

Learning to Dance

by Karri Justina Shea



Learning to Dance

by

Karri Justina Shea

with illustrations by

Kendyll Romine

AMagicBeyond Books
2011

This book is a work of fanfiction. Taz, Up, Dr. Space-Claw, the G.L.E.E., Bug World, and the crew of Starship 15A-2 are the creations and property of Team Starkid and their musical production *Starship*. No infringement is intended and no profits will be made from the production of this ebook - it is a gift of love (and slight, fangirlish insanity) from the author to the Starkids and all who have read and enjoyed this story in its original incarnation online.

Chapters 22 and 23 incorporate events and scenes from the actual musical *Starship*. Certain plot points and dialogue in these chapters have been directly quoted from the musical, and an effort has been made to be as accurate as possible regarding characters' gestures and expression during these scenes.

The story of Beatriz and Don Martin in Chapter 21 is a real Mexican legend called *La Calle de la Quemada* (The Burnt Girl's Street). The version Up reads is the author's adaptation.

Other names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Neither *Learning to Dance* nor its author are in any way affiliated with Team Starkid. If you're curious about *Starship* and Team Starkid, check out their [website](#), or [go here](#) to donate and keep these innovative young people in business.

for Pedro's Army

Chapter One

Quinceañera

“Tazia, *cielito*, stop fussing, you look beautiful.”

Taz dropped her hand from her head with as forceful of a huff as she could manage in the ridiculous dress her mother and aunt had coerced her into. All lace and poof, it suited her nearly as well as the teased hair and eye-drooping makeup they'd assaulted her with. “I look like you could slice and serve me as a wedding cake, *mamá*.”

“You look like a young lady,” her mama said. “As well you should, for your *quinceañera*. You're fifteen now – a woman grown. Time to stop being such a *muchachota*. You'll never catch a man's eye climbing trees and picking fights like you do.”

“One day,” Taz said. “That's all I promised.”

Her mama sighed. “*Dios muerto*, my daughter, what am I to do with you?” She lifted the curtain, ever so slightly. “Have you at least decided which *chambelán* will have the honour of the first dance with you?”

Taz followed her mother to the window. “*Maravilloso*,” she whispered despite herself. The yard was unrecognizable, her aunt and cousins having turned it from chickens and grass to a twinkling wonderland – fairy lights and flowers, guests in all their finery, the band setting up in the corner, and a cake almost as large and decorated as her dress. She'd been dreading this day for months – a *quinceañera* was a girl's coming out party, and there was nothing Taz hated more than being the centre of attention.

Especially in an outfit like this. The archaic-style mass had been bad enough, sitting up at the altar on display for everyone to see – but now she had to go out and face them, talk to people, smile... and dance.

“I don’t know, mama,” Taz said. “I don’t want to dance with any of them.” Her *chambelanes*, or escorts, were a motley collection of awkward youths, pimply and barely moustached, and most of them her cousins.

Her mama tutted and opened her mouth, but just then there was a wicked crashing sound, far away but close enough to shake the windows of their tiny house. Her mama looked up worriedly. “I didn’t think it was meant to rain today.”

One of Taz’s older cousins poked her head in the door. “It’s time, Tazia! Everyone is waiting for you!”

Taz froze and cast a glance back at the safety of her bedroom, but her mama took her by the arms and marched her forward, but gently. “I’m proud of you, *hijita mia*.”

There was applause as she exited the house, and Taz wanted nothing more than to die, or maybe have the earth just open up and swallow her. Perhaps a hoard of ravaging robots could conveniently stage an attack on their village right at that very moment -

A second crash, closer, caused a falter in the applause, and Taz saw her mama look up at the unclouded, starry sky with worry. A third, and then a brilliant flash, and Taz was no longer on her feet but soaring through the air. For a second she felt nothing but exhilaration. Fear overcame her just before she hit the ground.

Unable to breathe, unable to move, Taz tried to open her eyes and found them burning from the smoke filling the air around her. Shutting them quickly, she listened instead. Screams, and more explosions. A dreadful ripping of something that wasn’t cloth, and then the sound that struck

fear and hatred into the hearts of every human still living on Earth – the unmistakable mechanical sound of a robot.

Dragging her hand over her mouth, she took a cautious breath and coughed. She had to get out of the smoke. Summoning all her strength, she managed to will herself to flop and roll across the blackened grass until the air entered her lungs a little easier. She wanted to rest, to sleep, to give in to her overwhelming sense of fatigue, but the screams had gone silent, and it unnerved her. Staggering to her feet, she pulled herself to her full height and squinted through the hazy air.

Rrrr. Rrrr. Rrrr.

Through a tower of smoke emerged the deadly white form of a robot, and its weapon-arm was pointed directly at her.

“Up! Up! Come in, Up!”

The lieutenant coughed and reached blindly for his crackling radio. “This is Up.”

“Thank dead God you survived. We saw that blast from up here – how’s the rest of your team? We can’t get them on the line.”

Up raised his head. He was on his belly on the ground. All around him were the charred remains of seven human bodies. The G.L.E.E. insignia was still visible on the chest of the one nearest him, but he couldn’t tell who it belonged to. He turned away, feeling ill. “There’s just me.”

A pause on the other end. “All right, Up, get yourself back here. There’s nothing more you can do for these people.”

“Got it.” Up winced as he stood, battered but not really injured, and took in his surroundings. He had only taken a couple of steps in the direction of the pickup location when he heard a scream. A terrible, human scream, raw and edged

with anger and fear, but more than anything, defiance. It was a girl.

His soldier's instincts made him turn back.

The scene was bizarre as any he'd come across. Half a dozen robots in a circle, dead bodies and spilled cake and in the centre, trussed and hanging upside down from the branch of a tree, the girl. She spun slowly, giving the same dreadful battle cry with each twist of the rope. She was wearing the remains of an elaborate, smoking dress, and her tangled black hair fell loose, reaching for the ground. Her face was blackened and swollen. She had put up a fight.

She hadn't noticed him yet, and neither had the robots. One stepped forward, tapping a two-by-four against its palm as if it was a *piñata* stick. "Hush, little hu-mahn," it said. "We are just wanting to play a little game with you."

"Ha. Ha. Ha," deadpanned the others.

"I'll see you all burn in hell! *Hijos de puta!*" the girl bellowed, and the force of her efforts turned her again. Her eyes met Up's, and widened. The robots turned.

Up moved. It was quick, and if they had been human, it would have been bloody, but that wasn't a problem when your enemy was made up of soulless automatons. It was over in less than a minute, and amidst the smouldering metallic remains, the soldier turned to the girl *piñata*.

She was watching him with very large eyes. He was breathing heavily, and it sounded far too loud in the sudden silence. Finally she said, in a thick Mexican accent, "Aren't you going to cut me down?"

He did so, making sure he was close enough to catch her before she hit the ground. She was tiny, featherlight, and in pain, that he could tell from the gasp that escaped her when she landed in his arms. "Are you all right?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?" she asked, gritting her teeth. He looked around. He supposed it was a



“Are you all right?”

dumb question, she'd just been strung up by robots and they were surrounded by the bodies of likely everyone she knew. She closed her eyes, took a breath, and looked at him. "Who are you, anyway? Where did you come from?"

"I'm-" Up swallowed and wondered why he was feeling so thick-headed all of a sudden. "I'm Lieutenant Up, from the Galactic League of Extraterrestrial Exploration. I'm a – I'm a Starship Ranger. My platoon landed nearby to try and curb this attack, but I'm afraid we were too late."

There might have been the chance of a tear in her eye, but she blinked it away. "I'm Taz," she said. "Put me down, I can walk."

He complied, setting her down as gently as he could. She still seemed too delicate for words, but her fiery eyes, taking in the scene around them with a frightening lack of emotion, told him otherwise. "Walk? Walk where?"

"Wherever you're going, Starship Ranger," she said. "I'm coming with you."

Chapter Two

Nightmares

“That’s some stray followed you home, eh Up?”

“Pretty little thing, I’d say, once she’s cleaned up. A real *muñeca*.”

Chortles followed him down the hallway, but Up didn’t look back. He’d deal with those idiots later. He knocked on the Commander’s door, still not sure exactly how or why he’d gotten himself into this situation.

“Enter.”

Commander Li was seated at her desk, looking solemnly at a glass of scotch.

“Lieutenant,” she said. “At ease.” Indicating for him to take a seat, she reached to pour a second glass. “Bad scene down there. Lost some good men today.”

“Yes, sir,” Up said. They’d been his men. Not the first he’d lost, and not the last he would. The harsh reality of war.

“Another Lieutenant without a team. I guess that means I’ll be returning you to the Academy for reassignment,” the Commander sighed. “I’ll be sorry to see you go, Up. You’ve been a good leader to those Rangers.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And as such an exemplary soldier, I am sure you are well aware that starships armed for battle are not in the habit of taking refugees on board on a whim?”

Up had taken a sip of the scotch, and coughed. “Yes, sir, I am aware of that.”

“So please, enlighten me, Lieutenant. What in the galaxy caused you to bring that young lady on board my ship?”

Because she damned well wouldn't let me do otherwise was what he wanted to say, but that wasn't quite right. “There was nowhere else for her to go, sir. Her entire village was destroyed. There are still robots on the ground, and no bunkers for miles.” He saw the girl again, swinging defiantly from that tree branch amidst the smouldering ruins of her life. “She would have died.”

The Commander didn't respond, but raised an eyebrow and Up knew exactly what she was thinking – why should that matter to him? He'd laughed at death a thousand times over and had just lost seven good men. Who cared about some Mexican girl who could scream like a banshee in the face of certain death? He set the glass down on the desk, a little harder than he'd meant to.

“Permission to speak freely, sir.”

The Commander waved her hand.

“What's the harm in it? We'll be back at the Academy within a couple of weeks and I can't see her being much trouble. Clearly she doesn't eat much.”

“And what shall we do with her when we get to the Academy?”

“The refugee centre will set her up with something, give her a roof over her head at least. There's nothing for her here, and we're halfway to the next station anyway. We can't just kick her off the ship now.”

Commander Li looked unimpressed. “As was surely your plan, Lieutenant.” She sighed. “I guess that's settled, then. You'd better go collect her from sickbay.”

Up stood, then paused. “What – why? Shouldn't she stay there?”

“The medics tell me she's not seriously hurt. The beds there are full of our own men, and we've just established

that you're down a few bunkmates, aren't you? You brought the girl on board, Lieutenant. She's your responsibility until we get to the Academy." She stood up, too, and gestured at the door. "Congratulations, Up. You get to keep your pet after all."

He saluted, and walked out of her office. *Snide bitch*, he thought. Reassignment was fine with him.

The girl was sitting, legs curled up around her, in one of sickbay's metal chairs while medics bustled back and forth between Rangers suffering varying degrees of injury. She'd been cleaned up and her wounds tended to, and someone had scrounged up an old ensign's uniform for her to wear. She looked lost, out of place.

"Hey there, uh-"

She looked up, and relief flooded her face. "Taz," she said.

"Taz, yes, Taz." Up scratched his neck uncomfortably. "Well, I reckon they're full up in here. Commander says you're to come with me."

"Come with you?" She sounded surprised.

"Ya see, Taz, I kinda – I kinda goofed up bringing you on board the ship. Not supposed to happen that way, strictly speaking, but the Commander's agreed to let you stay until we get to the Academy in a few weeks' time. Thing is, you've got to stay with me."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "So I am your punishment?"

He didn't know what to say. Finally he shrugged. "Looks that way."

She nearly smiled, and stood, holding her side gingerly. He looked at her, quivering in her too-big clothes. Her cheek was still swollen but her skin was clean now, and he could see her better than he could before. She looked so young.

“Okay, then, *compañero*. Lead the way.”

Taz slept in a dead Ranger’s bed, wearing a dead Ranger’s clothes, and was fighting the robots all over again in her dreams. Flashes of fire and shiny white blasts. That terrible mechanical laughter. Being lifted like a child’s *juguete* into the air, powerless against the inhuman strength of her attackers. She screamed and screamed again, knowing her voice alone wasn’t enough but wishing it was -

“Taz, Taz! Wake up!”

She sat up, her last scream still on her lips, to find Lieutenant Up’s face inches from hers and the front of his shirt twisted in her hands. He looked surprised, and concerned. She released him.

“Sorry,” she said, pushing herself as far away from him as the tiny bunk allowed, and wincing as the wound in her side protested. Up was kneeling next to her, bleary-eyed and wearing the same grey G.L.E.E. issued pyjamas that she was.

“Are you – are you going to be all right?” the Ranger asked, somewhat awkwardly, in that southern drawl of his. Taz supposed that he probably didn’t spend a lot of time around fifteen-year-old girls. She found herself wondering how old the Lieutenant was. There was just a hint of silver in the blond hair around his temples.

Was she going to be all right? Good question. She heard her mama’s voice. *I’m proud of you, hijita mia*. Her eyes burned. *Dios muerto*, was she going to cry? In front of *him*?

“I’ll be fine,” she said, turning her face away from him. Lieutenant Up didn’t move. She could feel his eyes watching her, worrying. A scared little girl, she scoffed at herself. That’s all he thinks of me. Before she could stop herself, she turned back to him.

“What’s going to happen to me when we get back to the

Academy?”

“Well,” Up said, settling back on his haunches. “It’s in the Capital, so we can take you to the refugee centre there. You’ll have a place to sleep, food to eat. They might even set you up with a trade, if you like.” He was trying really hard to make it sound appealing, she could tell.

“A refugee camp?” she echoed, trying to imagine it. She pictured rows of sleeping bags in a school gym, crying babies, old people wetting their beds. What she wouldn’t give for Mexico again, for her mama and her pimply cousins and even that stupid *quinceañera* dress. *Jesucristo*, she was going to cry. She blinked rapidly.

Up looked like he wanted to say something reassuring, but changed his mind. “Yeah, I wouldn’t like the idea much, either,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry I got you into this mess.”

“No,” she said. He should never be sorry. “You saved my life.”

Up didn’t say anything, so she turned her back to him again. “Go back to bed. I’m sorry I woke you.”

He paused a moment, as if deciding whether or not he was okay with taking orders from a pint-sized girl like Taz. “All right,” he said, and returned to his bunk.

Over her shoulder, she watched him go. He didn’t look so fearsome now, pyjamas hiding most of his bulk as he stumbled his way through the dark, but she’d seen him take down half a dozen robots with nothing but a gun and his bare hands, and then shrug it off like he did it every day. Maybe he did.

Who was this Starship Ranger anyway?

Chapter Three

Lessons

The combat deck smelled like sweat and old gym shorts. Dust flew from punching bags as off-duty Rangers worked out their aggression on inanimate opponents. Taz, sitting cross-legged next to a pile of dirty towels, was watching Lieutenant Up put a bunch of ensigns through their paces in the ring. Most of them were boys, not much older than her, and they were putting on a fairly pathetic display.

“Ensign Lucas!”

“Yes, sir!”

“You wanna tell me what those are in your head? Those things under the eyelashes your mama thinks are so pretty?”

Silence. Someone chuckled.

“Uh, my eyes, sir?”

“Give the boy a prize!” bellowed Up. “Your eyes are for more than winking at pretty girls, Ensign. Use ‘em next time or you’ll be back on your arse on the floor again. You’ve got to *see* what’s coming at you in battle, or you’ll be toasted faster than a marshmallow in a campfire. Next!”

The next ensign was no more impressive. “I should send you back to the Academy, the lot of you!” Up regarded his charges and sighed. “You’re over-thinking this, children. A warrior has to sense what’s going on and react – there’s no time for your brain to get in the way.” He shrugged off his uniform jacket and Taz sat up a little taller against the wall. Just so she could see the ring better.

“So,” said Up, and the ensigns drew back, looking apprehensive. “Who’s going to give it a go? No takers? Parker, how ‘bout you?”

The ensign stepped forward reluctantly, a stout boy who looked like he’d rather be typing complex code onto a computer screen than facing the ship’s most formidable fighter in combat.

“Now, come at me, Parker,” Up coaxed. “Try your best.”

Parker, after a nervous look at the others, charged. Up moved so quickly that Taz couldn’t tell what happened, but the ensign was on the floor and Up wasn’t even winded.

“Remember, keep your eyes on the enemy. Don’t let them surprise you,” Up said, helping the boy up. “Next!”

They continued in this fashion until the whistle blew for mess. The ensigns, variously limping or holding appendages gingerly, filed out of the deck. Taz bit her lip, and then approached Up.

“Stupid children,” he was muttering as he towelled off. “I wasn’t kidding, they ought to send them all straight back. There was a time when only the best soldiers even had a prayer of graduating from the Academy as Rangers. Now they’ll take anyone.”

Taz tried very hard not to look at his arms, which were on full display in his white tank top. “Why’s that?” she asked.

He looked down at her, and slipped his jacket on. “The robots, Taz. You think half those kids will still be alive in a year’s time?”

She looked at the door where they’d left.

“True Starship Rangers are becoming a rare breed,” Up said, picking up his gym bag. “There aren’t many of us left.”

He turned to leave.

“You could teach me,” Taz blurted. She hadn’t meant to

say it quite so bluntly.

The Lieutenant stopped and turned to look at her. She drew herself up as tall as she could, fully aware of how ridiculous she looked in her too-big uniform. “Teach you?” he echoed, blankly.

“How to fight,” she said, her heartbeat in her ears. “I may be little, but I’m fast. I’ve been scrapping on the streets since I was a little *niña* and I know I’m better than any of those ensigns.”

He looked skeptical.

“I mean it, I could beat those *idiotas* any day. But you could make me better – you’re the best fighter I’ve even seen.”

Was he *blushing*? She chalked it up to exertion. “Why do you want to know how to fight, Taz?” he asked.

For a moment she heard the *rrrr, rrrr* sound of a robot’s deadly approach. She closed her eyes, opened them again, and looked straight at Up.

“Because I never want to be that helpless again. The next time I meet a robot, the *hijo de puta* is going to be the one tied up in a tree. And I’m going to be the one laughing.”

He was silent for a long time. Then he nodded.

“Meet me here, after lights out. We’ll see what you’ve got.”

She was as good as she said she was, quick, and could dodge a punch like nobody’s business. But her style was rough around the edges, unrefined.

“You fight like a wildcat. You’re using your instincts, that’s good, but you’ve also got to strategize. I’m twice your size. You’re not going to beat me with strength.” She dodged another hit. “Or by dancing around me all night.”

“I don’t dance,” she panted, tossing her thick braid over her shoulder. “And besides, you told the ensigns they were

thinking too much.”

“That’s not your problem,” he said, and she glared at him. He tried not to draw back from the ferocity he saw there.

It took four more late night sessions before she got a hit in, but that was more than any ensign had ever managed. It wasn’t a hard hit, but Up rubbed his shoulder anyway.

“Good,” he said. “Now do it again.”

Up’s rank and reputation kept any sass about his “pet” to a minimum when he was around, but he heard the whispers begin once he’d walk away, and he knew Taz did too. She kept to her bunk a lot, venturing out only for meals and to watch him at training. Her constant gaze made him nervous, but he didn’t let on. The ensigns were barely opponents at all – he wondered whether she’d still think him such a marvellous fighter when he was evenly matched.

Taz had been on the ship a week and was waiting in line in the mess hall when a drunk midshipman accosted her. Up had already gotten his food and was on his way to sit down when he heard the exchange.

“Hello, gorgeous,” the midshipman slurred. “Why don’t you take a break from the old man for awhile? Give us a spin, eh?”

Up looked over his shoulder. Taz took a step back as the midshipman leered closer.

“Yes, you are a pretty one, aren’t you? What I could do with that-”

She punched him, a good one, in the nose. Up was halfway there as the midshipman staggered backward.

“Stupid whore!” he called through a stream of blood, but faltered when he saw Lieutenant Up standing over him. The whole hall was silent.

“Here’s what you’re going to do, Ranger,” he said, in a dark and quiet voice. “You’re going to turn around, walk

away, and you're going to stay the fuck away from her."

The midshipman didn't respond. Up turned his back on him. "Come on," he said to Taz, who was still shaking, her fists tightly clenched.

"I guess you don't like to share your toys, eh Lieutenant?"

Up stopped.

"Uh oh," someone said.

Up was reprimanded for beating the living shit out of the midshipman, but Taz was left alone after that. They continued their late night fighting sessions. She got in a few more hits, and Up didn't have to pretend that they hurt anymore. She was getting better.

So he started getting harder on her. "Get up!" he hollered one night as she lay on the floor, stunned after a particularly hard blow to the head. He pushed his guilt for hurting her away. It was the only way to learn.

She looked up at him, and he could see defeat in her eyes. "I'm never gonna beat you, Up."

"Not if you stay on the floor," he said. She took a breath, then pushed herself up.

They sparred, and soon she was back on the mat. She was tiring.

"Get up!" he said again.

"I can't," she said, and this time she wouldn't look at him.

"Taz," he said, and he bent down so that she had to meet his eyes. "The next time you meet those robots, and they knock you down, is this what you're going to do? Lay down and surrender? Run away and hide?"

"No," she said.

"If there is one thing that I teach you, Taz, it has to be this: no matter what comes at you, no matter how tough it

is, how impossible it seems, the only way to win – to survive – is to just keep getting back up.” He straightened, and held out his hand to her. “So get back up!”

She took his hand, and he pulled her up.

“Okay,” she said. “Again.”

Chapter Four

Boarded

Taz was wrapping her ankle in her bunk when Up came in after a long meeting with the Commander. He sat down, pulled his boots off, and watched her wind the bandage around her foot.

“Not like that,” he said. “You’ve got to support it.”

She silently held the roll of bandage out to him. He moved to sit on her bunk, gently lifted her foot, and unwrapped what she’d already done. She winced a little.

“Sorry,” he said, and started wrapping it again. Taz had been quiet today, but he thought he knew why.

“Tomorrow we arrive at the Academy, ¿sí?” she said now.

He didn’t meet her eyes. “Sí.”

“And then you take me to the refugee centre, ¿sí?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Up,” she said, so that he had to look at her. “I don’t want to go.”

“I know,” he said.

“I want—” she hesitated. “I want to enrol at the Academy. I want to be a Starship Ranger.” She lifted her newly wrapped ankle and flexed it. “Like you, Up.”

He took his time replying. “I know,” he said finally. “I’ve already asked Commander Li if you could enlist.”

Her eyes lit up, and it was both the most wonderful and tragic thing he’d ever seen. “But she refused, Taz,” he said hurriedly. “You’ve got to be eighteen to join. And the

G.L.E.E. is not so big on exceptions.”

It was a little like watching a candle flicker out. Taz seemed to shrink even smaller as she hugged her knees.

“Eighteen,” she said.

“It’s only three years,” Up offered. “You can keep training, and by the time you enlist, you’ll shoot straight to the top of the class. Taz, you’re already the best student I’ve ever had.”

“You – you mean that?”

“Hey,” he said, pointing at the respectable bruise purpling on his cheek. “Do you know how many opponents have left a mark on Lieutenant Up?” He struck a pose, and the corner of her mouth twitched. “I can count them on one hand.”

There was a hint of a smile on her face. What he wouldn’t give to see a true one there.

“Red Alert! Red Alert! All Rangers to battle stations!”

Up jumped to his feet. Taz scrambled out of her bunk as the emergency call repeated, testing the weight on her foot. “Red Alert? ¿*Qué es* Red Alert?”

“We’ve been boarded,” he said tersely, swinging his gun over his shoulder. “Stay here.”

“Boarded? Up, wait-”

There was no time for waiting. In the hallway, red lights glared and Rangers were running, shouting orders to each other. Up hailed another lieutenant on his way by. “Where’s the breach?”

“They’ve got the Commander and flight crew held hostage on the bridge. Nobody knows how they got in. Rogers thinks there may be more-”

The unmistakable *pew, pew* sound of a laser and a look of surprise came across the lieutenant’s face. He sunk to the floor, a hole smoking in his chest.

Up lifted his gun and fired two, three, four times. The

robot, at the end of the corridor, exploded in a mess of wires and burned metal. There was only one, thank dead God.

Up turned on his heel to find Taz behind him, looking at the robot, her mouth a very round “o.”

“Dammit, Taz, I told you to stay in the bunk!”

She crossed her arms. “You’re not my commanding officer yet, *sir*.”

He glared at her, and she glared back.

“Fine,” he said. “Just stay out of my way.”

He took off down the corridor with Taz close on his heels. They had to pause at one or two intersecting points – Up put his finger to his lips, and they waited for a robot to pass. The robots were all heading in the same direction – for the bridge. Might as well see what they were up to before blowing them all into the seventh level of hell.

They had just reached the last bunker before the bridge when the wall to their left exploded. Reacting out of instinct, Up rolled and landed hard against the far wall.

He shook himself as got to his feet, squinting through the acrid smoke. There were other people here, other Rangers coughing and struggling to get up. Lieutenant-Commander Rogers emerged from the haze.

“We’re blocked in,” he said, slinging his gun over his shoulder. “Explosion took out at least four decks above us. It’ll take hours to move all the debris.”

Up was listening, but his eyes were raking the darkness. “Dammit, where’s Taz?” he burst finally. If that reckless girl had gotten in the way of the explosion-

“*Estoy aquí*,” she said, coming up beside him. “I’m here, Up.”

His shoulders relaxed, and he gave her a rough pat on the shoulder before turning to the Lieutenant-Commander. “What’s the situation on the bridge?”

Rogers, looking at Taz with a question in his eyes, jerked his thumb at the far door of the bunker, the one that led to the bridge of the ship. “They’ve got that door sealed off from the inside, there’s no way to open it from out here. Don’t think we can do anything but start working on that pile of rubble.”

“Or hope the robots open the door for us,” said Up.

“I don’t think that’s something I’m going to hope for,” said Rogers.

“Lieutenant-Commander!” called an ensign in a stage whisper from across the bunker. “Look here!”

The ensign was crouching at a metal grate at the bottom of the wall. “This vent leads directly into the bridge,” he said when they got close. “And see? It comes out behind the science station. They don’t have a sentry stationed there. I reckon a Ranger could sneak through there and unseal the door before they knew what was happening.”

Rogers knelt, peering through the grate. “They’d have to be quick,” he said. “Up?”

Up shook his head. The vent was barely a foot and a half wide. “I’d never fit.”

“I could,” said Taz.

They all looked at her. She held herself tall and looked at the Lieutenant-Commander. “I can fit, and Lieutenant Up can tell you I’m fast. I can do it. I can open the door.”

“No,” said Up.

She glared at him. “You said yourself that I’m the best student you’ve ever had, *no?*”

“This ain’t no lesson, Taz, this is the real deal,” *Did she have a death wish?* “You can’t go in there.”

“No, *you* can’t go in there,” she said. “Look around. None of these *hombres* can.”

Rogers was eyeing her with interest. “Have you ever handled a zapper before, young lady?”

“No,” said Up.

“No,” she admitted, her eyes flicking toward Up.

Rogers turned to Up. “It’s this or digging, and they’ll certainly have managed to break our access codes by the time we get out of here. They’ll have full control of the ship. Have you got any better ideas?”

Up expelled all the air in his lungs. “No,” he said finally.

“Get the girl a gun,” said Rogers, “I’ll assemble the Rangers at the door. We’ll be ready.”

Up pulled a pistol from the holster at his belt. “This will be simplest for you to handle.” He showed her the grip, the safety, the trigger. She listened intently. The ensign finished unscrewing the grate.

“Ready, sir,” he said.

“Don’t shoot unless you absolutely have to,” Up said, as she took the pistol in her hand. “And for dead God’s sake, don’t shoot yourself.”

“Do you think I’m *estúpido*?” she said.

“No, Taz,” he said. She was anything but stupid. “Stay low, stay out of sight. Wait for their attention to be elsewhere before you make your move. Remember, these aren’t humans you’re dealing with, these are machines, and they have sensory equipment we can’t even dream of.” He caught her arm as she crouched to enter the vent. “Be careful in there, Taz.”

Her eyes were very big and dark against her pale skin. “I will.” Neither of them moved.

“Ready, Lieutenant?” called Rogers.

Taz nodded, her eyes not leaving Up’s face.

“Ready,” he said. Reluctantly, he let her go.

Chapter Five

The Bridge

It was a tight fit, even for her. Taz pulled herself along the metal vent on her stomach, carefully keeping Up's pistol upright in her hand. It wasn't long before she had reached the grate on the far side. Pressing her face against it, she peered through the slats.

Rrrr, rrrr, rrrr.

Her breath caught as a robot's legs passed directly in front of her. "*Mierda*," she muttered. This wasn't going to be as easy as they'd thought.

She pulled out the screwdriver the ensign had given her, and set to work, listening all the while. Her heartbeat threatened to drown out everything else.

"Bridge secure," intoned a robot from somewhere nearby. "Access codes acquired?"

"Negative," replied another. "Insufficient time to process."

"Go ahead," came a different, more human voice. The Commander. "Process all you like. My Rangers will be here before you toasters have had *sufficient time* to do anything but polish those tin cans you call heads."

"Silence, hu-mahn!"

There was a blast and a flash of red light, and the Commander cried out. Taz turned the screwdriver faster, catching each screw carefully in her hand as they fell. When she reached the last one, she peered through the grate again. She could see a metal barrier just before her – that

must be the science station – and if she pressed hard enough she could just make out several pairs of human legs on the floor to the left. The door she needed to reach would be to the right. As long as the robots stayed on the other side, the science station would provide her cover, but there had to be at least fifteen feet between that and the door.

“*Sea rápida,*” she whispered. “I just have to be fast.”

Removing the final screw, she lifted the grate and set it soundlessly on the floor in front of the vent. She tucked her hair behind her ears, wishing she had something to tie it back with, and picked up the gun.

“*Bien,*” she told herself, forcing down a sudden wave of nausea. “*Ahora.*”

Using her left hand to pull herself forward, she slid out of the vent and crouched low on the floor of the bridge, listening. Now that she was out in the open, even the steady humming of the ship seemed to press against her ears. The robots were still moving about on the other side of the science station, but hadn’t seemed to notice yet that anything was amiss. Pressing herself flat against the metal station, she looked toward the human prisoners. They were bound hand and foot, sitting on the floor next to the Commander’s chair. Commander Li herself was clutching her leg, the deck beneath her soaked in blood. As Taz watched, the Commander turned in her direction, and their eyes met.

The Commander’s eyes widened. Taz put a finger to her lips, and slowly the older woman nodded. She turned to the robots instead.

“Hey, trash cans! Yeah, you! Didn’t your mama ever tell you that you shouldn’t play with other kids’ toys? Oh wait, that’s right, you don’t have a mama, you soulless piece of scrap metal-”

The Commander was distracting them. It was now or

never. Taz took a deep breath, and ran.

“Enemy detected! Enemy detected!”

Taz kept her eyes fixed on the door and the sensor pad beside it as the robots turned. She felt the warmth of a laser beam behind her, and ran faster. She was almost- there-

“Look out!” yelled a human voice.

She threw herself to the ground and watched another laser beam crash into the wall where she’d been a moment before. The heat of it scalded her bare arm, but she ignored the pain as she turned to see four robots advancing on her, weapons at the ready.

She was so close.

Letting out a fierce yell, she threw Up’s pistol as hard as she could. It hit the first robot hard between the optical sensors, and it staggered backwards. She didn’t wait to see what the others would do, but vaulted herself the last few feet to the door, smashing the sensor pad with her left hand.

A whirring sound, and the door opened.

Up was the first person to come through, and he was already shooting. The robots fell like paper dolls as more Rangers pushed through the door and ran to meet the enemy. Gunfire, lasers and human screams pulsed through the air. Taz, unarmed and feeling rather vulnerable, scrambled backward out of the Rangers’ way, holding her injured arm carefully aloft.

Up was still leading the charge, shouting commands over his shoulder as he knelt, firing at everything metallic that moved. It was not the first time she’d seen him like this, a deadly look in his eyes, a fearsome accuracy in his aim. A thrill went through her, and suddenly she wished she still had a gun so she could join him in the fight.

Taken unaware as the robots had been, it did not take long for the Rangers to get control of the situation. The prisoners were untied and most of the robots reduced to

smoking rubble on the deck. Taz hung back as Up and Lieutenant-Commander Rogers gave orders for the other Rangers to secure the rest of the ship, her pulse still drumming in her ears. She checked herself over for injuries. Her ankle was throbbing painfully, but besides the skin beginning to blister on her forearm, there didn't seem to be anything else new.

Finally, when the situation seemed under control, Up came over to her and unexpectedly cupped her chin in his hand. "You're alright?"

She nodded, even as her eyes began to water from the searing pain in her arm.

"You're incredible, Taz," he said. "You just saved the whole damn ship."

She didn't know what to say.

"We've got things organized here, Lieutenant," said Rogers. "Why don't you get this girl to sickbay, get that burn healed up before it worsens."

"Yes, sir," said Up. "Come on, Taz, let's get you out of here."

They exited the bridge through the opposite door, where the path was clear. Up frowned as they turned down the corridor that led to sickbay. "Where's my zapper, Taz? Do you still have it?"

She felt her face grow dangerously warm as she mumbled, "I- I threw it."

"You threw it?"

He was laughing. She aimed a punch at him with her good arm, but felt like laughing too.

Up was never more surprised in his life than when he opened his door later that night to see the Commander standing there on crutches, her leg freshly bandaged and a look something akin to chewing a lemon on her face.

“I realize that this is an unconventional visit,” she said, looking from him to Taz, who stood up from her bunk, cradling her newly restored arm. “But I wanted to thank our ship’s hero in person.”

Up stood back, and the Commander entered the room. Taz cast a nervous glance between them.

“I was informed of the details of your actions today, and I wish to convey my sincere gratitude for the bravery and selflessness you demonstrated. It’s entirely likely that the robots would still have control of the ship if you hadn’t acted as you did.”

Taz was slowly but surely turning red. Up hid a smirk behind his hand.

“I’ve reconsidered your request, Lieutenant. The Academy could use more cadets with the kind of balls this girl showed today. I think I can talk the Admiral into making an exception for this one.”

Up watched as Taz began to realize the meaning of the Commander’s words.

“You mean-”

Commander Li’s face twisted into something that was almost a smile. “Welcome to the Galactic League, Cadet Taz.”

“Cadet...”

Taz was still processing when the Commander made her exit.

“I’m going – I’m really going to the Academy-”

“You’re really going,” said Up, his grin spreading.

“I’m going to be a Starship Ranger-”

“And a damn good one, too, if I do say so myself.”

Her face lit up and she launched herself toward him. Picking her up easily, he swung her around, laughing.

There was the smile he’d been looking for.

Chapter Six

The Academy

Upon her arrival at the G.L.E.E. Academy, Taz had been swept away by a small legion of personnel in crisp green uniforms, asked a thousand questions she didn't know the answers to, and stripped down for a full physical examination in what was the single most embarrassing experience of her life. The G.L.E.E. personnel seemed skeptical about her size and age, but Commander Li had gotten her a letter of recommendation signed by the Admiral himself. A letter like that was as good as gold, and soon enough Taz found herself handed three smartly folded cadet uniforms and directed to the nearest bathroom.

Staring at herself in the bathroom mirror, Taz turned from side to side to get the full effect. The cadet uniforms were a plain beige, not as impressive as Up's camouflage, and even the League's smallest size was swimming on her. She pulled her belt tighter, smoothed the front of her shirt, and wove her hair, which needed a good wash, into a tight braid.

"Cadet Taz, at your service," she said aloud, and immediately felt silly.

When she emerged, Up was waiting, and she hadn't realized how much she'd missed his comforting presence until she felt a rush of relief.

"Have you been discharged yet?" he asked.

Taz cast a glance at the nearest green uniform and shrugged.

“Come on,” Up said. “I’ll show you to your new quarters.”

“Where have you been?” she asked as they entered the labyrinth of hallways that made up the Academy. He raised his eyebrows at her.

“Paperwork. There’s a lot of red tape involved when you get reassigned.”

“Do you know-”

“Where I’ll be transferred to?” Up shrugged. “That’s for the Admiral to decide. They’ll put me wherever I’m most useful.”

“But it might be *lejos*,” she said.

She wasn’t sure if he knew the word, but he seemed to get the idea. “I’m a Starship Ranger, Taz. I don’t stay in one place for very long.”

A knot settled in her stomach. She didn’t say anything, and after a while he continued. “Things will be a little different here, Taz. You must know that. You’ll be bunking with the other cadets, and I – I’ll be your superior officer.”

She knew it was true, but that didn’t stop her fists from balling up in anger. Up stopped in front of a solid metal door and checked the number.

“This is you,” he said.

“Thank you, *sir*,” she said, as coldly as she could.

He looked a little hurt. “Listen, I’ll be here for a while. There isn’t another starship due for over a month. I’m not going anywhere yet.”

Taz raised her arm in the best imitation of a salute she could muster. Up sighed, and returned the gesture.

“At ease, cadet,” he said, and turned to leave.

Fuming, Taz pushed open the door of her new bunk. “*Soy tu oficial superior ahora*,” she muttered. “*Las cosas van a ser un poco diferente aquí. De todos los estúpidos-*”

“*Bueno hola*,” said a voice brightly. “*¿Eres de México?*”

Taz stopped, and looked warily at the speaker, a young cadet with hair and eyes as dark as hers, lounging on one of the upper bunks. Beyond him, several other cadets bantered, mostly boys and seemingly uninterested in her arrival. “*Sí*.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” he said in English, grinning down at her. “Pedro Herrera. Nice to meet you...”

She was not in the mood to be friendly. “Taz,” she said, and threw her jacket onto the bunk beneath his, the only one not yet taken.

“That’s it? Taz?”

“*Sí*. That’s it.”

The cadet would not be deterred. “So who’s this superior officer you’re on the rampage about? Got a boyfriend in the League?”

“Maybe I do,” she said, tossing her braid over her shoulder, annoyed at his nosiness. “And maybe he’ll kick your ass if you try anything funny, Pedro Herrera.”

Pedro laughed. “As if I would! You think a lot of yourself, don’t you, princess?”

Taz put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “Forget the boyfriend,” she said. “I’ll kick your ass myself.”

He looked at her skeptically, so she raised her chin. “Just stay out of my way,” she spat, and disappeared into her new bunk.

“Nice to meet you too,” she heard the cadet mutter. She was clearly off to a great start.

Taz lay awake in her bunk for a long time that night, listening to the breathing of eleven other cadets. She found herself wishing instead for the familiar sound of Up snoring – the *idiota* did snore, for all he insisted otherwise. She should be happy – she was here, at the Academy, finally a real G.L.E.E. cadet – but she felt more alone than ever.

Up figured Taz just needed time to adjust to her new life at the Academy. He did try to talk to her whenever he'd see her at mess hall or on the quad, but she was unresponsive to the point of blatantly ignoring him. Unused to dealing with the misdirected anger of a fifteen-year-old girl, he eventually stopped trying to get her to acknowledge his existence, though reluctantly. Maybe he shouldn't, but he missed having her around.

The Academy instructors were impressed with Taz, and Up couldn't help but feel a rush of pride anytime he overheard them discussing her progress. She could beat anyone in her class in the ring and was keeping up fine in the athletics tests. He didn't get a chance to see it for himself until the day he was asked to teach a few classes for an instructor who'd had a little too much to drink the night before. The second class of the day was Taz's.

Up surveyed the group of freshman cadets before him. Most looked uneasy, tugging at their uniforms and casting nervous glances at each other. Perhaps his reputation preceded him. Taz stared straight ahead, not looking at him or anyone else.

"All right, cadets," he barked. "Let's see what you've got."

He started them off the way he always did: pushups, laps, and no mercy. The first one broke after twenty minutes, and that seemed to stiffen the others' resolve, as it often did. He stole a glance at Taz, who was halfway through her third set of pushups. Her arms were shaking, nearly imperceptibly. Her pace didn't falter.

When the cadets were shining with sweat and breathing heavily, he set them to sparring. He could see who had experience prior to coming the Academy, and who didn't. Most still had a long way to go. When Taz had put her third opponent on the floor, Up sighed. There was no one here to

match her.

He took off his jacket and stepped up to the mat. One of the cadets whistled, and the class gathered to watch.

They circled each other, as they had many times before, but something was different this time. Taz was a whirl of fury as she threw herself at him and he had to put his full attention into blocking her blows. Left jab, right hook, knee, elbow – he was on the defensive. The cadets started to catcall.

He managed a hit, a sideswipe that sent her to the carpet, but before he could pause for breath, she had rolled to her feet and they were circling again. This time he moved first.

She blocked him, and they sparred at a pace Up hadn't reached in a long time. He rolled to avoid a well-placed roundhouse kick. She was actually trying to hurt him.

Just as he got to his feet, Taz leapt at him, arms raised overhead and a wild look in her eyes. Throwing his hands up, he caught hers and held them tightly, forcing them backwards over her head. She struggled to break his grip. Their faces were inches apart as he leaned over her. Their eyes locked, and she stopped fighting.

They stood there, nose to nose and breathing hard, until after a long moment the cadets started to applaud. Up released her, and she stumbled back, rubbing her wrists.

"That's enough for today, cadets," he said, trying not to let his fatigue sound in his voice. Taz looked back at him as she filed out with the rest of her classmates. He wondered if her heart was racing as fast as his.

Taz knew she was forgiven for her awful treatment of him when Up sat down next to her in the mess hall and peered over her shoulder at the book she was banging her forehead against.

"Calculus?" he asked.

“They said I have to get my high school credits before I can officially qualify to be a Ranger,” she said. “I have to sit the exams for English, Science-” she gestured hopelessly at the meaningless *disparate* in front of her. “And this *tema estúpido*.”

“Let me see that,” he said, and pulled the book over to him. “Ah! Optimization, that’s cake! All you have to do to optimize a function on a closed interval is find all the places where the derivative of zero doesn’t exist and compare the values of the function at these points and the end points of your interval.”

She blinked, and blinked again, and he chuckled. “Okay, okay. Calculus is tough. But I’ll make you a deal.”

She eyed him with suspicion.

“I will help you out with calculus – if you promise that the next time we fight, you won’t try quite so hard to kill me?”

She blushed to the roots of her hair, but he was smiling, and she knew they were going to be okay. “*Es un trato*. It’s a deal.”

Chapter Seven

Reassigned

It was a rare, peaceful moment when the cadets were granted an afternoon off. Taz sat under her favourite tree in the quad, reading a book of Mexican folk tales. It was an old book, tattered and well-thumbed, but it had been a gift from Up upon his return from one of his frequent short-haul missions to the South, where the robot invasions were growing worse. It had been her sixteenth birthday, the anniversary of the day they'd met. The day she'd lost everything.

Taz traced the familiar words with her finger. She'd managed to wait until Up had left to cry. Her mama had told her these stories each night since she was a little girl - it was a beautiful gift.

"Hey, look here, guys, it's *Tazia*."

Taz didn't have to look up to know that Pedro and his gang of *zoquetes*, as she called them, were lumbering in her direction. "*Ahora no*," she muttered into the pages of her book.

"Whatcha readin', *Taz*?" The way he said her name, in a drawn-out singing tone, made her want to throw up. Preferably on him. "Anything good?"

One of Pedro's *matones* snatched the book from her hands. "Hey," she said sharply.

"Now now, *mi hermana mexicana*," Pedro said. "We're only looking."

The thug dangled her book precariously by the binding.

“Give it back,” she said.

“Whatcha gonna do about it, Taz? Aren’t you on probation already for fighting in the quad?”

She was, and it was the only reason she hadn’t already smashed his smug face in. “You mean for that time last week I beat you so bad you ran crying for your mama? Awfully brave now that you know I can’t do it again, aren’t you?”

One of the thugs covered up a laugh with a cough and Pedro sent him a deadly glare.

“You wish, *niña pequeña*,” he said. “You’re so little you can’t even reach high enough to-”

He stopped mid-sentence, and a look of apprehension crossed his face. Taz frowned in confusion, and then let out a yelp of surprise as she felt herself being lifted off her feet and plopped unceremoniously onto Up’s shoulders.

“Is this high enough for you?” he drawled.

Pedro and his crew turned tail and ran. Taz chortled in delight and hung on for dear life as Up gave chase and most of the quad turned to watch. They yelled together, a wordless battle cry, as their prey headed straight for the Academy dumpsters.

Up’s combat boots felt heavier than usual as he left the Admiral’s office that night, the mirth of the day’s events a distant memory now. He wasn’t heading in any particular direction, but soon found himself in the gym. It was nearly deserted at this time of night, except for Taz, of course. She stood with her back to him and one of the practice ceremonial rifles in her hands. She was muttering to herself as she alternately spun, tapped, and clumsily shouldered it. As he approached, the rifle fell with a clatter to the floor.

“You’ve got to find your rhythm,” Up said, and she jumped.

“This is the *cosa más estúpida* I have ever had to do,” she said, picking up the rifle. “It’s completely useless for combat – when I meet a robot, I’m not going to stop to twirl my gun, I’m going to shoot the *bastardo*.”

Up laughed. “You’re absolutely right, but when we’re not at war, pomp and circumstance is what being in the military is all about.” He took the rifle from her and demonstrated a neat change. “Has young Pedro recovered his pride from the garbage pile yet?”

She smiled broadly. “*A quién le importa?* Who cares?” He handed the rifle back to her and she gave it a halfhearted turn.

“Think of it-” Up paused. “Think of it like dancing. You’ve got to feel the beat.”

“I don’t dance,” Taz said quickly.

“Is that right?” he said, taking the rifle back.

“Yes, that’s right. You’ve never mentioned your previous career as a *bailarin*, yourself.”

“Okay, fine, I don’t know the first thing about dancing,” Up admitted. “But come on, didn’t you ever learn as a kid? Isn’t a girl supposed to know how so she can dance with all the boys at her *quinceañera*?”

He wished he had the words back as soon as they left his mouth. A dark look clouded her eyes. “*Sí*,” she said, after a moment. “My mama tried to teach me, but I hated it. I was *podrida*.”

“Show me,” he said, setting down the rifle.

She eyed him warily, then held out her hands. He took them in his own. They were tiny, and cold, but strong.

“The basic salsa step begins like this,” she said, and her eyes were focused over his shoulder at something far away in time. “I step back, you step forward. No, no, *el otro pie*, the other foot.”

He tried to follow her instructions, but the truth was he’d

always been rubbish at dancing. He was suddenly glad they were alone, and fervently hoped that no one else was planning a late-night workout tonight. He'd never hear the end of it.

“*Uno, dos, tres- no, la izquierda!* Left!” Taz dropped his hands in exasperation. “You’re useless!”

“At least I’m making you look good,” he offered. Punching him lightly in the stomach, she took his hands again. “Okay, left, right, left – no, move back. Try again.”

Up tried, but somehow managed to misstep so spectacularly that his legs entangled in hers and they both toppled to the mat. For a moment, Taz looked annoyed, but then she started to giggle. It was such a funny, girlish sound coming from her than he laughed too, and soon it became hard to stop. Both of them lay on the floor, gasping for air and clutching at their sides.

Taz finally pushed herself up, still taking deep, shuddering breaths. “That – is the last time – I try to teach you anything, Lieutenant Up!”

Reality, and the reason he’d subconsciously come looking for her tonight, came crashing back to him. He got to his feet, slowly. “It’s Lieutenant-Commander Up now.”

Something in his voice must have caused her to turn to him with such a searching look. “You got a promotion?”

“I got a new assignment,” he said.

“You get new assignments every other week,” she said.

“This one – this one’s different, Taz.” He swallowed. “It’s a recon mission, into deep space. This is top secret, so don’t go spreading it around, but they think they’ve found the location of the robot’s base star.”

Her eyes widened. The G.L.E.E. had been looking for the heart of the robot’s rebellion for years, since they’d picked it up and moved it out of their own solar system. “They’ve found it?”

“Based on new intelligence, they think so. But it’s far, Taz, farther than any of us expected.”

She digested that. “How long?”

“A few years for a return trip, at least.” He didn’t mention the distinct possibility that it might not be a return trip.

He watched her slump, and remembered why he pushed people away, kept them at arm’s length. It was so he didn’t have to do this part. He sat next to her against the sweaty gym wall.

“Why does it have to be you?”

He wasn’t expecting that question. He’d never asked it himself. “Well - I have recon experience. And they like to keep the family men close to home. Soldiers like me – well, I haven’t got a wife, or kids, or family to speak of. There aren’t too many people here to miss me.”

“I will,” she said, but just barely. They didn’t speak for a long time.

The night before Up was due to leave, Taz knocked on his door. It was past lights out.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he said, but he stood back to let her in anyway.

It was the first time she’d been to his bunk. The single room was sparse by most standards but downright luxurious compared to the bunk of questionable odours she shared with her eleven classmates. Up’s bed was fully made and a duffel bag containing all his worldly possessions was propped at the end of it. The vidscreen was on, and paused on Jackie Chan’s face.

Up sat back down on the bed and patted the spot beside him. “*Karate Kid*?”

“Always,” she said.

They finished the movie, and then she read him some of

the folk tales from her book. He didn't know much Spanish but insisted that he liked to listen to her read anyway. After a while, her eyes grew droopy, and she struggled to keep them open. Tonight, of all nights, surely she could stay awake! The words on the page started to swim together, and she felt herself saying things she hadn't meant to say.

"I wish you didn't have to go, Up," she said, her head falling toward his shoulder. "You're all I've got."

Through the dimness of near-dreams she felt him take the book out of her hands, put his arm around her, and draw her closer. "Same here, Taz."

She felt the gentle pressure of his head resting on top of her own, and felt herself give in to sleep. Here, with him, she would always be safe.

He'd meant to leave her sleeping there, curled and somehow smaller than ever, when he hoisted his duffle onto his shoulder and turned to make the long walk to the docking station where the Starship *Eagle* waited for him. But as he turned back, just for one more look, she stirred and opened her eyes.

Confusion, then comprehension. She sat up. "It's time," she said, and her voice wobbled a little.

Up nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Instead, he crossed the room in two swift strides and cupped her sleep-creased cheek with his hand, pressing his lips to the top of her head. She closed her eyes.

"I'll be back," he whispered, and she nodded. He would do everything in his power to make it true.

Chapter Eight

Reunion

Six months after Up left, the G.L.E.E. lost all communications with the Starship *Eagle*.

At first they thought it was a technical error, a busted satellite, but all the diagnostic reports came back with equipment in perfect working order. The *Eagle*, specially commissioned for the mission, was travelling into the far reaches of known space, and they didn't have another that could make the trip for a rescue mission. The Admiral and the head honchos at the government argued back and forth about the best course of action. Nothing was actually accomplished. Eventually, the newsfeeds stopped reporting on the topic, and the mysterious plight of the *Eagle* faded from general conversation.

The last time Taz had spoken to Up, it had been via vidscreen and he'd been in a cheerful mood. The connection had been poor, and they'd done a lot more of shouting "What?" at each other than actual talking, but she'd managed to tell him about the results of her second-year exams, and she'd seen the pride in his eyes before they lost the connection entirely. It was less than a week later, through the newsfeeds and the whisperings of her classmates that she'd learned that no one had heard from the ship since then. Worry settled in her stomach, but she did her best to ignore it and continued her studies, determined that when Up did come home, he would find in her the best young Ranger the Academy had ever produced.

After eighteen months of waiting, the *Eagle* and its crew were declared officially lost in space by the G.L.E.E. A memorial was organized and attended by thousands. Taz didn't go. The newsfeeds that day published pictures of each of the *Eagle's* four hundred and seventy three crewmen, and she paused the screen at Up's. It was a classic, stern military pose, and he seemed older and strange to her, all *engalanada* in his dress uniform. His blue eyes looked unsmilingly at the camera, at her.

Taz threw herself farther into her studies, and solidified her position at the top of her class. No one wanted to fight her in the ring anymore, and so she took out her frustrations on the punching bags and practiced her knife-throwing skills while her classmates looked over their shoulders in apprehension. When a fellow cadet invited her to play a game of cards in the mess hall, she responded with hostility. She took to carrying a switchblade around and absentmindedly flicking it open and closed whenever anyone got too close. The first and second years were terrified of her.

Now here she was, at the eve of her graduation. Four years ago, she was a scared little girl who'd lost everything because she didn't know how to properly defend herself. Tomorrow she would become Ensign Taz, a real Starship Ranger, and finally have free reign to go out and kill every *maldito* robot she met. She sat on her bunk and touched the fringe of her own dress uniform, a smart blue and gold.

"I did it, Up," she whispered.

The door banged open, and she carefully hung the uniform in her locker, next to the book Up had given her.

"He's not coming back, Taz."

She glared. "Shut up, Pedro."

"But you know it's true. If that ship was still out there we would have heard from them by now. It's been nearly

three years.”

Pedro had grown up a lot since the dumpster incident so long ago. She wouldn't go so far as to call them friends, but some of the animosity between them had faded. Some of it.

He came over now, and put his hands on her shoulders. She froze at the contact. She could smell his cologne, a pungent, sickly smell. He was too close. “Taz - you've got to let it go.”

She pushed him away from her, and left the bunk, wanting to get as far away from him as possible. But she could never get far enough from the truth in his words.

Commander Up stood on the bridge of his broken ship and watched the familiar constellations draw infinitesimally closer. The *Eagle* shuddered, and he patted her respectfully. “C'mon, girl,” he said. “We're so close.”

“Satellite range approaching in five, sir,” Ensign Matthews said from the communication station. “Message ready to be transmitted to G.L.E.E. headquarters.”

“Alert me when it's time,” he said, and turned back to the viewscreen. They were still too far away, of course, but he could almost imagine that he could see it: Earth, shining blue and green like a beacon of hope in the great black void that was all his ship had known for three years. The crew was silent. This moment was theirs as much as his.

The *Eagle* was running on one engine, half a warp crystal, and the ingenuity of a skeleton crew with one singular goal: to bring her home. They'd found the robot's base star, yes they had, and when their cloaking device failed, they found themselves exposed and vastly outmatched. The casualties had been staggering, and had included their Commander, which was how Up had found himself unexpectedly promoted and in command of the entire mission. It had taken an ion storm and a daring

hiding place within an asteroid to throw the robots off their trail, but they'd done it, and by the time they'd repaired their ship to flying condition, the base star had been gone. Overall, not a very successful mission, but they had gotten a lot of readings on the robots' ships and weaponry that would prove helpful to the G.L.E.E. - if they could ever get back to them.

Three years was a long time. Up had lost a lot of good men and women, people he respected. Relationships had been forged among the crew. Funerals – too many funerals – had been held. But Up had also officiated at three marriage ceremonies, and just last week the *Eagle's* youngest crewman had been born in the infirmary with pink cheeks and a healthy set of lungs. This ship was their new reality, and he knew that many of his crew were more nervous than they let on now that their goal was within reach. The G.L.E.E. had surely given up on them by now. What would be waiting for them on Earth when they arrived?

Taz's face flashed unbidden to his mind, and he pushed it away with more force than was strictly necessary. She would be finished at the Academy now, or nearly, a real Starship Ranger like him. He wondered if she'd stayed at the top of her class, if she'd found someone else to watch *The Karate Kid* with, to open up to. He wondered if she still thought of him, if she knew somehow that he was still alive.

He would know soon.

“Commander,” said the ensign. “It's time.”

He nodded. “Do it.”

Taz was the perfect picture of military discipline when the Admiral pinned the pips on her and returned her salute at the cadets' graduation ceremony. There was respectable applause, as everyone there knew her by reputation, but no

one there to whom it really *mattered* that Taz had just beat the odds to become the youngest Starship Ranger in over a generation. She felt strangely hollow afterward as she followed her fellow graduates into the reception area.

She was just planning her escape route, craving a good workout at the gym, when a young communications officer burst excitedly into the reception. Conversations died as everyone turned to stare at his dramatic entrance.

The officer didn't falter, but sought the Admiral with his eyes.

“Admiral, sir! An urgent message for you from space!”

Scattered muttering from the crowd as scenarios flashed through Taz's mind. She subconsciously reached for her zapper. More robot attacks? Full-scale war?

The officer continued.

“It's the *Eagle*, sir – she's on her way home.”

The message from the *Eagle*, the newsfeeds later proclaimed, had been sent by a primitive Morse code transmission, but the encryption codes had been verified and there was no doubt that it had come from the lost ship. Celebrations were planned and a lot of loud “I told you so's” were heard throughout the mess hall. When it was announced that the starship had been spotted within their solar system again, a great cheer went up around the entire Academy. The ship looked badly damaged, and if the G.L.E.E. was able to contact them again, they were keeping the communications to themselves. A rumour started going around that all the ship had left was a skeleton crew of seventy or so – far fewer crewmen than she'd left with – and that the ship's Commander was among the dead. The return of the *Eagle* was all anyone on Earth could talk about.

A welcoming ceremony was planned for the day the ship finally docked at the Academy's base. Taz stood at the far

back of the crowd. At first she'd felt nothing but joy at the news of the ship's return, but the rumours of the high death tolls had disturbed her. She told herself over and over, if anyone could survive, it would be Up - but still she was afraid. If that ship landed and he wasn't on it...

She couldn't face the possibility. And then - what if he was? What would she say to him? The starship, battered and war torn, eased into the docking station to vivid cheers. There was a hiss, and the door began to open.

And Taz, the toughest son of a bitch Ranger in the whole damn Academy, turned and ran.

It was a hero's welcome, but Up had never felt less like one as he blinked and stepped into the first natural atmosphere he'd breathed in three years. Eighty-four Rangers left out of four hundred and seventy three, the ship hanging together with string and wire. He was lauded, praised, fawned over. The Admiral spoke loudly of medals and parades. As he stepped off the ship's ramp, he sagged a little, and a feeling of fatigue overtook him. He'd done what he'd set out to do - he'd brought his ship home.

Everyone wanted a piece of him. Their words stumbled over each other and every time he nodded in false understanding the crowd cheered anew. Camera flashes blinded him. He scanned the mass of gathered faces for the one that had haunted him for the entire mission. She wasn't there.

It was a long time before Up was able to excuse himself, pleading exhaustion and promising to give the Admiral a full debriefing the next day. A starstruck lieutenant showed him to his new quarters, and he sat down long enough to gather himself before getting up again and listening for movement in the halls. He cautiously opened the door.

Finding the hallways thankfully deserted, most people

still revelling in the celebrations, he found himself heading automatically for the place he knew she would be, if she was still here at the Academy at all – the gym.

He stepped in quietly. She moved like a goddess of war, twisting and twirling a rifle in her hands like it was an extension of her, turning ceremony into an act of aggression. She swung the rifle around her back and flowed into a kata pose, and then another. He could see new strength in her arms, her back. She'd cut her hair short, and wore an ensign's camouflaged pants with boots and her white tank top, a red band keeping the sweat from her eyes. She was so familiar to him, and yet he felt like he was meeting her for the first time.

She was goddamned beautiful.

He cleared his throat, and she went entirely still, her back to him.

"I told you I would come back," he said.

She turned, slowly. The years they'd lost had changed her, just a little – she looked older now, her cheeks more slender. Black bangs fell into her eyes, but the short hair suited her. She looked at him, and he wondered what she thought of him, dressed in the grey and black of a Commander's uniform, his blond hair turned nearly entirely to silver, aged ten years in three. She took him in.

"I knew you would," she said. They stood there, six feet apart from each other, and Up hated that he didn't know what to do, now that he was here. She approached him first.

"Your eye-" she said, and reached up a hand as if to touch the scar he now wore there. She drew her hand back, and the air between them burned.

"Still in working order," he said. It wasn't the only new scar he'd acquired. "I won't win any beauty contests, but-"

She shook her head. "You look like a hero."

He didn't want that word, not from her. "There was a job



She turned, slowly.

to do, and I got it done, Taz. Nothing more, nothing less.” She didn’t respond, and he sought for something to say. *How’ve you been? I missed you every day.* “You’re an ensign now?”

She stood a little straighter. “*Sí,*” she said, and finally smiled, a tentative one.

He smiled back. “Got your first assignment yet?”

“Not yet,” she said. “Things have been more or less put on hold since your message arrived last week.”

“Well,” he said. “It’s a little soon for these arrangements, I suppose, but once the *Eagle* is decommissioned, it looks like I’ll be getting a new ship and needing a new crew. I’ll be looking for talented new recruits from the Academy – know anyone who’d be interested?”

He held his breath as she took in his words. Her smile reached her eyes. “I think I might know of someone.”

And suddenly Up knew he was home.

Chapter Nine

Rookie

“The warp cores are located here, here, and here,” said Commander Up, tapping the map on the greenish screen that took up most of the *Cazadora*’s strategy room. He was surrounded by a select group of Starship Rangers, suited up for their first mission on the new ship. “Disabling them is easy, but so is repairing them. The only way to ensure this robot ship never makes it to its destination is to take the cores with us. Lieutenant-Commander Tripp?”

“Lucky for us, the robots’ warp cores are relatively small,” Up’s second-in-command said, holding out his hands to demonstrate about a foot in length. “But they do have some radioactivity, so you’ll be taking these-” he gestured to a collection of glass cylinders in the corner of the room “- to carry them in. You’ll have to touch the cores to remove them, but if you’re exposed to them for more than twenty minutes, you’ll be looking at radiation poisoning.”

“So don’t do it,” said Up. “You’ve all been briefed on the removal of robot warp cores?”

Nods all around.

“We’ll do this as efficiently as possible, in three teams. Lieutenant-Commander Tripp’s got a diversion planned that should have them good and distracted, but we figure we’ve got seven, eight minutes tops before they realize we’re in. And by the time they realize we’re in, we should be on our way out. You got me?”

“Yes, sir!” the ensigns chorused.

“Then let’s get the job done,” he said, and the Rangers filed out. Stopping to load a copy of the map into his handheld scanner, he listened to the banter coming from the weapons room beyond.

“Yo, Taz, *chiquita*, it’s your first mission!”

“Roooookie!” Another cheered. The chant began. “Rookie! Rookie! Rookie!”

Up smiled. It was a ritual, a hazing, and Taz, swinging a zapper confidently over her shoulder, didn’t seem to mind it in the slightest. She was a real Starship Ranger now, and he had no doubt that she was about to prove it to them all.

Tripp was watching him with a funny smirk on his face. “I hope your rookie’s as good as you say she is, Up.”

Up looked at his friend. They’d served together for much of their careers, and the past three years on the *Eagle* had only solidified the trust between them. So Up chose to ignore the implications of that little smile.

“She is,” he said, loading the scanner into his utility belt. Tripp saluted, still smiling. Up returned the salute with a roll of his eyes, and turned to join his Rangers.

After reluctantly being lauded as a hero by the entire solar system for the triumphant return of the *Eagle* and skyrocketing his way into becoming one of the best-known Rangers in the entire G.L.E.E., Up had been given command of the fleet’s latest and most advanced starship, the newly christened *Cazadora*. Soon after the ship was launched, headquarters had intercepted intelligence that indicated the robots were planning to launch a stealth attack on Farm Planet, the most important agricultural centre of human existence. Its loss would undoubtedly cause the starvation of half of the human race – and was absolutely out of the question. The *Cazadora* was equipped with the most sophisticated cloaking technology humans were

capable of – and crewed by the best Rangers the G.L.E.E. had to offer. It was the perfect ship for the job.

“All right, kids,” Up raised his voice as he entered the weapons room, and the Rangers stopped chanting to listen. “Remember, no mercy. We shouldn’t meet any robots – but if we do – feel free to kill the sons of bitches.”

Grunts and shouts of assent, and the Rangers loaded themselves into their smaller transport ship, the *Arrow*, for the short journey to the robot ship. Energy was running high. Soon a chorus of “Rookie! Rookie! Rookie!” started up again. Up thought he saw a small smile on Taz’s face, where she sat squished between two other ensigns. She was going to do just fine.

When they had docked, silently, with the designated hatch of the robot ship, the Rangers turned expectantly not to Up, but to the rookie.

“Just let me have the first *bastardo*,” she said, and there was general hooting in approval.

Up divided up the ensigns, gesturing a direction to each group. “Taz, with me,” he said, and with a few pats on the back from departing Rangers, she followed him and two others into the dark, winding hallways of the robot ship. He knew she’d be fine - but that didn’t mean he couldn’t keep an eye on her.

Up hated the robot ships. They were completely unlike the smooth, clean beauty of the *Cazadora* or the *Eagle*. The robots thought nothing of aesthetic value, so the walls were covered in exposed wiring, structure turned inside out, occasional flashing lights, crisp functionality. The hallways were small, claustrophobic even. They were deep into enemy territory now.

Their presence went unchallenged as they made their way through the ship to the engine access shaft. The warp core engine, one of three, was tiny and accessed by a bare

metal walkway that led out to a platform in the centre of the inconveniently deep shaft. Robots didn't see the need for railings, or much in the way of lighting for that matter, so Up carefully edged his way across and gestured for Taz and the others to follow. If he squinted, he thought perhaps he could make out the bottom of the shaft, just barely – at least ten decks below.

The sound of a rush of shaky air came from behind him. Up looked back. The other ensigns were on his tail, but Taz was staring down at the pit with wide eyes, still at the beginning of the walkway.

Seeming to sense his gaze, Taz shook herself and stood taller. She stepped out onto the walkway, very determinedly looking straight ahead at the core. Up reached the platform and the other ensigns set to removing it. He waited for Taz to join them, keeping a keen eye out for movement on the shadowed walls of the shaft.

“Doing alright, rookie?” he said, quietly enough so the others wouldn't hear.

“I'm just hoping those robots show up so I can shoot the *hijos de puta*,” she said with a bravado that might have fooled anyone but him. He eyed her sideways.

“Got it, Commander,” said one of the other ensigns. He handed the glowing purple tube over to Taz, and reached for the radiation container.

“*Intruder alert! Intruder alert!*”

“Shit,” said Up. The mechanical voice seemed to be coming from everywhere. He pushed the ensign, still struggling to open the radiation container, toward the walkway.

“We'll deal with that later, go!”

Buzzers, raw and harsh, began to sound, and the surface beneath them seemed to shudder. Making sure Taz was still behind him, Up raced across the walkway with the others,

images of robot booby traps and hurtling into the darkness below filling his vision.

Just as he crossed the threshold into the hallway beyond, there was a horrible screeching noise. Up turned just in time to see a heavy iron gate come crashing down behind him.

“Taz!”

She hadn’t made it through in time. She was trapped.

The buzzing rang still louder in her ears as Taz and Up stared at each other, trying to comprehend the row of iron bars between them. The other ensigns turned around, realizing that something had gone wrong.

Taz stood very still, clutching the pulsing warp core to her chest, and watched with an odd sense of detachment as Up tapped the gate, felt for a catch, tried to lift it with pure strength. Nothing worked.

“Commander!”

The sound of zappers, and a flash of light. The robots had found them. Ducking as a jet of light bounded off the iron bars, Up reached through them to grab Taz’s shoulders.

“Taz, look at me.”

It took her a moment to focus on his face, full of determination, and perhaps a trace of fear.

“Taz, look around. Do you see anything that looks like a secondary escape route? A hatch? Another walkway?”

She looked up, and around, and down, her eyes scanning the exposed wires and metal pipes for something that fit the description. Then she paused, and squinted at a spot that was just a little darker than the rest.

“Si,” she said. “There’s a hatch.”

“That’s your way out,” Up said, still holding tight to her shoulders. “Give me the core.”

She attempted to slip the glass tube through the bars as more shouts and blasts came from the other ensigns. They



“Taz, look at me.”

were holding off the robots, but for how long? She bit her lip. The tube was a mere centimetre too wide for the gap in the bars. It wasn't going to go through.

"Dead goddammit," said Up. "You're going to have to take it with you. And you don't have the radiation case."

Taz shook her head.

Up's forehead creased further. "You heard Lieutenant-Commander Tripp."

"I have twenty minutes," she said.

Up's hands moved, gently but urgently, to her face, and she blinked in surprise. He pulled them back through the gate. "Less. Get moving. And take this." He pushed the scanner containing the ship's map through the bars.

With shaking hands, she took the scanner and pushed the warp core into the deepest pocket of her camouflage pants. "Good thing I climbed so many trees as a *niña pequeña*," she said, trying to sound as brave as he was.

He gave her a kind of sickly smile. "You can do this, Taz. You're a Starship Ranger."

Taz saluted, and with a great deal of effort, tore her eyes away from his.

She listened to him turn and run toward the fight as she surveyed her options. The warp core, with its precious crystals inside, felt heavy and warm against her leg.

"*El reloj no se detiene*," she said to herself, as there was no one else to hear her.

Crouching on the walkway, she squinted at her destination – it was at least three decks below, a hatch on a slim ledge that might just hold her. The wiring and pipes thick on the walls should allow for proper climbing – thank dead God this wasn't a G.L.E.E. ship with its smooth walls and slick construction.

Then again, if this was a G.L.E.E. ship, she wouldn't be in this mess.

Feeling for a grip on the underside of the walkway, she found a thick knot of wires and after tugging to test its strength, swung herself down until she was hanging one-handed beneath the walkway and feeling very thankful for her combat gloves.

Then a flash of red light sliced through the air.

“¡Mierda!” she said, nearly losing her grip. Grunting, she hauled herself up so that she was perched on the underside of the walkway, her feet braced against a metal bar and both hands wrapped firmly around thick bundles of wires. A bead of sweat her headband had missed ran directly between her eyes. Her muscles screamed.

More robots had emerged from another panel she hadn't seen, a few decks up. A few more blasts of light, and then silence. Taz held her breath and tried to gauge the distance to the wall. At least six feet – too far to jump. Listening for robot movement, she grabbed another bunch of wires and pulled herself a few inches closer.

She continued like this, hand over hand and her feet seeking tentative footholds, until she could touch a pipe that jutted out from the wall of the shaft. Perhaps it was her imagination, but the core seemed to be growing hotter in her pocket. It was now or never.

Pushing hard with her feet against the walkway, she got a firm grip on the pipe and swung herself over to the wall in one fluid motion. Red light exploded as she scrambled for handholds, and then her stomach was in her mouth as she felt herself falling, falling, the sound of robot blasters echoing around her. Reaching desperately for something to stop her fall, she felt a jarring in her shoulder as she nearly pulled a sheaf of wires from the wall. It did the trick, and she hung precariously over the blackness of the pit, her feet dangling. Looking to her right, she saw the hollow shape of the hatch directly beside her.

“Well, that’s one way to do it,” she said, and stretched out her toe to touch the ledge. Once she had maneuvered her way into a crouching position, she pressed herself as closely as she could into the shallow protection of the ledge and rotated the wheel of the hatch, hoping that it didn’t require an access code. It swung open easily.

“*Gracias a Dios muerto*,” she said, slipping inside and closing the door on the red light still bursting throughout the engine shaft. She stood up quickly and immediately felt a wave of dizziness wash over her. The warp core felt like it was burning her skin through the fabric of her clothes.

“Got to – get back to the *Arrow*,” she panted, placing a hand on the wall to steady herself and pulling out Up’s scanner. She studied the map, trying to get oriented. She was in a hallway that looked just like any other in the ship, but she knew she was three decks down from their entry route... there it was. She quickly memorized the route she would need to take. The robot ship’s continually sloping hallways meant that there was no need for stairs or elevators – that was probably going to be a good thing.

Taz wiped her forehead with the bottom of her shirt – she was breaking out in a sweat, and she didn’t think it was from her exertion in the engine shaft. Taking a few deep breaths, she set out at a jog along the hallway. She felt so cold.

A double burst of weapons fire shot across the hallway as she passed an intersection, and that’s when Taz realized that her vision was starting to go. Pushing herself to run faster, she swung her zapper around her shoulder and held it at the ready.

More bursts of light and Taz fired blindly, hearing the satisfying *pew-pew* sound of energy blast hitting metal. She didn’t stop moving – she had to get back to the *Arrow* – she had to get back to Up -

Running at full speed, she rounded a corner and there he was, running toward her with his gun raised, shouting orders at the Rangers behind him. She felt a vague sense of relief, and then her knees buckled. His face, bending over her in concern, was the last thing she saw.

Taz woke to blinding white light, and wondered for a moment if she had somehow made it to heaven. Then she turned and saw Up sprawled in an uncomfortable looking chair next to her bed, and realized that she was in sickbay, on the *Cazadora*. She tried to sit up.

“Whoa there, take it easy,” Up said, untangling himself from the chair. Had he *slept* there? “You had severe radiation poisoning from the warp core, but the doctors managed to get enough anti-radiation meds into you to counteract the effects. It will take some time for your body to restore itself, but you should be feeling back to your old self within a few weeks or so.”

Taz blinked as memories of the robot ship flooded back to her. Had she really climbed down the wall of the engine shaft? Shot her way through a hoard of robots in a radiation haze? The images were all jumbled in her mind.

“I guess coming back unconscious isn’t the best way to end your rookie mission on a starship, is it?” she asked weakly, her voice sounding raw and sore.

To her surprise, Up smiled. “It’s not the worst, either.”

Taz found out why he was smiling later that evening when he helped her, despite her protestations, into the crowded mess hall. The room fell silent, and then a lieutenant boomed, “Three cheers for the rookie!”

“Rookie! Rookie! Rookie!”

Riotous whoops and applause filled the hall.

“Taz, did you really climb six decks down that shaft to escape the robots?”

“Is it true you killed *twenty* toasters on your way out?”

“Did you really do it all through the radiation poisoning?”

She found herself being pounded on the back, raised up onto the shoulders of two burly ensigns, and a drink being pushed into her hand. Stunned, Taz looked at Up, who was laughing and clapping too.

“Looks like you’ve made quite an impression on your first mission, rookie,” he said. He raised his own glass, and the hall quieted.

“To Taz! The toughest son of a bitch rookie Ranger I’ve ever met!”

“To Taz!” the crew echoed, and there was the sound of sloshing liquid and more cheers. Taz started to laugh. Despite her aching muscles, nauseated stomach and the pounding headache she was beginning to think would never go away, Taz had never felt happier. She raised her own glass, grinned at Up, and drank it in one.

Chapter Ten

Rescue Mission

It was mid-afternoon in the *Cazadora*'s mess hall. Off-duty Rangers drank whiskey and the sound of cards slapping on tables filled the room. It was a fairly quiet day, the starship just returning from a disheartening mission to an alien planet where they'd tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the planet's leaders to let the G.L.E.E. set up a military base in orbit around them. The location of the planet was strategically ideal – long-range satellites from here would be able to pick up secret robot transmissions and ferry them back to headquarters – but it was a no go. The Graali people weren't interested in getting involved with the human-robot conflict, not even for the promise of technology and favours in return. The Commander had stormed out of the last, disastrous meeting and locked himself in his quarters. Commander Up was unused to unsuccessful missions – and disliked being restrained by diplomacy.

So the Rangers were on their way back to G.L.E.E. space for their next assignment, without much to do in the meantime but gossip and play crazy eights.

“Three of spades,” said one aged lieutenant, lighting his cigar. “Not much of a first mission for you, rookie, but we'll be seeing some action soon.”

The rookie to whom he spoke, a wiry young man in glasses and an ensign's uniform, placed a three of hearts on top of the lieutenant's card. “The Commander's not very

happy, is he?”

“Would you be?” the lieutenant said. “We’ve wasted almost a week and plenty of resources on these people. Taz was right - the least they could have done was say no right away, rather than dragging it out.”

The ensign threw his cards on the table and leaned back in his chair, tilting it toward the wall. “Who is this Taz? I keep hearing his name around the ship.”

The lieutenant chuckled. “Ain’t no he, son. Ensign Taz is the toughest Ranger to come out of the Academy since the Commander himself – she’ll be made a lieutenant soon enough - and she won’t take kindly to being called a man.”

The ensign put his hands behind his head and leaned still farther against the wall. “Wait, are you talking about that little Mexican girl that’s always following the Commander around? *That’s* the legendary Taz?”

The lieutenant’s eyes darted nervously across the room. “That’s her.”

The ensign burst out laughing. “I just assumed she was the Commander’s – well, you know. She’s seems like she’d be quite the looker under all those combat fatigues-”

A sharp whistling sound, and the mess hall fell silent. A knife, short but deadly, quivered in the wall a mere inch from the ensign’s ear.

“And she’s a good shot, too,” said a low, thickly accented voice. Across the room, Ensign Taz lounged back in her chair in an exact imitation of the rookie.

The ensign made a half-formed splutter in response. Taz swung herself out of her chair and walked toward him. She didn’t break eye contact with the rookie, still frozen with fear, as she pulled her knife from the wall and twirled it once in her fingers. The ensign winced.

“Remember that,” she said, and sheathed the knife. She turned and walked out of the mess hall. A few appreciative

whoops followed her.

“Nice aim, Taz,” a familiar voice said.

“Shut up, Pedro.” Taz kept walking. “I was aiming for his head.”

“Hey listen, Lieutenant-Commander Tripp wants to know – have you seen the Commander?”

“Up?” she paused. “Not since we left the Graali planet. Why, *¿qué pasa?*”

Pedro didn't say anything.

“Pedro...” she said warningly.

“Well, it's just – no one else has seen him since we left either. And-” Pedro swallowed. “The ship's locator can't find him. According to our computers, he's not on board.”

“*¿Qué?*” Taz said, setting off at a jog. Pedro rushed to catch up.

“This is why the Lieutenant-Commander didn't want me to tell you, Taz, he knew you'd get all worked up-”

“This is not me worked up, *idiota*, this is me trying to figure out how the *Cazadora* could leave orbit without its Commander on board. Tripp!” she called as she pressed the sensor to open the door of the bridge. The Lieutenant-Commander looked up and groaned.

“*¿Qué diablos pasó, Tripp?*” she demanded, placing her hands on her hips. “How in dead God's name do you lose a Commander?”

“At ease, Ranger,” the Lieutenant-Commander said. “We all saw him go in to his quarters after the meeting. We assumed he was still in there, and I gave the order to leave.”

“Well, I *assume* you've already given the order to go back?” Taz said.

The Lieutenant-Commander glared at her. “Obviously. And I don't appreciate your tone, *Ensign.*”

Taz crossed her arms. This was her least favourite part of being a Starship Ranger – superior officers. Up she could

take it from – Up’s orders made sense, and he valued her input. But Tripp was another story. She only restrained herself from telling him what she really thought of him because he and Up had served on the *Eagle* together, and Up liked him.

Tripp turned his back on her and spoke to the team assembled on the bridge. “Commander Up wasn’t happy with the results of our last meeting. It’s possible he returned to the planet to try one last negotiation.”

“Up wouldn’t do that,” Taz said loudly. Most of the Rangers turned to look at her. “He would never leave the ship without telling anyone.” *Without telling me*, she wanted to add, but restrained herself.

Tripp exhaled in exasperation. “All right then, Ensign Taz, what do you think happened?”

Taz thought about the Graali, their calm, secretive demeanour, and their complete lack of interest in everything the G.L.E.E. had offered them. “The Graali didn’t want our technology. What if they already had their own? What if they had already made a deal – with someone else?”

She didn’t say it, but she could see them coming to the same conclusion she was.

Robots.

“Say the Graali *are* working with the robots,” Tripp said, sounding unconvinced. “That doesn’t explain why the Commander is missing.”

“Commander Up is one of the most senior officers in the fleet, and a famous one at that,” Taz said. “It could be for ransom.”

“Or information,” said a voice behind her. She’d almost forgotten that Pedro had followed her in. “The Commander has security access most of us can’t even dream of. They might have taken him to get top secret information about the G.L.E.E.”

“Up would never tell them anything,” Taz said.

“He may not have a choice,” Pedro said darkly.

Torture. The word echoed unsaid between them. Taz turned back to Lieutenant-Commander Tripp expectantly.

He sighed. “All right, let’s treat the Graali as a potential enemy, but we’re trying diplomacy first. No sense starting anything if the Commander just wanted some extra time to smell the overly large flowers. In the meantime, we’ll ready a rescue team to take the *Arrow* down to the planet to check things out. Wilson, Luddy, Punz, suit up.”

“I’m going,” Taz said.

“Taz is right, she should go,” said Pedro, and she turned to him in surprise. “If anyone’s going to find him down there, it’s her. She knows Up better than anyone.”

“All *right!*” Tripp bellowed. “If only to get you out of my hair. Taz, suit up. You too, Ensign Herrera.” He turned his back firmly on them as they headed to the weapons room.

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“I know how much you care about him,” Pedro said, not looking at her but selecting a shiny black zapper from the row before them. “You’d drive everyone nuts about it if you had to stay here.”

Before Taz had a chance to respond, the ship’s computer announced in a calm, pleasant voice, “Destination reached: planet Graali.”

“Let’s go,” she said, and together they headed for the *Arrow*.

The second blow was sharper than the first had been. Up felt his head whip around from the force of it, his neck muscles shrieking in protest. Fiery orange explosions clouded his vision. His cheek burned, a deep, slow pain.

He stayed silent on his knees, his wrists tied to his

ankles, unable to defend himself. A thousand curses rang through his head, but none were bad enough for how he felt about the Graali right now. His hosts watched calmly from the corner of the room as the robot lifted its heavy metal arm for another blow.

Up exhaled from the pain of it, determined not to give them the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. The bastards had been lying through their pointed teeth the whole time the *Cazadora* had been there. It was no wonder they hadn't wanted G.L.E.E. technology – the robots had given them ships, weapons, *transporters*, for dead God's sake. They had appeared in his quarters, slapped a mobile transporter on him, and had him back on Graali before Up knew what had happened. He doubted the crew would have even realized he was gone yet. He wanted to hit someone. *Why* had they been so unprepared?

“You humans are so *cute*,” said one of the Graali, a female with grotesquely glowing eyes and two small horns pointing from her head. “So trusting.”

“And you're a two-faced bitch, Senator,” Up said, grimacing. “Let me up and I'll show you how *trusting* humans can be.”

The robot looked at the Graali Senator. “Should I hit him again, Sen-a-tor?”

“Oh, maybe a few more,” she said, smiling and showing her teeth. “I have a feeling that brute strength won't break this one.” She bent down, her face inches from his. “But there are other ways to break a man, Commander. Humans are just so *weak*.”

She straightened and gestured for the robot to continue. Up braced himself as the world exploded again.

Taz and Pedro were crouched in a pink bush of enormous lime green flowers, awaiting word from the

Cazadora and trying to make themselves as invisible as possible. Their camouflaged ensign uniforms weren't exactly the right colour to blend in with this planet. The Lieutenant-Commander, as far as they could tell, wasn't having much luck getting a diplomatic answer out of the Graali people, and Taz was getting restless. They *knew* Up was in the government complex – they'd tracked his signal from the *Arrow* – and who knew what they were doing to him while she sat idly by, waiting for a stupid order to come through. Her fingers itched on her zapper.

"Take it easy, Taz," said Pedro, and she glared at him. He settled himself deeper into the bush, keeping half an eye on a large yellow insect pollinating the bloom nearest him. "Up's a tough son of a bitch. He can take care of himself."

"Shut up about Up," she said, gripping her zapper still tighter.

"He saved your life, didn't he?" Pedro continued. "Back when you were a kid, I mean. Before you came to the Academy. Before he brought you there."

"Sí," Taz said quietly. "I owe him everything."

"My family was killed by the robots, too," said Pedro blithely. "In our first year. I left for the Academy, and three weeks later, *bam!* My entire village was gone."

Taz looked at Pedro, really looked at him, for the first time in years. How could she have gone to school with him, been bullied by him, chased him into a dumpster, served on the same starship as him and never known that they shared this key common background?

"They say there isn't much of Mexico left now," she said softly, and forced the image of her mama, lifeless and staring, from her mind.

Pedro looked at her sadly. "I'm sorry that I was so cruel to you then, Taz. I know it's no excuse, but I hope you can understand how difficult that time was for me."

She didn't want to think about it, the person beneath the uniform, now the only other person she knew who might understand what it was like to lose everything. She fixed her attention firmly back on her zapper.

When Pedro next spoke, his words stumbled out one after the other. "Taz, there's something else I should tell you-"

"Ensign Taz! Come in, Ensign Taz!"

Taz snatched up her radio. "Taz here."

"Diplomacy is a no-go. You're clear to enter the complex from your side. We've pinpointed the Commander's location and sent it to your scanner."

Taz looked at Pedro, who gave her a thumbs up to confirm this.

"The other team should meet you inside. This is all about stealth. Make it clean. That means no open fire if you can help it, got it, Ensign?"

Taz rolled her eyes at Tripp's tone. "Yes, sir!"

"Make sure you bring our boy home, Ensign."

For a moment, the Lieutenant-Commander sounded almost human. "Will do," she said, and turned to Pedro, who looked disgruntled about something. "It's time."

Up had the satisfaction of disabling no less than three robots before their counterparts were finally able to strap him down to the unappealingly surgical table in the next room. The walls and ceiling of the room were painted in psychedelic colours and designs to match the striking scenery outdoors: monstrous trees, towering beanstalks. He continued to struggle, straining against the metal clasps as two white-coated Graali doctors approached him with needles in hand.

"I hope you enjoy your sleep, Commander," said the Graali Senator through the room's glass window. "I think

you will be a little more – *cooperative* – when you awaken.”

Every molecule of his being wanted to resist whatever drug they were injecting into him, but before the Graali doctors had even left the room, he could feel it, icy and tremulous, filling his veins, making his vision swim. Beanstalks became sunflowers, and flowers ogres with horns on their heads like the Graali wore. He squeezed his eyes shut, but the images persisted. Now they changed. Fire everywhere, and smoke making him cough, and the metallic sound of robot laughter. A swirling of metal and haze, and then a girl stepped out from the darkness.

It was Taz, as he hadn't seen her in years, dressed in her *quinceañera* finest, dark hair hanging long again over her shoulders. Her dress was pristine, despite the fires raging around her, and her skin cool as she approached him and placed her hand gently on his forehead. “You're burning up,” she said. Her appearance may have been that of a girl at her *quinceañera*, but her face was the same as he knew it now, older and more experienced, the tiniest scar next to her left ear from the time she'd let him get too close during fencing practice. He chuckled.

“Up, that's my name,” he said, and then wondered what was wrong with him.

She smiled, more indulgently than she should have. “Up,” she said, as if she'd never heard it before. Her fingers moved to trace the shape of his jaw, the scar on his left eye. He closed his eyes and felt years of tension begin to fade from his neck, his shoulders...

His eyes snapped open. Her face was very close to his. “You're not Taz,” he said suddenly. “Taz wouldn't – I mean we're not-”

“Have you ever asked her?” Not-Taz said, a small smile playing on her face. Up frowned, and then blinked as the

familiar sound of shouting and gunfire filled the air. With a gasp of surprise, Not-Taz disappeared, and in her place was a very worried-looking Must-Be-Real-Taz, short hair, headband and all.

“Up!” she said. “Can you see me? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” he said, though he felt a little as though his brain had been sucked out his ears and replaced with bubblegum.

Taz fiddled with the metal straps, then swore in frustration. “¡*Mierda!* Okay, hold still, Up.”

She was a good shot, but that didn’t stop him wincing as her zapper blasted through each of the four clasps holding him to the table. “Can you stand?”

He sat up first, shaking his head. It was beginning to clear.

“You can’t have been hooked up to these machines very long,” Taz said, as the *pew pew* sound of zappers echoed around them. “As soon as I pulled out the IV, you started to wake up.” She put her arm underneath his shoulders and helped to push him into a standing position. Her closeness felt like an electric shock after the hallucination he’d just had.

“I’m fine,” he said, stepping away from her and testing his weight on both legs. The room was a mess of blasted equipment and shattered glass. “Taz-”

Ensign Herrera rushed in, zapper in hand.

“The other team is holding off the Graali but we don’t have much time,” he said to Taz. “Can he walk?”

“*He* can walk just fine,” said Up, before Taz could respond, and crossed the room to the doorway to prove it. The fogginess in his brain was fading fast. “Didn’t bring an extra zapper, did you, Garbage-sniffer?”

Taz and Pedro looked at each other. For some reason this annoyed him. Why had he assigned this idiot to his starship again?

“Sorry, Commander. We don’t have any time to waste - we have to get out of this complex and back to the *Arrow*,” said Pedro. “Follow me - I mean, if you will, sir.”

Up followed, but only because he didn’t have a sweet clue where in the complex the Graali had transported him and didn’t see any other way around it. They had barely made it around the corner when a robot blocked their path and raised its arm. Taz and Pedro both cried out as their zappers and Pedro’s scanner were pulled from their hands and flew at an alarming rate toward the robot. But perhaps the robot had miscalculated its magnetic pull, for just as the zappers reached it, one of the triggers went off and the robot exploded in a spectacular display of stupidity.

“*Robots de puta madre!*” burst Taz. Now they were weaponless and without a map.

Two more robots rounded the corner after the first, and Up threw himself toward them, aiming for the weak points in the neck and the waist. Sparks flew, and the robots shuddered, sinking to the floor.

“Let’s go,” he said, and both Taz and the Garbage-sniffer fell into line behind him.

Without the scanner, they had to rely on Pedro’s memory to know which way to turn, which proved to be not-so-accurate. Before long, they found themselves staring at a blank wall with a single large window in the centre. Looking out the window showed them nothing but a three story drop into some acridly coloured rose bushes and a fast-moving yellow river. A dead end.

A metallic sound of marching behind them made them turn. Two dozen robots, easily, were headed their way, and them with no weapons to speak of. Both Taz and Pedro looked at him.

There was nothing else for it.

“After you, Garbage-sniffer!” said Up, gesturing at the

window and turning to face the oncoming robots. “Make sure you aim for the river.”

Taz surfaced, spluttering yellow water and trying desperately to stay upright in the bobbing current. Wiping the water from her eyes, she looked around. Up was spinning down the river as well, and gave her a thumbs up to indicate that he was okay. But where was Pedro?

After several long moments, she spotted him, face-down in the water, far too still. “Up!” she screamed over the sound of rushing water. He looked her way, and she pointed.

They both started swimming for Pedro, moving with the current, angling themselves with the river bends. Up reached him first, and then Taz joined him, both taking an arm, holding Pedro’s head carefully out of the water. It took them a long time – Taz was beginning to fear too long – to reach the shore and haul Pedro’s limp body up the bank.

He started to cough up water as Up shook the waterlogged radio and tried to reach the ship. Taz breathed a sigh of relief and thumped Pedro on the back, not sure if she was really helping – but at least the boy was breathing.

The radio crackled to life. “*Cazadora*, this is Commander Up. We’ve got three Rangers here in need of a pick-up and a medic if you can spare one. Is the other team accounted for?”

“Taz-” coughed Pedro, spitting out a stream of yellow water. “Taz, I have to tell you-”

“Shut up,” she said, but not too harshly, sitting back and wringing out the bottom of her tank top. “You nearly drowned. You need to rest.”

“No,” he said, grabbing the front of her shirt and pulling her close to him. “I’m not shutting up this time. I’m crazy about you, Taz. I always have been. I can’t just sit back and

watch -”

Taz’s mouth dropped open as her brain tried to filter the words Pedro was saying. And then he kissed her, roughly but desperately, and it was all too much, too fast for her to comprehend. He tasted like yellow river water. *But Up* -

And something in her brain realized that Up had fallen silent, that he was right there, seeing everything, and she garnered enough sense to break the kiss and pull away from Pedro, her eyes wide and blinking.

“Taz-” Pedro began.

She pulled her arm back and punched him in the nose.

Later, as the three of them walked to the site where the *Arrow* was hidden, Pedro sullen and Taz fuming, she realized that Up was chuckling silently to himself.

“What are you so happy about?” she hissed.

“Just remind me never to try anything like that with you,” he said, his smile a mile wide. “I like my nose just fine the way it is.”

Chapter Eleven

Stranded

The Graali senator sat hunched at the *Panther's* interrogation table, her glowing eyes fixed on the wall across the room. Up folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, a picture of nonchalance.

“Well, Senator,” he said. “It appears that the tables have turned.”

The senator's hate-filled gaze flicked to Up. Behind him, Taz leaned against the wall, one boot up, examining her knife.

“So it's your choice,” Up continued. “We can do this the easy way – or your way.”

Taz straightened up, and the senator laughed, a low, grinding sound.

“Is this really the scariest soldier you've got, Commander?” she said. “Am I supposed to be afraid of her?”

Taz walked casually over to the table. Before the senator's laugh had echoed away, Taz was behind her, one hand on a scaly horn, the other pressing the knife to her throat. The senator made a rasping sound.

“Like I said, Senator,” Up said, still relaxed in his chair. “It's up to you.”

They eyed one another, and then the Senator raised her hands. Up nodded, and Taz released her.

“You think the robots are going to stick around once they realize how fallible – how *weak* – their allies are?” Up said.

“Robots have no compassion. Or sense of loyalty. They’ll do what is logical for them – and right now, that would be hanging you and the rest of your backstabbing people out to dry.”

The Senator hesitated, a little too long, and Taz wrenched her head back again.

“The *Panther* has its cannons pointed at your planet, Senator. Specifically, on the very government complex where you seem to get such sick pleasure out of drugging and torturing alien ambassadors. And I don’t see any robot ships coming to stop us. What’ll it be?”

Up held his gaze steady until the Senator, still straining away from Taz’s knife, seemed to deflate.

“All right!” she gasped. “I’ll tell you everything.”

Taz was practically bouncing in her seat as they flew back to the *Cazadora*, still high from the success of their mission. “You should have seen the look on your face, Up! I swear it nearly made me *cagar mis pantalones*, it’s no wonder she couldn’t wait to tell you all about her little robot *amigos*.”

“I think that knife of yours may have had something to do with it, too,” Up replied as he switched the controls of the *Arrow* to autopilot. He was smiling.

“*Arrow*, this is the *Panther*.”

“Go ahead,” Up said to the radio as Taz put her feet up on the control panel, pulling out her knife again and polishing it with the bottom of her shirt.

“We’ve got the Senator secured here and the Graali have agreed to sign a peace treaty for her safe return.”

“Good,” said Up. “I still don’t trust the bastards, but it’s a start. Thanks for picking her up for us, by the way.”

“Anything for you, Commander. *Panther* out.”

“Anything for you, Commander,” Taz imitated, punching

Up on the shoulder. He rubbed it ruefully. “The people love you.”

“Oh, go do something useful, like check the radar, will you?”

Taz swung around to look at the screen, its pulsing green lights showing exactly what it should: the *Arrow*, the much larger *Panther*, and farther away, their destination, the *Cazadora*. Glowing dully in purple were the Graali planet and its thirteen moons, and there, in red-

“Up, we have a problem.”

“Well, don’t drag it out,” he said.

The *Arrow*’s sensors then caught the same thing she had, and the ship’s lights began to flash red. “Enemy ship approaching mark 2324 – it’s robotic!”

“Weapons,” Up said, switching the controls back to manual, and Taz unbuckled herself to sprint back to the weapons array, still keeping half an eye on the radar.

“Up, there are three of them!” she called. “Closing fast – they see us!”

“Engaging the cloaking device,” Up said, pressing buttons faster than she could keep track of as she swung into the artillery seat, gearing up the cannons. The *Arrow* only had four – she wasn’t meant to be a combat ship.

“*Panther*, this is Commander Up. Do you read me?”

Silence.

“They’re blocking transmissions,” Taz said, her eyes scanning the sensors.

“And the cloaking device,” Up confirmed, then turned to her. “It’s fight or flight.”

She looked at him, and at the robot fighter now looming in the viewscreen behind him. “Let’s get it done.”

“Shields up,” he said, turning back to the screen. “I’m going to try and get in their blind spots. Fire when you get a clean shot, but don’t-”

“Don’t waste them, *sí, lo sé,*” she said, gripping the trigger. “Just fly, Commander.”

Up, in his early career, had spent a short time as a fighter pilot, this she knew from the stories that cycled the mess hall. That’s when, they said, he had earned the silver wings that adorned his dress uniform – though he’d never spoken of it to her. Even with the *Arrow*’s limited maneuverability, Up dodged several rounds of fire from the foremost robot ship and darted directly below it. Taz aimed the first cannon upwards.

“*¡Hasta luego, jodidas tostadoras!*” she hollered with glee as she squeezed the trigger and the robot ship exploded in a shower of flame. She heard Up laugh as the *Arrow* rolled to avoid another blast from the second robot ship and flew underneath it -

The *Arrow* rocked suddenly, and warning lights flashed everywhere. “Direct hit!” said Up. “Shields are down!”

“*Maldita sea!*” said Taz, peering at the sensors. “Another hit like that-”

A second shot skimmed the *Arrow*’s wing, sending the ship reeling in an uncontrolled spin.

“Aft cannons are gone!” Taz called, as Up’s fingers flew over the controls. “I’ve only got one left!”

“Well then, we’d better make it count!” Up shouted back, and swung the *Arrow* to face the two oncoming robot ships head on.

Taz pulled the trigger.

Their last cannon flew straight – and straight into the robots’ oncoming missile. The force of the collision, and resulting explosion, pummelled the *Arrow* with shrapnel and debris and sent them whirling. Taz, clutching the arms of her chair, watched the radar screen in wonder.

“Up – we actually got them! The closest ship – it’s been destroyed by the explosion!”

“Then there’s still one left,” said Up, sounding grim. “And we’re losing power.”

Taz swung herself out of the weapons array and peered over his shoulder at the controls. He was right. With no weapons, no shields, no power, the *Arrow* was failing. Soon they would be dead in the water – dead in space.

“What do we do?” she said.

“Find a place to land her,” he replied, turning knobs, testing buttons, trying to give the ship a little more juice.

Taz threw herself at the navigational controls. “We’re closest to Graali’s fifth moon,” she said. “We’re practically orbiting it now.”

Up looked over at the screen, and nodded. “We can make it.”

With a last effort, the *Arrow* turned toward the moon, small and orange and still. A sudden explosion rocked the *Arrow* once more and Taz, who’d forgotten to belt herself in again, flew across the cabin to land hard against the ship’s wall.

Everything began to spin out of control.

It was bright, far too bright, after the constant semi-darkness of space. Up raised his hand to shield his eyes as he looked around the wreckage that had once been the *Arrow*. He was lying amidst a pile of navigational rubble, beneath a smashed viewscreen. The Graali system’s sun streamed through what was left of the jagged glass. And he was still breathing.

“Guess we have oxygen,” he said, coughing up some dust. He carefully extracted himself from the remains of the pilot’s chair and stood up, stretching each muscle in turn. He was relatively unharmed. He’d been lucky.

“Taz!”

She lay very still, on the other side of the cabin, a shaft

of sunlight making the blood shine red on her cheek. He was at her side in moments, feeling for a pulse, checking her injuries. She was alive, and breathing, the blood stemming mainly from a shallow gash at her temple. Up stood and released the panel with the emergency supplies, thankfully intact. Dehydrated food, water, blankets. A first aid kit.

She stirred as he knelt over her, removing her headband and gently cleaning the wound. “Up...” she said, weakly.

“Shh,” he said. “We made it to the moon, but the *Arrow*’s in pieces. How do you feel?”

“Like *mierda*,” she said, licking her dry lips. “You?”

“I’m fine,” he said, handing her a water bottle. “Drink some, then sit up when you’re ready. I’m going to check out the landscape.”

They’d landed in a desert, or at least that was the closest thing Up could compare it to. He could already feel the heat of it seeping through his heavy grey uniform. The view was desolate, and fiercely orange. He took a tentative step.

The ground sprang back with surprising buoyancy and Up gave a yelp as he was thrown off-balance.

“¿*Qué pasa?*” called Taz urgently.

“I think this whole planet’s just one big goddamn trampoline,” Up said, testing his weight a little more cautiously. The ground had just enough give so that when he applied pressure, it pushed back an equal amount. “We’re going to be walking with a literal bounce in our steps, Taz.”

“*Gran*,” she said, coming up behind him, one hand on her head. He reached over and adjusted the bandage beside her eye. “I’ve always wanted my own backyard trampoline.” They stood quietly, taking in their surroundings, their situation. “I guess we should try the radio?”

The *Arrow*'s long-range radio was lying somewhere in the wreckage, probably in as many pieces as the ship, but there was a smaller one among the emergency kits. Taz fiddled with the dials as Up took inventory of their supplies and starting packing two backpacks.

"Too much interference," she said. "I can't get a signal."

Up had expected that. "We're in a valley," he said, handing her one of the packs. "We've got to head for those mountains in the distance. They're our only shot. Feel like taking a hike?"

"Or a bounce," she said. "Guess we don't have much choice, do we?"

They walked for hours, but it felt like days. It took time to adjust to the buoyant ground, and Taz felt muscles engaging in her legs she hadn't known existed. The fierce Graali sun burned. Her Ranger jacket had long ago been relegated to her pack, and Up had stripped off his uniform from the waist up. Sweat soaked both of them, and her white tank top was drenched through, but she was too tired to worry about that. Her black combat boots simmered heavily on her feet, and the metal of her dog tags grew so hot she had to put them in her pocket so they wouldn't scorch her skin. She pushed on, determined to keep up, vowing not to be the first to complain. The mountains looked no closer when Up finally stopped, the sun inching lower in the sky.

"There's no sense in killing ourselves trying to get there," he said, dropping his pack. Taz gratefully did the same. "Let's make camp."

Up bent to open his pack, and Taz saw a long scar across his back, running diagonally from shoulder to hip. There was another story she'd never heard. It wasn't the only scar Up carried, but certainly the worst. His arms were raked

with traces of battles past. Taz flopped to the ground. She'd always secretly admired Up's arms. Now she was going to have to add the rest of his torso to that list, too.

Up gave her an odd look, and she realized she was staring. *Consiga un apretón, Taz. This is no time to start mooning over how good your commanding officer looks with his shirt off. Get a grip.*

The temperature was much more bearable now that the sun was beginning to set. They sat together and ate wretched dehydrated spaghetti with meatballs. Up laughed at the look on her face as she chewed.

"What I wouldn't give for a nice *tortilla*," she said, swallowing with a grimace. "Maybe with some *pico de gallo*."

"You'll have to make some suggestions to the chef once we're back on the *Cazadora*," Up said. Neither of them mentioned the distinct possibility that they might not be returning at all. Taz knew as well as Up did that getting this radio to work was a long shot even once they got to the mountains – and as far as they knew, no one had seen them go down to the surface. The *Cazadora* would have to search all thirteen moons to find them – if they didn't just assume that the *Arrow* had been destroyed in the battle.

"There are enough supplies here to last a week," said Up. "More, if we stretch it. I reckon it'll take a few days to reach the mountains."

Taz nodded, and wondered if this was it for them. To die of starvation, or heatstroke, on some alien moon, completely alone. She looked at their shadows, side by side and growing long in the dusky sunset. Well, not completely alone.

Night fell, and the temperature continued to drop. Taz put her jacket back on, and Up used the emergency kit to start a small fire. Without wood, it would be difficult to

keep it going once their limited fuel ran out. They pulled out blankets and stretched out on either side of the flame, as close to its paltry heat as they dared get. Taz could see her breath now, crystallizing in the air before her. She shivered. Sleep wasn't coming, and she was half afraid if it did, she'd never wake up again.

"Dead goddammit," said Up, after a while, and she could hear the cold in his voice, too. "This must be one of those desert moons with extreme temperature shifts from day to night."

"No kidding," said Taz, but her heart wasn't in it. Her brain was starting to feel fuzzy with cold.

"Body heat," Up said then, and she blinked. "It's the only way we'll have a chance at still being alive in the morning, come on."

Taz hesitated, peering through the darkness to try and see his outline.

"As charming as I find it that you would rather die than snuggle up with me," Up said, his tone unreadable. "Don't be an idiot. Get over here."

He was right, of course. Gathering up her blanket, she dashed around the fire, shivering as the cold night air hit her anew. Up was laying on his side, with his arms open, and she practically dove into them as he arranged both blankets over them. He was shivering too, but his body felt warm to her.

"Your lips are blue," he said softly, as they lay face to face in the dim light of the fire. "Dammit, Taz, don't you keep any body heat at all?"

"Too skinny," she chattered, and he pulled his arm back from her and started maneuvering his way out of his shirt again. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"I know it may seem counter-intuitive," he said, now unbuttoning her jacket and helping it over her shoulders.

“But it’s the best way to share heat.”

His skin was like a furnace as he wrapped his bare arms tightly around her and pulled her closer. She let his warmth seep into her, feeling her body begin to relax as she buried her face in his neck, inhaling the musky scent of him.

“So what if it was Lieutenant-Commander Tripp you crash-landed with, and not me?” she said sleepily. “Would you be cuddling with him on some dark alien moon instead?”

She felt Up chuckle, and pull her closer still. “No, *mi querida*,” he said. “I’d only do this for you.”

Up woke as the sun began to peek over the mountains, and he was still alive, and Taz was still in his arms, her breathing steady and reassuring. He felt a strange sort of peace steal over him, and for a moment imagined staying like this, the alien sun just beginning to warm the fresh dawn air, waking up next to her every day for the rest of his life-

Then he realized that was exactly what was going to happen if they didn’t get to that mountain soon. The rest of his life wouldn’t be very long.

He gently jostled Taz. “Hey.”

She blinked up at him, looking surprised to find him so close. “*Buenos días*.”

“We should get moving before the sun gets too high.”

They untangled themselves and set about packing up. Neither said anything, but something felt different about this morning. Taz had looked at him almost – shyly – before swinging her backpack over her shoulder and setting off – and *shy* was not a word he tended to associate with Taz.

They bounce-walked until the sun was well overhead, and then Up insisted they break for lunch. Today’s entree was supposedly Pad Thai.

“Pedro always used to complain about these things when he took that survival course in third year,” said Taz, slurping up a noodle with a smacking sound. “I never really believed him until now. I didn’t realized anything could taste this bad.”

Something about hearing her say that name put a definite damper on Up’s good mood. “How is the Garbage-sniffer?” he asked casually, twirling his own noodles on his fork.

Taz frowned. “I wish you wouldn’t call him that. He changed a lot while you were away, Up. He’s not so bad.”

Up raised his hands in innocence. “I guess you’d know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” Up said, feeling unreasonably angry. “You two seem to be quite – *close*.”

Taz stood and put her hands on her hips, looking like a cross between a fearsome Starship Ranger and a really pissed-off teenaged girl. “Are you talking about when the *idiota* tried to kiss me? If you hadn’t noticed, I decked him a good one for that, and he won’t be trying it again soon. He’s only just started talking to me again.”

“That’s great,” said Up, and Taz stamped her foot in frustration. The resulting bounce spoiled the effect and only made her angrier.

“Oh, why are you so *estúpido*, Up? *No es Pedro el que me importa, imbécil.*”

He had no idea what she’d said, but there was an insult in there somewhere. Taz started throwing things into her pack. “*Vamos*,” she said, throwing a water bottle at him roughly. “I can’t wait to get off this moon *ridícula*.”

They bounce-walked in silence for the rest of the afternoon, Taz muttering the occasional Spanish insult under her breath, and Up stalking along behind her, watching the sweat trickle down her back, between her shoulder blades and disappear into the damp white of her

shirt. Her skin was growing browner by the hour, her tank top turned translucent at the small of her back. The sun had just begun to set, the cooling temperatures a welcome relief, when Taz stopped so quickly that Up nearly walked into her.

“What?” he said in annoyance. Then he saw what she was looking at.

A snake, black and shiny against the smooth orange landscape, had reared its head and was watching them curiously over dripping fangs, its body quivering, tense. Poised to strike.

It was also fifteen feet long.

“I suppose your zapper’s in your bag?” asked Up.

Taz nodded, her eyes fixed on the snake.

“Mine too.”

A long pause, waiting, sizing them up, and then the snake struck. Up and Taz dove in opposite directions, rolling and bouncing their way out of its reach. Struggling to find his balance on the unstable surface, Up turned to see the snake rearing again, its eyes fixed on Taz, who was scrambling backwards as fast as she could.

The snake was faster. Taz’s scream rang in Up’s ears as he launched himself at the creature, using the terrain to jump farther than should have been possible. Wrapping his arms around its body, he squeezed as hard as he could and hung on for dear life as the snake released Taz and shook itself, trying to throw him off. A scrabbling sound, and a deafening blast, and suddenly the snake went limp. Up found himself falling to the ground, and bouncing up again, finally coming to a stop in front of Taz. She was standing unsteadily, her pant leg torn and damp with something darker than sweat. Her zapper was still raised in her hands.

As he got to his feet, Taz let the weapon drop and swayed to the side. He caught her as she fell, suddenly a

dead weight in his arms. Lowering her gently to the ground, he carefully pulled aside the torn pant leg.

The snake had bitten her in the thigh, a deep, oozing wound, bleeding profusely and turning greenish at the edges.

“Venom,” she said, leaning heavily against his chest. “Isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said, and tore her pant leg off completely, using it as a tourniquet around her thigh. Reaching into his pack, he reached for the first aid kit and cleaned up the puncture as best he could. Taz grit her teeth and threw her head back as he dabbed at it with a disinfectant. “The doctors on the *Cazadora* could whip you up an antidote, no problem.” *But I can’t. Who knows how long you have until the venom takes hold?*

“Well,” Taz said, and he knew she was trying to sound brave for him. “We’d better get back to the *Cazadora*, then.”

Their fight was forgotten. Though she was in no condition for it, her only hope now was to keep moving toward those mountains. To Up’s relief, the alien snake’s venom didn’t seem to be doing its job properly – by all rights Taz should have been dead within hours – but perhaps the venom was not intended for human victims. They continued late into the freezing night, her leaning on his arm, listening for snakes, feeling their way through the darkness, until finally she stumbled one time too many, her knees buckling under her. It killed him to see her in so much pain.

“Sleep,” Up said, hoping desperately that what he was saying was true. “Sleep will give you strength.”

This time when he pulled her close it was her skin that was burning up, though she shook more violently than ever. She tossed feverishly, not-quite-sleeping. He held her as

tightly as he dared, praying to a God long dead that this wasn't it, this wasn't how she was going to go down, not to some stupid snake on an alien moon, not a fighter like Taz.

"How come you never tell me stories, Up?" she said suddenly, her speech slightly slurred.

"Stories?" he said, surprised.

"About you. Before we met. I know so little about you. I don't even know how old you are."

"There's not much to know," Up said quietly, after a moment. "I grew up in an orphanage. I have no family to speak of. When I was sixteen I joined the Academy. The rest you can read about in the history feeds."

"I don't want to read about it," she said. "I want to hear it from you."

"Okay," said Up. She was still shivering. "What do you want to know?"

"How did you get that scar on your back?"

Up closed his eyes. "The big one? That would be from the time I took down a Bird of Prey with my bare hands."

"¿Qué?"

She nestled in closer, and he began. His words seemed to soothe her. He'd tell her stories all night if he had to.

"It all started when Tripp got into trouble with some pissed off Klingons in a space bar..."

In the morning, they realized just how far they had managed to travel after night fell. The mountain loomed in front of them, and it was only then that Up realized their next biggest problem: how they were going to climb it.

Taz was awake, but listless, and the greenish hue was spreading up her leg, the edges of the puncture wound gone completely black. She looked up at the summit with trepidation, and refused to meet his eyes. With her leg worse, there was no way she could do it, but she wouldn't

admit defeat to him. He'd have to take matters into his own hands.

"Well, Taz," he said, putting his pack on backwards, around the front. "It's a good thing that I can climb faster than the two of us combined."

He reached down and helped her clamber up onto his back. He shifted her weight, careful to avoid her injured leg.

"Comfy?" he said. She thwacked him on the shoulder, and then rested her head there.

It was a steep climb on unstable terrain, and rough when you're balancing the weight of two people instead of one. Up had to stop a few times to rest, and Taz seemed a little less coherent each time he set her down and picked her back up again. Her fever was growing worse.

It was late afternoon when they finally reached the summit, and Up's strength was spent. He set Taz down gently on the springy ground, and pulled out the radio before exhaustion could overtake him.

"*Cazadora*, are you there? Come in, *Cazadora*. This is a distress call from the fifth moon of the Graali planet. Two Starship Rangers in need of immediate medical assistance. I repeat, this is a distress call..."

He set the message to repeat, crawled back to Taz, and waited. She slept, fitfully, and he told stories. It made him feel like he was doing *something*. He told her about his early career. His time on the *Eagle*. He talked until his voice grew hoarse.

It might have been minutes, but it could have been hours before the radio crackled to life again. Taz stirred restlessly beside him.

"Commander Up? Come in, Commander Up. This is the *Cazadora*."

Up fairly flew to the radio. "This is Up. Tripp, am I glad

to hear from you.”

“We’ve got your location, Commander. The *Panther* is sending a ship to pick you up, they’ll be there any minute. Is Ensign Taz with you?”

“Yes, and she needs immediate medical attention. A bite from a venomous snake – it’s bad, she’s been feverish since last night.”

“There’s a doctor on board the *Panther*’s ship. She’ll be in good hands.”

“Thanks, Tripp,” said Up. “I owe you one.”

“I’m just glad we found you, Up.”

Up returned to Taz, and carefully lifted her head, spilling a little water, the last from his bottle, into her mouth. She opened her eyes as he gently brushed her hair back from her face.

“It’s going to be okay, Taz,” he said. “We’re going home.”

Chapter Twelve

Undercover

The *Cazadora*'s gym smelled of sweat, old socks and overcrowded Rangers. Florescent lights buzzed overhead, drowned out by the jeers and shouts of those gathered, clutching bet tickets to their chests, counting coins, urging their chosen champion on. In the ring, two figures circled each other, their weaponry cast aside, barefoot and ready to fight.

Rear Admiral Tripp entered the gym with a slew of aides following him, and took in the scene. "They *still* do this?" he said to no one in particular.

The catcalls reached a feverish pitch as the two fighters launched themselves at each other. It was easy to see that they had fought before – they knew each other's tricks, so they had to invent new ones to get the upper hand. A groan rang out from part of the crowd as a precisely aimed blow reached its target.

"Rear Admiral?" asked one of his aides. "Why is the Commander fighting one of his lieutenants?"

"Up is not your everyday Commander," Tripp said, crossing his arms, his eyes on the fight. "Tricks like this boost the morale of his Rangers – they eat it up."

"Clearly," said the aide. "They're even taking bets! Who would bet against their own Commander?"

"*Clearly*," Tripp raised his eyebrows. "You've never seen Lieutenant Taz in action."

In the ring, the fighters seemed to be evenly matched. He

was strong, but she was fast, and they jabbed, kicked, blocked, and spun at a thrilling pace. Neither showed a sign of slowing down.

Tripp cleared his throat, and an ensign nearby turned around, gave a start, and saluted.

“How long do these things usually last?” he asked.

“They went for three hours, once, sir,” the ensign said.

Tripp sighed. “Well, I can’t wait that long.” He nodded at his aide, who blew a sharp whistle.

“Rear Admiral on deck!” the aide called, in a shrill, carrying voice.

The shouting died, and the gathered Rangers turned to stand at attention. In the ring, the fighters froze, locked together, then slowly broke apart.

“Tripp,” said Commander Up, breathing heavily and leaning on the ropes of the ring. “Long time no see.”

“Good to see you too, Commander,” Tripp said. “Sorry to interrupt your little match here, but I have an urgent matter to speak with you – and Lieutenant Taz – about. If we could go to your ready room?”

“Sure thing, Rear Admiral,” Up said, turning and pointing a threatening finger at his opponent. “We’ll finish this later, Lieutenant.”

She slowly drew her finger across her throat, and the crowd burst into cheers.

Up and Taz stood at ease in the ready room, waiting for Tripp to speak. The recently promoted Rear Admiral looked quite at home behind Up’s desk, the buttons of his dress uniform polished to a threatening shine. Taz had her arms crossed and Up knew she was biting her tongue for his sake. Taz didn’t like Tripp or his glossy new uniform and she *really* didn’t like being interrupted in the middle of a fight.

Things had been quiet lately, and though many Rangers took that as a good sign, that maybe the Robot Wars were finally coming to an end, Up didn't believe it. If the robots were withdrawing, it was only to bide their time, grow stronger for their next attack. Given the serious look on the Rear Admiral's face, he wondered if that wasn't what Tripp had come to talk to them about.

But why call himself *and* Taz to the meeting? That was an unprecedented move.

The Rear Admiral dismissed his aides and waited until they had left the room to speak.

"I assume this room is secure as any on the ship?" he asked first.

Up nodded.

"The G.L.E.E. has intercepted intelligence that has pinpointed the time and location of a crucial transfer of information between the robots and their human spies." Tripp fairly spat the word *spies*. It was beyond Up how any human could willingly betray their own race for the likes of the robots, but just last month the G.L.E.E. had weeded out several dozen placed throughout the organization in their biggest bust yet. "It is believed that this information may have been lifted from Headquarters' highest security clearance – this is not widely known, but there was a breach in the system just last week."

Taz's eyes widened, and Up raised his eyebrows.

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you the catastrophic consequences if the robots get this top secret information – battle plans, ship records, weapons inventory. Locations. Access codes."

"We'll all be dead," said Up. It would only be a matter of time.

"Given the nature of what we've learned about the planned transfer, we've decided the best course of action

will be to send some Rangers in undercover – with armed backup as plan B, of course. But it will be best to do this quietly, if we can.”

Up understood. The knowledge that the information had been stolen in the first place would put a serious dent in the G.L.E.E.’s public image if it leaked. And as humanity’s last hope against the robots, they needed that image intact.

Tripp continued. “We want to send in the best – so we’d like to send in the two of you.”

Up looked at Taz, and she looked at him. “What *is* the nature of this planned transfer?” she asked Tripp with suspicion.

The Rear Admiral broke into a sudden, wide smile. “Why, it’s taking place at none other than the Galactic Ambassadors’ Ball.”

Silence.

“A *ball*?” said Taz dangerously.

The Galactic Ambassadors’ Ball was the single biggest social event on the galaxy’s calendar. Hosted by the opulent citizens of the Jovian moon Europa, it was a gathering of ambassadors from Earth and all of their allied alien friends, to wine, dine, dance and continue to woo the friendships integral to the fabric of the alliance. It was also ridiculously silly and expensive. Up had worked security for the ball once, a long time ago. He’d never seen so many different species, or so much waste of money, in his life.

“Yes, a ball, Lieutenant,” Tripp said, settling back in Up’s chair, the smile never leaving his face. “Your identities have been all arranged and your invitations secured. You’re going to be Dr. and Mrs. von Tuppington of Alabama, a wealthy Earth surgeon and his exotic young wife.”

Up had never – *never* – seen Taz at a loss for words, but she was now. Her mouth dropped open, and closed again, soundlessly.

“Dr. and Mrs. von Tuppington are passionate activists for the welfare of endangered alien animal species and have donated oodles of money to the cause, which is how they got their invitation,” Tripp continued. “They know nothing about robots, war, or mixed martial arts, but they are rather good ballroom dancers – won first place in the Alabama championships last year.”

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?” said Up.

“Immensely,” Tripp said, his smile bigger than ever. “The ball is a week away, which won't be much time to prepare you.” He eyed Taz as he said this. “So my team will be staying on the *Cazadora* in the meantime to brief you on the situation and coach you into looking, sounding, and acting the part.” His smile faded. “In all seriousness, we wouldn't have chosen the two of you if we didn't think you were the best bet for retrieving the information. This could be the most important mission we've ever sent you on.”

“I understand, Tripp,” Up said, one hand on Taz's shoulder to stop the outburst he could sense coming. “But did you have to add in the ballroom dancing?”

Taz stalked down the corridor, muttering a thousand Spanish insults about Rear Admiral Tripp under her breath. “Of all the stupid, *idiota*—” She whirled on Up, who was walking along behind her, looking slightly amused. “*Un maldito baile!* And I have to play your stupid, simpering *esposa* – and wear a dress, probably, and giggle and a million other *lo femenino* -”

“Relax, Taz,” Up said. “Tripp was right – they wouldn't have picked us if they didn't think we could do it. You know what will happen if the robots get a hold of that information - it's *adiós* to the whole human race!” She didn't look convinced. “Think of it as just another job, Ranger.”

“And we’ll get it done,” she said, her shoulders slumping. “But *von Tuppington* – what the hell kind of name is that anyway?”

They reached her bunk, where she lived with the other junior-grade lieutenants, and stopped outside the door.

“Why didn’t you take the promotion when they offered it to you, Up?” she asked. “It could have been you sitting there giving Tripp *idiota* missions instead of the other way around.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Who wants to be stuck behind a Rear Admiral’s desk? I’ll take adventure and the *Cazadora* any day. I’ll stay a Commander forever if they’ll let me. Besides, who’s got time to spend polishing all those buttons?” He smiled, and tweaked her on the nose, knowing full well that if anyone else tried that they’d lose their hand. He was feeling a little daring tonight. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Dance lessons, 0900 hours sharp,” she said. “Let’s hope you’re better at ballroom than you were at salsa.”

As it turned out, Up’s dancing skills were universally awful. The instructor Tripp had brought from Earth, who referred to herself in the third person as Madame LaViolet, was at her breaking point.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Madame LaViolet rapped her cane on the floor. “Monsieur Comman-daire, *you* are the man in this situation! *You* must lead! Again! 1-2-3, 1-2-3 -”

Up, dressed casually in a black tank and his grey Commander’s pants, was gripping Taz’s waist so tightly she could hardly breathe. His face was screwed up in concentration as he focused on his feet, consistently getting them tangled in hers. It would have amused Taz if he didn’t keep stepping on her.

“No, no, no!” Madame LaViolet screeched. “Look at

her, not at ze ground!” With a tortured sigh, she dropped her cane and walked over to them. “Watch Madame LaViolet.”

Pushing Up out of the way, the dance instructor took Taz by the waist and led her in neat circles around the floor of the studio that had been cleared specifically for this top-secret purpose. “1-2-3, 1-2-3 – see, the Lieutenant can do eet, Comman-daïre!”

It was true, Taz was taking to the instruction rather easily, to her own surprise. When it came right down to it, learning to dance wasn’t that different from learning to fight – it was all choreography, movement, focusing on your partner -

Madame LaViolet led Taz back to Up. “Now,” she said, in a transparently patient voice. “Offer your hand to the lady, Comman-daïre.”

Up tentatively held out his hand. Taz took it, and placed her other hand on his shoulder, looking determinedly at the instructor.

“Now, take her by the waist – but *gently*, Comman-daïre, she’s a woman, not a missile launcher.”

Up raised his eyebrows at this, but did as he was told.

“Now, both of you, *look* at each other, you’re supposed to be in love, are you not?”

Taz slowly raised her eyes to meet his. Eye contact, it was such a simple thing, but it seemed to take on a whole new meaning now that they were standing in a make-shift dance studio, poised together so intimately. Something glimmered shyly in Up’s blue eyes that made her heart skip a beat. He was clearly a better actor than she took him for.

Madame LaViolet clapped her hands. “Good, good! Now, we dance – 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3-”

The dance instructor pronounced Up as having much improved when they finally, dizzily, came to a stop. “But

there is much still to do,” she said. “And as for you, Lieutenant -”

She dangled a pair of spiky gold heels at Taz. Up laughed, and she stomped on his toe.

“Try it again, Lieutenant.”

“The – *rain* – in *Spain* -”

“No, no, more of a drawl, you’ve lived your whole life in Alabama, listen to the Commander again.”

Taz was going to kill someone, Up could see it in the tension in her fists. “You know, I think that’s enough for today, Dr. Parlons. I’ll keep working with Lieutenant Taz, we’ll get there.”

“But the Rear Admiral -”

“Tell the Rear Admiral it won’t be the end of the world if Mrs. von Tuppington doesn’t have a perfect Alabama accent. She’s supposed to be ‘exotic,’ isn’t she? Send in the next torturer.”

The speech expert left, rather huffily, and Up put his hands on Taz’s shoulders. The ball was two days away, and she just couldn’t seem to drop her natural accent.

“It doesn’t matter, Taz. Dr. von Tuppington can have a Mexican wife.”

“You don’t think someone at that ball will clue in that a silver-haired Southern gentleman with a Mexican *chica* on his arm might be connected to the G.L.E.E’s best-known Ranger and his famous *compañera* Taz?” She buried her face on the table. “I knew this whole thing was a mistake. I don’t know why they picked you and me.”

“Trust me,” Up said. “No one’s going to recognize me after all these dancing and etiquette lessons. And that penguin suit they’re making me wear? Not a chance.”

She turned her head to the side and almost smiled at him.

“Just remember, wifey,” he said. “We’re in this

together.”

She nodded, and then groaned as another of Tripp’s henchmen entered, brandishing scissors and a comb with a flourish.

“Dead God, *look* at that hair! Have I got my work cut out for me with *you!*”

The time had arrived for their first test. Taz and Up stood in the luxurious travel ship Tripp had procured for the von Tuppingtons’ arrival on Europa, waiting for the docking procedure to complete so they could disembark. Taz, feeling most unlike herself in a smart navy blazer and pantsuit, twirled a strand of black hair around her finger. Her stylist, Alejandro, had completely given up on Taz’s own short, restless haircut and had pinned a wig of long, shiny locks on her. It felt strange and heavy on her shoulders.

“Stop fidgeting,” whispered Up. “You look great, Mrs. von Tuppington.”

She looked up at him. Up still looked like himself, but a cleaned-up, more dashing version. His silver hair had been combed back and the scar across his left eye covered carefully with makeup. He wore a grey suit with a slim black tie, and a wedding ring flashed silver on his left hand as he reached out and linked his arm with hers. He looked quite - distinguished. “Let’s do this.”

They were ushered into the lobby of the Grand Europa Hotel by bowing Jovian porters and escorted to the front desk.

“Welcome to the Grand Europa,” said the purple-skinned employee at the desk. “How may I help you today?”

“My name is Charles von Tuppington,” said Up, in a crisper, more eloquent accent than was usual for him. “My wife and I are here for the Galactic Ambassadors’ Ball and

would like to check in to our rooms.”

Taz aimed her most winning smile at the Grand Europa employee. It had been decided that Up should do most of the talking so as to avoid having Taz use her imperfect Alabama accent when at all possible.

“Ah, yes, the Sweethearts suite,” said the employee, and Taz made a mental note to kill Tripp when next she saw him. “One of our best. If you’ll just follow me-”

The von Tuppingtons were followed to their rooms by a small army of Rangers dressed as butlers, maids, and whoever else might be employed by a wealthy Earth doctor for an event such as this. The suite looked more like a mansion to Taz, who had never seen such opulence, with a full kitchen, living area and separate rooms for the aforementioned butlers and maids. The master bedroom contained a massive four poster bed and a balcony overlooking the breathtaking views of the floating Europa City. Jupiter loomed large on the horizon.

Taz flopped onto the bed. “Wow,” she said, sinking into a luxury of blankets as the other Rangers started securing the perimeter. “I didn’t know they made mattresses this thick! *Mira esto*, Up!”

“No jumping on the bed, now,” he said, loosening his tie and smiling. It was a relief to hear his real voice again.

“*Please*, Lieutenant!” a panicked voice called. “You’ll wrinkle your outfit! It’s an original!”

Taz made sure she rolled a few more times before clambering out of the bed and smiling sweetly at Alejandro. Up winked at her.

“Only three hours until the ball begins!” the stylist continued, wringing his hands. “It’s not enough time! Lieutenant, if you please...”

He gestured for Taz to follow him into the adjacent dressing room. She shrugged at Up, who had stretched out

on the bed in her place to wait, and entered her own personal torture chamber with a sense of dread.

It was very nearly three hours later when Taz stood in front of the dressing room's full length mirror, looking at a creature that was most definitely not her. She'd been poked, prodded, waxed and plucked, attacked with curling irons and eyelash glue, and it had been all she could do not to deck the next assistant who came at her, though she'd certainly cursed them all loudly enough for Up and the other Rangers to hear through the wall. She turned this way and that, examining the results, as Alejandro clapped his hands with joy. "You're a bombshell, my darling, a masterpiece! Phillipa von Tuppington of Earth will be top of all the best-dressed lists in the feeds tomorrow! I will win awards for this one!"

"I don't think that's the point," Taz muttered, but she had to admit, after all that torture, that he'd done a good job. Her dress was slinky, one-shouldered, and dark red, and somehow managed to give her the hourglass figure she'd never realized she'd had. The wig had been styled in a loose up-do, big curls spinning around her face in an appealing manner, and there was so much makeup on her face that just blinking felt like lifting weights, but it made her eyes look big and dark and her lips sultry. Real diamonds at her ears and throat sparkled to match the ring on her finger, and she didn't even want to know how much those had cost the G.L.E.E. to procure. Nobody would recognize her as rough-and-tumble Lieutenant Taz tonight.

She had never felt so exposed as when the stylist opened the dressing room door and stood back proudly. "Your husband awaits."

The Rangers sitting around the room, variously playing cards and checking out the mini bar, fell silent as she

stepped out as steadily as she could on three-and-a-quarter inch heels. Water dribbled from the mouth of one, and nudges and raised eyebrows went around the room. Someone whistled.

“Looking good, Taz!”

“*Muy sexy*, Lieutenant!”

“Watch it, Wadowski,” she said. “I’m still armed.”

Up stood on the balcony, hands behind his back and taking in the view of the city. Approaching him, Taz barely had time to register how nice his shoulders looked in the black of his tuxedo jacket before he turned and saw her.

He went very still, as she raised her arms and played her part, doing a stupid, girlish twirl, feeling the light fabric of the dress whirl around her. All the chemicals they’d used in her hair must be affecting her. “So what do you think, Dr. von Tuppington?”

Up went into some kind of coughing fit. “Wow,” he said, finally. “Who are you and what have you done with my lieutenant?”

She whacked him on the arm, and he laughed and offered it to her. She slipped hers through the crook of his elbow - it was starting to feel natural to have it there. “You look beautiful, *mi querida*,” he said. “But you always do.”

Chapter Thirteen

The Ball

The ballroom of the Grand Europa was just as Up remembered it: ritzy and opulent, the ceiling skyrocketing overhead, chandeliers and pillars and dinner music floating through the air. All of it way out of his element. He cast a glance down at Taz, who looked as though she was about to vomit all over her priceless designer dress. It was undeniably strange to see her all done up like this, and probably even stranger for her. He had to admit, she was drop-dead gorgeous tonight, but then he thought the same when she was shining with sweat in the heat of battle. They reached the porter waiting at the door and handed him their invitation.

“Dr. and Mrs. Charles von Tuppington, of Alabama, Earth,” the porter announced as they entered the ballroom.

All eyes turned toward them, and Up couldn't help but feel a surge of foolish pride as he led Taz down the grand stairs of the hall and into the colourful crowd of ambassadors below. Gentlemen stared, and ladies started to whisper. Mrs. von Tuppington was turning heads.

Taz had a look somewhere between bewilderment and terror on her face. “Smile, darling,” Up said out of the corner of his mouth. “You're the centre of attention.”

“*No es broma,*” she whispered back, but plastered a smile on anyway.

They were led by yet another porter to one of the many well dressed round tables, their false names scripted in gold

on place cards. China plates and far too many forks. The crowd began to filter to their seats, many people still casting glances in Taz's direction.

"I think Alejandro may have done his job a little *too* well," he said to her as they sat. "We're supposed to blend in, not capture the notice of everyone in the room."

"Well, *excuse* me," she said, tugging angrily at the front of her dress. "Do you see the target?"

"Not yet," he said, though the special lens he was wearing in his right eye was scanning continually for the presence of the information diamond they were looking for.

"OMDG, you *have* to tell me where you got your dress!"

A blonde and bubbly teenager in an elaborately sequined purple number squealed and plopped herself down next to Taz. Before Taz could do anything but blink in bewilderment, she continued.

"I'm February, like the month, but a girl - I saw you come in and I'm, like, so psyched we're sitting next to each other, I just know we're going to be BFF's before the night's over."

"Phillipa von Tuppington," said Taz, after a moment, in a sort of Mexican-drawl hybrid. "This is my husband, U-Charles."

"Ooh, he's handsome, isn't he? This is totally my first time at the ball, I can't even handle it, I'm so excited! All the outfits - I just heart your dress so much. I knew I should have worn red, red would look so much better on me than you, don't you think?"

Taz looked at Up for help, but if he said anything he was going to lose his carefully constructed pokerface. He held his tongue.

The teenager's monologue was interrupted briefly as other guests joined them at the table and one of their Jovian hosts rose to the podium - the banquet was begun. February,

not to be deterred for long, kept up a steady commentary throughout the endless speeches, mostly related to the fashion choices of the guests, but managed to slip in a few gleeful pieces of gossip here and there. Taz, at whom most of this was directed, nodded a lot, but her eyes were busy scanning the ballroom for the same signal Up was looking for.

Suddenly Taz's leg pressed into his under the table, hard. Startled, he looked at her, and she flicked her eyes to the left, then turned back to February.

Up stood up. "Please excuse me. Duty calls."

He walked in the direction she'd indicated, nodding hello at random people until finally the lens in his eye indicated their target – young, fit, and impeccably dressed, he was clearly human – and in possession of the information diamond they were looking for. He willed the man to look his way – if he could get eye contact, even for a few seconds, the lens should be able to identify him.

No dice. The target was engrossed in conversation with his lovely Jovian dinner partner, and Up had no choice but to pass him by. As he walked behind the man's table, he let the pin-sized tracking device he was holding between his fingers casually drop into the pocket of the dinner jacket slung over his chair.

When Up returned to the dinner table, their first course had been served and Taz looked like she was ready to stab someone with her dessert fork. Under cover of February informing the lady on her other side all about the latest blow-drying techniques on Neptune, he bent close to Taz. "I've bugged him – it will activate if he leaves the hall. Keep your eye on him. We'll have to see if we can get him on his own."

"*Lo tengo*," she said. "If I learn one more thing about this season's preferred height for stilettos the knife tied to

my leg is going straight through that girl's eye, and I cannot be held responsible."

"Patience, my dear," Up said, digging in to his portion of unidentifiable pate with enthusiasm. "There's only eleven more courses to go."

She kicked him under the table, and he winced, ever so slightly.

The dinner lasted for hours, and consisted of several unrecognizable delicacies from across the galaxy.

"*Hijo de puta!*" exclaimed Taz loudly when their seventh course was unveiled, a pulsing lime green Uranian version of lobster in the shell. The table fell silent, and several of the ladies looked up in shock.

Up laughed uneasily and patted Taz's arm. "My wife's family originally hails from Mexico," he said in explanation. "Sometimes the Spanish just bursts out when you least expect it – one of the many things I love about her."

"Awww," said February. "You two are just so cute."

Taz looked at Up with a searching expression in her eyes, and didn't say another word for the rest of the meal. He wondered what it was that he'd said.

The guests hovered, cocktails in hand, as the tables were cleared for the dancing portion of the evening. A seventeen-piece interspecies band was set up on the stage, and soon the music began and the dance floor started to fill. Taz and Up stayed close to the bar, making sure their target stayed within sight lines.

It certainly qualified as one of the strangest nights of Taz's life. She now knew more about hem length and eyelash curlers than she ever thought possible, and refraining from breaking the nose of the next gross old man who leered at her was becoming more and more difficult as

the night wore on. She was grateful for Up's polarizing presence - even in a tux he looked like the kind of man you wouldn't want to mess with - she just wasn't used to having to rely on him for that. Normally her reputation spoke for itself.

"And I hear," said February, who they hadn't managed to escape yet, "That you two are just totally stellar ballroom dancers, is that right? Like, last year's state champions?"

How do you hear these things? Did Tripp send out a press release? Taz wondered, but simply said, "We're not really that-"

"Whatever!" February said. "You, like, have to show off, it's what we do here! Charles, ask this woman to dance, before someone else does, will you?"

With a bit of a smirk, Up obediently held out his hand, and together they moved toward the dance floor. Taz decided she didn't mind. After several hours of February, a moment to hear herself think would be a welcome relief.

Up was much improved since their disastrous first dance lesson, and it was a good thing too, because they continued to draw attention from all corners of the room. They kept it simple, a waltz, and took turns keeping an eye on their target, who seemed to be spending most of his time flirting with the locals. After a while, Taz stopped concentrating on her footwork and almost began to enjoy herself. She looked at Up, and was surprised to find him smiling down at her.

"We're not so bad, are we?" he said, and she didn't know how to respond, because she didn't know what he meant: at dancing, at going undercover, at being a couple?

"No," she said softly. "We're not so bad."

They held their eye contact, and it wasn't hard this time, it was the most natural thing in the world to be looking into those blue eyes she knew so well as they spun around the dance floor. Up opened his mouth, and looked as though he

was about to say something else, but then someone cleared their throat directly behind her.

Taz turned, and found herself face to face with their target.

“I’m truly sorry to interrupt,” he said, in a perfect English accent. “But may I cut in?”

Does he know? was her first thought. She looked at Up, who looked like he was having similar suspicions. The sandy-haired man smiled disarmingly. “I was only hoping to have a chance to dance with the most beautiful woman at the ball – with her husband’s permission, of course,” he added, nodding at Up.

Up looked very much like he wanted to say no. Taz put her hand on his arm. “It’s fine, *mi amor*,” she said. “You can share me for one dance.” *This could be our chance to get the information*, she tried to tell him with her eyes.

He seemed to understand, and gestured his assent. Taz watched him stalk across the floor and lean against the bar, a sullen look on his face. The sandy-haired man held his hand out to her. “Shall we dance, my lady?”

Taz was suddenly grateful for Madame LaViolet and her relentless lessons because this man knew what he was doing and it was all she could do to match him, keeping her movements smooth and her face serene as they twirled across the floor. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced, Mr-”

“Brown, Jasper Brown,” he said, although the lens in her eye was telling her based on his retinal scan that it was actually Goldstein, Leonhard Goldstein, a high-ranking civilian G.L.E.E. employee. “And you must forgive my fervour, Mrs. von Tuppington, but I’m quite intoxicated by you. Your husband shouldn’t be so quick to give you away.”

Menudo desgraciado, thought Taz. *What a creep*. “You flatter me, Mr. Brown.”

The music changed, and a salsa rhythm crept in to the music.

“I hear some Mexican in your voice,” The false Mr. Brown said. “So should I assume that you are familiar with this dance?”

She matched his steps, right-left-right, left-right-left. Even after all these years, it was a part of her, all those nights her mama had spent teaching her to salsa for her *quinceañera*. Mr. Brown certainly knew what he was doing. He pulled her closer and they tested each other, each step growing more complex, check forward, side step, spot turn. As he spun her, she saw that others nearby had stopped to watch them. Up was still standing darkly at the bar, his arms crossed, his gaze on her.

Taz was getting out of breath, and no closer to figuring out where Mr. Brown was keeping the information diamond. As the music built to a feverish pitch, she found herself being turned and dipped, suddenly looking at the world upside down, and the small crowd that had gathered burst into applause.

Pulling her upright again, Mr. Brown bowed. “*Do* let me know if you’re ever in need of a new dance partner for the championships,” he said, kissing her lightly on the hand, and disappeared into the crowd.

Taz was flushed, and feeling stupid. At least now they had his identity. She made her way back to the bar where Up stood before anyone else could ask her to dance. He didn’t look very happy.

“It’s getting awfully hot in here, isn’t it, sweetheart?” he said loudly. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She followed him out of the ballroom, Up leading them toward the wide stone balcony overlooking the gardens. They stood and leaned against the rail, taking in the view. Couples walked the floating garden paths, holding hands,

giggling as they snuck into bushes.

“Nice moves,” Up said, his eyes fixed on the garden.

“I tried to teach you once, remember?” she said, feeling inexplicably frustrated with him. Why was he acting like she’d done something wrong?

Then she saw their target, Mr. Brown, walking along next to a blue, winged ambassador from the planet of Zambuki. Up’s tracking device must have alerted him that they’d be coming this way. He held out a small ear bud. She put it in, and suddenly her ear was filled with a whispered conversation too far away to hear.

“You have the diamond?”

“Yes, it’s here, as arranged. But-”

“No buts, you agreed-”

“Shut up and listen for a second. I think the Rangers are here.”

Taz and Up looked at each other.

“The Starship Rangers?”

“That couple from Earth, the doctor and his wife? They’ve never been to the ball before. I tried to get a read on the woman while we were dancing but her retinal scan came up blank.”

So that was why he’d cut in - of course he would have a lens scanner, too. Luckily Tripp had thought to wipe their official records before sending them here.

“I don’t think they’re a real couple, I think they’re Rangers undercover -”

They continued to argue, but Taz stopped listening. Mr. Brown and his associate were looking at them now, high above on the balcony, and a flicker of anxiety trembled on Up’s face. The traitor suspected, but he didn’t have proof. They had to convince him that they really were Dr. and Mrs. von Tuppington – somehow.

“Kiss me,” she said.



Well, that wasn't going to fool anyone.

Up's eyebrows jumped up to his hairline. "What?"

"Don't be stupid, just do it, Up!" she said, in a voice all her own.

A question in his eyes, Up leaned down and tentatively caught her lips with his.

Well, that wasn't going to fool anyone.

Taz reached up and threaded her hands through his hair, deepening the kiss, pulling him closer. Her senses seemed to be wide awake and she noticed a million new things about him at once – like how soft his hair felt between her fingers, how his moustache tickled, how he smelled freshly washed and tasted like mint and chocolate from dessert – but then he was kissing her back and she forgot everything but his arms wrapped around her, his strong hands moving on her back, his warm mouth on hers. She pressed closer to him, her body demanding it, and felt him groan just a little against her lips.

Up moved his hands to either side of her face and then his kiss was suddenly gentle, intimate. He drew back, ever so slightly, and when she opened her eyes all she could see was the blue of his. A flood of feelings assaulted her.

"Taz—"

"Isn't this precious? What a digital Polaroid moment."

Reality came cascading back, and it was sharp as glass. Over Up's shoulder, Taz could see several figures in black raising zappers in their direction. From the look on his face, Up was seeing the same thing behind her.

They were surrounded.

His brain still reeling from Taz's kiss – and holy hell, what a kiss – Up didn't move as he took in their situation, his hands still cupping her face, hers wrapped around his neck. There were at least a dozen, if Taz was seeing the same thing he was, each aiming a zapper directly at them.

He felt his own weapons pressing against the small of his back, underneath his jacket. How could he get to them without the others seeing?

“Dr. von Tuppington,” came the same snide voice. It was their sandy-haired target, sounding slightly out of breath but rather pleased with himself. “I was hoping we’d have a chance to meet again tonight. But then, that’s not really your name, is it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, sir,” Up bluffed as Taz slowly, discreetly slid her hands down his chest, and beneath his jacket to his back. “My wife and I-”

“Did a very good job of convincing the bimbos in there of your little act,” the traitor continued. “But not me, I’m afraid. Though you are a wonderful dancer, darling.”

Taz’s hands had found both zappers holstered at his waist. She moved her leg forward imperceptibly, and he could just make out the outline of the knife she’d strapped to her thigh beneath the red fabric of her dress. He was going to have to be fast.

“So now, let’s not make a fuss about this, no need to disrupt the party. If you’ll just come with us-”

Up ducked down as Taz pulled the zappers from his belt and swung them around to face the enemies on either side, letting out a battle cry as she began to fire. They scattered, taken by surprise. Crouching at her waist, Up slid his hand up her leg until he found the knife. Swinging himself around, he stood so that they were back to back, and looked for a target as she continued firing.

“Shit, Taz, why couldn’t you have fit a zapper under there, too?”

She laughed, the light of the lasers dancing across her face. The enemies were firing back, and the sandy-haired target was creeping away toward the ballroom, where the music had stopped. Up’s lens was still showing the

information diamond in his pocket.

Up took careful aim and threw Taz's knife.

It sunk deep into the back of the man's thigh, as Up had meant it to, and he stumbled and fell to the ground with a cry as the doors of the ballroom swung open. A crowd of astounded ambassadors had gathered, looking at shock at the scene on the balcony.

The blasting stopped, and Up looked at Taz. "No more juice," she said, shaking the useless zappers and dropping them to the ground. She had managed to take out all of the dark-clad henchmen, who now lay motionless on the ground.

"Were those set to stun?" he asked. "They may be traitors, but they're still human."

"*No sé*, they're your zappers, Up."

As they turned to him, the sandy-haired man, clutching his leg, scrambled upright and grabbed the nearest partygoer.

"Like, ew, don't touch me!"

It was February, it had to be February. The traitor pulled a zapper from his own pocket and pressed it into her neck.

"I get through, the girl doesn't get hurt."

The teenager's frightened eyes looked from Up to Taz. He didn't know what to do. They had no weapons left. But they couldn't let him get away with the information diamond.

"Phillipa, girlfriend," said February shakily, as the zapper pressed farther still into the side of her neck. "Three and a quarter inches is totally deadly, right?"

This meant absolutely nothing to Up, but understanding dawned on Taz's face. Before anyone could move, she bent and tugged a shiny black stiletto from her foot.

The traitor never saw it coming.

There had never been a more eventful Galactic Ambassador's Ball. G.L.E.E. backup arrived to haul the traitor and his slowly reviving henchmen away, and the information diamond was taken into secure custody. Feed reporters swarmed, and cameras flashed as February bid Phillipa, as she insisted on calling Taz, a tearful goodbye. She was having a little trouble wrapping her head around the whole dual-identity Starship Ranger business.

"You ever think of joining?" Taz said. "You were pretty ballsy out there on the balcony. And they could use a few more girls going through those Academy hallways."

"Me, a Starship Ranger?" February's eyes filled with wonder. "Well, I *have* always been interested in schi-ency things, you know."

Up waited a few metres away, well away from the clamouring reporters. Taz was barefoot, her dress scorched and her elegant hairstyle tumbled down, and she looked better than ever. He wanted to kiss her again, but she wasn't Mrs. von Tuppington anymore.

The charade was over.

"We didn't exactly do things quietly, did we?" he said as she approached.

"Tripp is going to kill us," she agreed. "But he can't say we didn't get the job done."

They both fell silent, and there was a question hanging between them, but Up didn't know how to ask it.

"Okay, Commander, transport's ready to go," an ensign said, and they turned toward the waiting ship.

Chapter Fourteen

Tequila

*A*lien bars are a lot like bars on Earth. Some are pounding, pulsing music and lights, some are dark taverns with darker beer. Locals and intergalactic travellers alike would find them, hoping to drown their sorrows in the bottom of a whiskey glass, forget their pain in a stranger's arms, throw away cares with cards and dancing and shots all around. This one was large and long and semi-dark, one of the low-key local haunts, but the locals didn't mind when Rangers in the area stopped by for a drink or two on their day off – it usually made for excitement of one kind or another.

Up leaned against the bar, wooden and smelling of a hundred days of spilt alcohol, sipping at a purple Yularian scotch. He'd offered the evening's shore leave in an effort to help his crew forget that they'd just spent a rough couple of weeks battling stray robot fighters in the Beta sector, and several dozen of his Rangers had taken him up on it. Everyone was growing tense as the robot-human conflicts had begun to escalate, and the G.L.E.E. couldn't afford to lose soldiers to burnout now. He figured a night off would do his Rangers good.

It seemed to be working – to his right a few young ensigns were trying their luck with the local ladies, and a rowdy game of cards was taking place in the corner. But most of the bar's blurry attention was focused on the makeshift stage set up in the corner of the room. It was

karaoke night.

Not long after she joined the team, the *Cazadora* crew had discovered that if you gave Lieutenant Taz enough tequila and a microphone, she would sing anything – loudly and lustily – with anyone, anywhere, anytime. The crew took advantage of this whenever possible, as there wasn't much that was funnier than watching Taz belt out "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" with whichever hapless partner she'd managed to recruit that night. Up had to admit she was actually pretty good, although you'd never try to tell her that sober.

Taz finished her song to loud catcalls and kicked over the microphone stand. Ignoring the cries for an encore, she blew her audience a kiss and marched over to where Up was standing.

"You're a regular Aretha," he said. He was glad to see her enjoying herself. She'd been in a mood all day, bench-pressing impossible numbers of reps in the gym and refusing to come to the mess hall to eat. Maybe it was just the constant threat of robot invasion that was bothering her.

She stuck her tongue out at him and turned to the bartender. "*Un tequila*. And non of your local shit, *por favor*."

"Having a good time, are you?" Up said dryly.

"*Excelente*," she said, taking the shot glass from the bartender and knocking it back, disregarding the offered lemon and salt. "While you just stand here looking like your data dog just died."

"Someone has to keep an eye on all you kids," he said. It was true. If anything out of the ordinary happened here tonight, as the ship's commanding officer, he'd be the one to answer for it. The G.L.E.E. certainly didn't need any more trouble these days.

"Okay, *padre*," she said with far too much emphasis,

slamming the glass back onto the bar. “But it wouldn’t kill you to have a little fun once in a while. I haven’t seen you smile in months.”

She left, and he stared after her. Things had been tough lately as the Robots had begun renewed attacks on human colonies – and he had plenty to worry about keeping the *Cazadora* intact and in fighting shape. But had he really forgotten how to smile?

He watched her join the card game, clink glasses, and laugh at something Pedro said. The lovesick idiot still gave her the same moony eyes he always had. Up turned his back and ordered a refill from the bartender.

The night grew louder as it grew later, and the liquor was flowing freely. Some soldiers started arm wrestling in the corner, and the karaoke warbling grew so off-key that Up found himself wishing that Taz would get on stage again just to put everyone out of their misery. He circled the room, sharing toasts and jabs with various crew members, trying to convince himself that he was having *fun*, but his heart wasn’t in it. Having made the obligatory rounds and with nothing else to do, Up found himself at the bar again. Suddenly Taz was at his elbow, rather tipsier than before.

“*Uno más, camarero, y muévete! Tengo sed!*” she barked, swaying a little, and though the bartender clearly didn’t understand what she’d said, he poured another tequila and offered it hopefully.

“Are you sure you need that?” said Up. She was leaning rather heavily on the bar for support.

Her eyes flashed. “You know, Up,” she said, coming closer and stabbing at his chest with her finger. “I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“I know that,” he said warily. Experience had taught the *Cazadora* crew that Taz on tequila could go one of two ways: extremely dangerous or extremely flirty. He wasn’t

sure yet which he was dealing with tonight.

“I’m all grown up now,” she said, reaching for her drink. As she did, someone behind her tripped, knocking her into Up. Quickly he wrapped his arms around her, more to prevent her from attacking anyone than anything else. She writhed around to yell at the perpetrator.

“Mira por dónde vas, o te sacaré de las entrañas!”

Up chuckled, and she turned to look up at him. Suddenly the clinking glasses and chortles of laughter around him faded and he was transported to a stone balcony and a warm night on Europa, remembering the subtle scent of her, the softness of her lips, reliving the rightness of his hands at the small of her back. Her eyes softened just a little bit, and he wondered if maybe – just maybe – she was thinking of the same thing.

They didn’t talk about it. They had never talked about it, what had happened between Mr. and Mrs. von Tuppington on that balcony.

Now Taz pressed her palm against his chest, a gentle, questioning touch. He wondered if she could feel how fast his heart was beating. She traced the G.L.E.E. insignia on his casual uniform, then each button in turn, her fingers exploring their way down his shirt. So this was definitely flirty Tequila Taz.

“Taz,” he said, though he wanted nothing more than for her to continue. “Don’t.” *Not tonight. Not here. Not like this.*

She stiffened in his arms, and for a moment, hurt flashed in her eyes. It was quickly replaced by anger. He let her go and she picked up her forgotten drink.

“Sorry, Commander,” she said. “My mistake.” She downed the liquor and threw the shot glass on the floor where it shattered, causing a few patrons nearby to jump. Giving him a sloppy salute she turned, disappearing into the

thickening crowd. Up rubbed his face in his hands, suddenly wishing he was back on the *Cazadora*, watching the *Karate Kid*, maybe taking a bubble bath. Anywhere but here.

It wasn't very long before there came a particularly loud smashing sound and a series of shouts from across the bar. He could see a number of Ranger uniforms among the gathering crowd, so Up approached, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Fight, fight, fight, fight!”

“Dead goddammit,” said Up, coming up beside Pedro as Taz sent her larger, alien opponent flying into a card table. Glass and game pieces flew everywhere. “Why is Taz brawling with one of the locals?”

“It's Taz,” Pedro shrugged, though admiration shone stupidly in his eyes. “He probably just looked at her the wrong way.”

Two of the alien's buddies approached her, cracking knuckles. She slipped beneath their reach and kicked at their legs, sending them sprawling to the floor. She wasn't as quick to get up as usual, and staggered a little as she rose.

The locals were starting to look angry. Up stepped into the middle of the circle.

“LIEUTENANT!” he roared. Taz looked startled, and her eyes attempted to focus on him.

“That is *enough*,” he said harshly. “We are guests on this planet. You are drunk, and acting irresponsibly, and you are an embarrassment to this team. Get yourself back to the ship before you cause any more trouble.”

Taz, for a moment, looked abashed, but then she reached out and swept her arm across an array of empty bottles on the nearest table, sending them all shattering to the floor at his feet. A challenge.

Anger rose inside him as the glass settled, but he kept his voice steady. “You’re confined to quarters until further notice, Lieutenant. I’ll see you on the *Cazadora*.”

She stared at him for a moment, as if not believing what he’d said. Then she turned and stalked away, smashing a few more bottles for good measure.

“Make sure she makes it there in one piece,” Up spat at Pedro, who nodded, wide-eyed, and ran after her.

Up rubbed his temples again as he turned to face the looming aliens behind him.

Her quarters were spinning. She had only moved into them recently, after being promoted to a full Lieutenant, but she was fairly sure that they weren’t supposed to be doing that. She had finally managed to find her bed, after Pedro had helped her to the bathroom just in time to puke up most of what she’d consumed. She’d caught a glance of herself in the mirror and she was a mess, blood crusting on her eyebrow, her short hair sticking up everywhere, spilled alcohol staining her shirt blue and yellow. She’d stripped down to her bra and underwear, her uniform ruined, before remembering that Pedro was there and kicking him out before he got too much of an eyeful. She thought about returning to the bathroom to clean herself up, but instead crawled under the thin military blanket and curled up, wanting to die. Her head was reeling and her stomach doing the salsa. She had never felt this awful in her life. How many drinks had she had, anyway?

More than she’d needed, after Up – she curled herself tighter in embarrassment. She’d fairly thrown herself at him, and he’d been understandably disgusted with her *culo borracho*. What had she been thinking? That because of the way he’d kissed Mrs. von Tuppington on Europa he’d want to do the same with her? When the truth was that really he

still thought of her as a kid, even after all these years. An embarrassment to the team. To him.

If she hadn't before, she'd proved it tonight with her behaviour, picking fights and smashing glasses. Taz felt ill again as she saw his angry face in the dim light of the bar. Up never got angry with her.

The room was quiet. Until her latest promotion had granted her these quarters, Taz had never had so much space to herself. She'd bunked with fellow junior-grade lieutenants, ensigns, cadets, and before that, lived in the same room as her mama in her aunt's house – but no, she wouldn't think of her mama tonight. Not after spending the whole night trying to drink her away.

Confined to quarters. She'd literally never been so alone.
A knock.

Taz lifted her head, willing her vision to stop swimming.
“Taz? It's me.”

She was fairly sure her heart stopped at his voice.
“Come in,” she said, eventually.

Up came in tentatively, looking around until he saw her in the dimmed night lighting, wrapped up defensively in her bed. He crossed his arms and surveyed her.

“You look like shit,” he said. The anger had left his voice. “Didn't Pedro help you get home?”

“I chased him out,” she said.

“Well, you need to get cleaned up,” he said. “Come on.”

Slowly, excruciatingly, she unravelled herself and crawled out of the blankets. Up raised his eyebrows and then averted his gaze when he saw what she was- or wasn't – wearing. She wrapped a blanket around herself, her shame growing, and shakily walked to the bathroom. It was only when she put her hands into the tap water to wash her face that she saw the blood on them. “*Mierda.*”

“What is it?” Up asked, peering around the corner.

“Jesus, Taz, your hands are full of glass.”

That would be from the bottles she’d smashed while proving her childishness with a full-out tantrum. “I’m sorry, Up,” she whispered, and could feel tears pricking at her eyes. She’d never cried in front of him, *never*.

That was it - she was never going to drink again.

His face softened slightly. “Just – don’t touch anything,” he said, dampening a washcloth. “Let me do this.”

She sat on the toilet cover and managed to hold the tears in while he washed the blood from her face and arms with the washcloth and rummaged in the medicine cabinet until he found a pair of tweezers. It was a long and painful process as he carefully slid each tiny shard of glass from her palms. Without meaning to, every now and then she’d let out a small gasp, and he would look up in concern. He held her hand gently with his own as he worked, and she watched him, her liquor-addled brain thinking about how he’d changed in the years she’d known him, new scars he’d added, fresh worry in his face. She watched his brows crease, and her gaze dropped to his lips, and she wanted to do the same thing she’d wanted since Europa – to kiss him again, to see happiness there on his face once more. *He’s your commanding officer, he’s out of bounds, he’s your partner, he’s your best friend, he’s Up*, she repeated to herself, over and over again. It had become her mantra these last few months.

Her mama would have been pleased to see her finally losing it over a man. Taz closed her eyes against the images that threatened to come back, the ones she held at bay with fighting, tequila shots, too many reps at the gym. They wouldn’t stay away this time.

Up worked as cautiously as he could, but there was a lot of glass. He could feel Taz watching him, her eyes a little



“Let me do this.”

glassy, the blanket wrapped around her. She looked miserable.

He finally got up the nerve to ask. “What’s going on, Taz? I’ve never seen you act like this before.”

She didn’t say anything for a while, and then the words came out of her as if by accident. “It’s my birthday tomorrow.”

Up stopped, and frowned. Was it? Taz didn’t usually pay much mind to birthdays. “Happy – birthday?” he said, confused as to what this had to do with anything.

“I’ll be twenty-five,” she told the bathtub beside him. “Ten years ago-”

And then he understood. It had been her birthday the day her family and village had been destroyed by robots, the day he’d found her hanging upside-down, a human *piñata* at her own *quinceañera*. “I didn’t realize it still-”

“Bothered me?” she said bitterly. “Watching everyone I cared about being blasted and ripped into pieces while I was powerless to stop it? Why should that still bother me?”

“Taz, I didn’t mean it like that,” he said. He pulled the last shard of glass from her palm. “There.”

She didn’t pull her hand away. He looked at her, dark eyes and all-over-the-place hair, a fresh cut on her eyebrow, the curve of her shoulder disappearing into the blanket that had slipped down her arm. She looked more vulnerable now than she had in a long time. Sometimes he forgot how young she had been when she first joined the Academy. He suddenly felt overwhelmed by an intense desire to take her in his arms again, remind her that she wasn’t alone. She had him. She would always have him.

His communicator beeped.

“Commander Up?”

He had to let go of her hand to raise the communicator to his mouth.

“Up here.”

“Urgent message from Rear Admiral Tripp, sir.”

Up and Taz raised their eyebrows at each other. “Patch him through,” he said, knowing that Taz would keep her presence quiet.

“Tripp?”

“Up,” Tripp’s voice came through, and his breathing was ragged. “It’s the Admiral – he’s dead.”

“Dead?” he repeated, as Taz’s eyes widened to match his own.

“Assassinated,” Tripp said, sounding like he had aged twenty years since Up had last spoken to him. “The robots have control of G.L.E.E. headquarters. They’ve done it. They’ve taken over.”

Chapter Fifteen

Earth

A dozen starship commanders stood silently around the strategy table, surveying countless blueprints, grasping for some key element there they'd missed, coming up blank. It was a lull in the heated discussions that had been taking place since they'd arrived at the secret Mexican bunker. The bunker had been set up expressly for this purpose, a place to meet in the event of a disaster like this, its coordinates hidden deep within G.L.E.E. codes to prevent any spies getting a hold of them. Most of the starships that had been within the solar system had made it back to Earth within hours – the *Cazadora* among them – and now their captains were faced with the task of finding a way to win the very heart of the Galactic League back from their robot enemies.

They were leaderless, and that was a problem. Tripp and the other Rear and Vice Admirals were trapped within the robot-held Headquarters, and there had been no further contact with them after Tripp's initial message to Up. Every commander had their own ideas about their situation, but none of them actually seemed to stand a chance of working.

"Headquarters has the highest security known to man," said Commander Li, breaking the silence. Up's former commander was the most senior officer there. She was also the only female in the room. "It's going to be damn near impossible to get in."

"The robots did," said Up, for what felt like the hundredth time. "We just need to figure out how."

More pointless arguments. They were talking in circles. Headquarters was built to be virtually impenetrable, the last fortress of its kind. No Ranger had ever expected to be trying to break into it.

Elbows on the table, Up put his head in his hands and rubbed his temples. They were getting nowhere. He found himself wondering what Taz would have to say about the situation. She would likely cut through the pragmatic bullshit and get right to the point, help them find some brilliant, simple solution they were overlooking.

She couldn't though, because she was still confined to quarters. A minimum of twenty-four hours had to pass before Up could release her, according to G.L.E.E. regulations, and he just couldn't bend the rules for her this time. There were already too many people asking questions about their relationship. If the wrong people thought that Up was treating Taz differently from any of his other crewmen, she could find herself reassigned to another ship, and he needed her on the *Cazadora*, on his team – with him.

She hadn't been real pleased when he told her to stay put.

The arguing faltered. Up raised his head as the door opened and a large, imposing figure in black entered the room.

“Making any progress, gentlemen?”

Taz stared at the ceiling of her quarters, watching it move back and forth as she pulled herself up into a crunch and down again, her hands resting behind her head, her rep count rounding into the three hundreds. What she'd really like was a punching bag – maybe with Up's face on it. Like anyone was really going to care if he followed the rules at a time like this, when the biggest development in the history

of the Robot Wars was happening *right now*? She should be out there with the rest of them – with him.

“Confined to quarters,” she muttered. She was going to lose it if she had to stay in here much longer. Some way to spend your birthday.

A knock at the door, and she paused mid-rep.

“Come in.”

Pedro poked his head around the door. “How are you doing in here, Taz?”

“How’s it look like I’m doing, *idiota*?” she said, continuing the crunches. “I’m killing time until Up *se despierta* and realizes he needs me out there. What’s happening, anyway?”

“The Commander’s been in meetings with all of the other starship commanders since we arrived at the bunker. They haven’t come out in a while, I don’t think it’s going well.”

“What is there to meet about? We’ve got to go in and destroy the *hijos de puta*.”

“That’s the problem, we’ve got to go in – you know how hard it is to infiltrate Headquarters when it’s fully locked down like this,” Pedro said, coming in and sitting on her bed, wrinkling his nose at the trace of blood on her pillow. Taz’s glass-shredded palms were wrapped in bandages and hurt like hell, but the throbbing pain was only helping her focus her growing frustration.

“The robots did,” she said. “We’ve just got to figure out how.”

Pedro shrugged. “That’s the commanders’ problem, isn’t it?”

Taz sat up and glared at him. “It’s everyone’s problem, *hombre*.”

Pedro casually picked up her pillow by the corner and moved it out of his way, stretching out on her bed like it

was his own. “Whatever happens, I have to admit it’s nice to be on Earth again, even if we have to stick to the ships and bunkers.”

Taz froze, halfway to standing. “We’re on Earth?”

“You didn’t know?”

“Why would I know, Pedro? I’ve been stuck here with no viewscreen, no radio contact since Up got the call from Tripp!”

Pedro looked at her accusingly. “Why was Commander Up here when he got the call?”

Taz crossed her arms and didn’t answer.

They glared at each other for a moment, then finally Pedro pushed himself up out of her bed. “You’d better watch yourself, Taz, you know the G.L.E.E. doesn’t have much tolerance for unauthorized relationships between commanding officers and their subordinates.”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Taz spat, feeling herself grow red. “There is no *relationship*. But if you go and start shooting your mouth off-”

“Do you really think I would do that?” There was hurt in Pedro’s voice. “Up’s the best commander in the fleet, and you-” The rest of that thought hung in the air between them. Pedro sighed. “I don’t want to see either of you lose your jobs. But you’re kidding yourself if you don’t see the way he looks at you.” He looked angry now, too. “Enjoy your solitary confinement, Taz. I’ll let you know how it all turns out.”

“Wait-” she said, her brain still trying to take in everything he’d just said. “At least tell me where we are – where on Earth did we land?”

He stopped in the doorway, and turned, a strange look on his face. “Why, *mi hermana*,” he said. “We’re in Mexico. We’ve finally come home.”

Dr. Samuel Claw did not look like your average ship's doctor. Up had heard him spoken of before, and met him once or twice in passing. He was supposed to be some sort of genetic genius, a specialist in robotics who'd invented a controversial method of fusing robot parts into human bodies to replace those lost to injury or illness. Lauded by some as the key to immortality, and abhorred by others as the end of humanity itself, Dr. Claw's research had made waves across the galaxy a few years ago. The doctor's own hands and forearms shone with a sinister metallic gleam, and it was rumoured that it was because he had used himself as a test subject in the early stages of his research, many years ago. There was something eerily supervillainous about him, which was perhaps why the newsfeeds had taken to calling him by his press-given nickname: Space-Claw.

"Dr. Claw," said Commander Li. "What a surprise. I didn't realize the *Panther* was in the area."

Dr. Claw folded his hands with an unsettling whirring sound. "We're badly crippled, I'm afraid, and were on our way back to Earth for repairs when we got the distress call." He made eye contact with each commander in turn as he spoke. "We lost Jackson in our last attack – I have been Acting Commander in the interim. I may not have a working ship to offer but perhaps I can be of some assistance anyway."

There was a moment of silence at the news. Jackson had been a good Ranger, a good Commander. The *Cazadora* and the *Panther* had collaborated on missions many times - it was the *Panther* that had rescued Up and Taz from the Graali desert moon only a few years before.

Dr. Claw came closer to the strategy table and peered at their plans. Everyone instinctively stood a little taller – he

had at least a foot on anyone else in the room. Up wondered if that was another robotic enhancement. “Going for stealth, I see. Not getting you very far, is it?”

“Do you have another idea, Doctor?” said Up, who was well past tired of this meeting.

“Blow them up,” Dr. Claw said with a shrug. “Stop wasting time in this bunker and show the bastards that we can be just as ruthless as they are.”

Silence. Finally Commander Li spoke.

“Every high-ranking officer in the Galactic League is trapped inside Headquarters with the robots, Dr. Claw. Bombs aren’t selective in their targets.”

Dr. Claw leaned across the table, inches from her face. “There’s a reason we haven’t won this war yet, Commander.” He drew back and looked at them all, his voice deep, powerful, assured. “We *care* too much. If there’s one thing we did right when we created those tin cans, it’s that we took away that particular human folly.” His volume dropped nearly to a whisper, and the gathered commanders leaned in. “If we want to win this war for good, we’ve got to think like they do. We’ve got to *act* like they do.”

“No,” said Up, shaking his head, and everyone turned to look at him. “We start acting like the robots, we lose what little humanity we have left.”

“We were born human,” said Dr. Claw smoothly, smiling. “We will always be human - but not if they drive us to extinction. And you all know the reality: we *are* on our way to extinction, Commander Up. Our planet hovers on the brink of environmental collapse. What happens to humanity then?”

The tension in the room could have been sliced and served for lunch with a side of fries. Commander Li cleared her throat. “We’ve been at this for hours. Why don’t why

take a short break, clear our heads? We'll reconvene in fifteen and discuss Dr. Claw's suggestion."

Up was the first to leave, his hands shaking and his mind coming up with a thousand retorts, none of which sounded quite as good as what Dr. Claw had left them with. Blow up the entire Headquarters and everyone in it? What kind of plan was that? They'd never agree to it, they couldn't possibly-

He stopped short as he passed the bunker's garage, where the land vehicles were kept. Someone was moving around in there. He pulled out his zapper.

"Ensign!"

Pedro turned around guiltily, one foot already in a camouflaged Jeep. "Oh, hi, Commander."

Up was at the end of his rope. "Planning to go for a joyride, were you? You know that we're deep in robot territory, Ensign. *No one* is to leave the bunker, it's not safe for humans to be out there alone."

Pedro opened his mouth, then closed it again. Up crossed his arms and waited.

"It's Taz," he said finally. "She's gone."

"*Gone?*" Up said dangerously.

"I went to visit her and I let it slip that we'd landed in Mexico," Pedro said, very quickly, his hands half raised as if to defend himself from an expected attack. "When I went back a half an hour later, she wasn't in her room. I checked the ship's log and she's not on board." He pointed at a set of tell-tale tire tracks heading toward the bunker's garage door. "And there's a Jeep missing."

"*You told her we were in Mexico?*" Up said, raising his communicator to check the logs himself. They confirmed what Pedro said – Taz was not on board the *Cazadora*. If she had checked the navigation and realized that they weren't more than twenty miles from her obliterated

village... “Are you soft in the head? Do you *know* what today is?”

Pedro furrowed his brow and shook his head. He didn't.

Up rubbed his temples again, wondering what to do. His duty was here at the bunker, in that meeting, listening to all that useless back-and-forth. But Taz, if last night was any indication, was in no state to be wandering around a robot-infested land by herself. Not today.

“Get out of my way,” he said finally, and Pedro stepped aside. Up swung himself over the door of the Jeep as the ensign scurried around to the other side.

“I'm coming with you,” Pedro said, jumping into the passenger's seat and putting his hands on his hips like a defiant five-year-old.

“Fine,” Up said, too exhausted to argue. When was the last time he'd slept? Backup wouldn't be a bad idea. He turned the ignition. “Buckle up, Garbage-sniffer.”

Taz sat cross-legged in the middle of a blackened memory. Dead trees dangled, and grass no longer grew where there had once been life, family, laughter. It should have been unrecognizable but it was a part of her, this place and its horrors, its haunting of her dreams. She could see it all, lanterns and lights and dancing, chickens and ice cream in the summer, bicycles and running barefoot with her cousins, her mama telling stories at night while fireflies hovered to listen. Her first sticky kiss with the boy down the street. Watermelon seeds and smoking bodies and spilt champagne, screams cut short and mechanical laughter, the sweetly searing smell of burnt flesh. Being lifted off her feet by arms too inhuman to fight, seeing the end of the world coming at her upside down. Knowing death was coming, and almost welcoming it, knowing she would join her family soon...

And then the Ranger, sweeping in like a dead-goddamned knight in shining armour, destroying them all, doing what she couldn't, making her feel more helpless than before. He'd cut her down and caught her, and they'd stared at each other, the only two survivors in a world of destruction. As soon as she saw his blue eyes she'd trusted him, inexplicably, irrefutably. She'd never stopped.

There was nothing left of the house but the remnants of a raging fire, a few broken pieces of pottery, and a photograph, somehow preserved in its shattered frame. She held it now, tracing her finger over the faces she had only seen in her dreams these past ten years. It was an impromptu family portrait, taken when she was twelve or thirteen, her aunt and cousins and mama and her all gathered together under the biggest tree in the yard, the baby screeching, two of her cousins pulling each other's hair. Her mama with her big, comfortable arms wrapped around Taz's skinny, braided younger self, both of them all smiles for the camera. Taz blinked. The tears were there, just behind her eyes, but they wouldn't come.

She should get up, get back in the Jeep, and return to the bunker before anyone realized she was gone. But she couldn't make herself leave.

Suddenly behind her there were footsteps. She didn't move. She knew who it would be.

He looked down at her sadly, and she couldn't speak, because it was just like him to have her figured out so precisely, to know exactly where she would have gone and why, to come and look at her like that, like her pain was his own. He sat down next to her, without saying anything at all. She allowed her head to fall to his shoulder and rest there, seeking his strength. Finding it.

They stayed like that for a long time.

Suddenly a crackling sound came from Up's wrist. "Hey,

Commander?”

It was Pedro’s voice, and Taz looked at Up in surprise. He looked a bit abashed as he raised his wrist and said, “Go ahead, Ensign.”

“Sorry to break up this nice little moment, you two, but I think we’ve got company.”

“Shit,” said Up as the two of them leapt up and looked around. Pedro was sitting in one of the bunker Jeeps atop a hill not too far in the distance, gesturing wildly behind him. As they watched, he started the ignition and careened down the slope. The metallic form of one very large, very angry-looking robot crested the hill.

“You brought *Pedro* out here?” Taz yelled as they ran toward the oncoming Jeep.

“If it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t even have known you’d left the ship, Taz!” Up shouted back. “I left him in the Jeep to keep watch!”

“Great idea!” she said, only halfway meaning it. “Now what?”

The Jeep was almost upon them. Pedro slowed down ever so slightly and both Up and Taz managed to grab hold of either side and swing themselves over as he passed them. Taz growled at the pain pulsing in her palms as she steadied herself in the backseat. The robot was gaining ground.

“That son of a bitch is *huge!* They’re making them big here on Earth these days!” Pedro said, looking in the rearview mirror. “Hi, Taz.”

“I can’t believe you told on me, *idiota,*” she said in return, pulling a couple of zappers out of the Jeep’s cargo and checking to see if they were charged.

“I think you mean ‘thanks for coming to rescue me from that crazy-ass robot chasing us, Pedro. You’re a real pal.’”

Taz cursed as the Jeep pitched and she was thrown roughly into Up, who was holding tightly to the rollover

frame. She pushed one of the zappers at him.

“Hey listen, Taz,” Pedro continued, rising about a foot into the air as they went flying over another huge bump. “I understand, really I do, this is my homeland too, remember? But you don’t see me defying orders and taking off to go have a look-see at my burnt village, do you?” Their eyes met in the mirror. “Sometimes the past is best left in the past.”

She didn’t have a chance to respond. A shadow fell, and a monstrous robot hand reached out and plucked Pedro from the driver’s seat as easily as if he was a popcorn kernel in a bowl.

“Grab the wheel!” shouted Up, and Taz threw herself over the seat as Up stood up with one foot on the back of the Jeep, his gun levelled at the robot, seeking a target. He didn’t shoot, and Taz knew why: if he brought the robot down, then Pedro would come down with it. And it would be a long fall to the hard ground below.

Steering with just the tips of her fingers, Taz had barely managed to regain control of the speeding Jeep when she felt it jolt, and then suddenly leap ahead. She looked in the rearview mirror. Up was no longer there.

“Some big rescuers you two *idiotas* are!” she bawled up at them. The robot had a tight grip on them, one in each hand, and was still coming after her. Intent on making a neat job of it, she supposed.

She turned her attention back to where she was going just in time to see herself drive into a lake.

The Jeep shuddered and pitched forward, filling quickly with water. Taz used the windshield to push herself up and away from the suction it created as it sunk, taking all of their weapons with it to the bottom of the lake. *Estúpida, estúpida, estúpida*. She should have known it was there, she’d learned to swim in this lake, pulled leeches from her

legs on its shore. She tread water and turned to see the robot still coming, Up and Pedro struggling to free themselves from its grip.

The robot, its blank eyes fixed on her, stepped into the deep water. A strange buzzing sound, and sparks. Suddenly the robot's hands opened, and Up and Pedro both dropped like rocks into the lake below, twin shouts of surprise abruptly interrupted as they hit the surface with two large splashes. Taz watched in alarm and amazement as the robot listed forward, electric currents humming the length of its body, vibrating through the water into hers. Its eyes went dark, and then it was falling forward, creating a tidal wave as it struck the water, sending her whirling head over heels, disorienting her. Where was the surface, where was the light, where was the air? She twisted mid-water, seeking, searching, her lungs straining with too little in them-

Then she felt hands, and she was being pulled up, and she broke into the beautiful Earth atmosphere with a grateful gasp. It was Pedro, who waited long enough to see her start treading water before diving again. Taz looked around. She couldn't see Up anywhere.

Pedro's head broke the surface again, his dark hair plastered to his forehead, a frightened look on his face. "I can't find him, Taz."

At his words she dove, straining to see through the blackness of the lake. She could just make out the robot's body, lying prone against the bottom. And there, pinned to its leg and struggling to free himself, was Up, a mere ten feet below the surface near the edge of the lake. He had to be almost out of air.

She rose up again and pointed out his direction to Pedro, swimming faster than she ever had in her life, not waiting to see if he was following. Taking the biggest breath she could manage, she used the edge of the robot's foot to shoot

herself straight down.

Up looked at her through the dark lake water as she reached him, his eyes glazing over, clearly losing consciousness. Taz grabbed his shoulders and pressed her mouth to his, forcing air into his lungs, giving him all she had. She kicked off from the bottom and gasped as she reached the surface again. Pedro had reached them.

“He’s caught,” she said, before pushing herself down again. Pedro followed.

Together, they worked to free Up from the dead robot’s grasp. Taz pulled her knife from her boot and sawed at his utility belt, snagged in the joint at the robot’s knee, willing him to stay conscious, hold onto the air she’d given him. Just a few seconds longer. A few more-

Finally, finally, he was free, and they pulled him up together, reaching the blessed surface, sucking in oxygen, hauling him to land. She heard Up cough, and sagged with relief, flopping onto the barren lake shore as her muscles gave out beneath her.

The three of them lay there, panting with exhaustion, for what seemed like forever.

“You know what this means?” said Up. His voice sounded raw, but he was speaking, and that was good enough for her.

“The *cabrones* aren’t waterproof,” said Taz.

“How could we not have known?” said Pedro.

They lay in silence a little longer.

“Sprinklers,” said Up.

“Controlled electronically-”

“The robots will short-circuit-”

“But the humans will be fine!”

Up got up quickly, though his legs shook a little. “I’ve got to get back to that meeting. Taz, where did you park the other Jeep?”

He got back in time to watch Headquarters explode.

The commanders were gathered around the strategy room's viewscreen. Up knew it was too late the moment he saw the orange plumes unfurl across the screen, the thick grey smoke clouding the satellite images, the shattering *boom* hit his eardrums. They'd actually done it. He couldn't believe it.

Some of the commanders watched the screen avidly, or with a sort of grim determination. Others were looking firmly at the floor. Dr. Claw watched calmly, his robotic hands propping up his chin.

"How many Rangers?" Up said darkly. The other commanders turned to see him, framed in the doorway, dripping wet, his uniform slashed and hanging in tatters. Some wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Commander Up, how good of you to finally join us," Dr. Claw said warmly. "That must have been some detour you took."

"How many?" he repeated, this time directing his question at Commander Li, who at least had the grace to look upset at the horror unfolding – the horror they'd unleashed.

"Five hundred and fifty seven," she said. "Eighty-eight of whom were high-ranking officers." *Our superiors*, her eyes said, though she didn't say it out loud.

"It didn't have to be like this," Up said.

Dr. Claw opened his mouth, but it was Commander Li who spoke. "But it did, Up," she said. "Dr. Claw is right – we've been losing this war for hundreds of years now. It's time to turn things around. We should have done this a long time ago."

He looked at them all, friends and colleagues, and saw them solemnly agreeing with her. Dr. Claw sat in the

middle, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

Up turned his back and walked away.

Taz opened her door to find Up standing there, still sopping wet and looking ready to kill someone. She stood back to let him in, and he started pacing the room.

“What did they think of your idea-” she began, and then jumped back as Up picked up her desk chair and threw it at the wall. It broke in two.

“It’s too late, they did it, I should have been there-”

“They did it?” she said, watching him with alarm. “They blew up Headquarters?”

He stopped moving and stood in the middle of her room, looking suddenly lost. It was such an unusual expression for him that she rushed over and took both of his hands in hers. “And- and Tripp?”

“And everyone,” he said, his voice suddenly devoid of emotion. “All dead. Dr. Claw has convinced the other commanders that it’s time we started playing this game by the robots’ rules. The *Cazadora* has been ordered into orbit to protect Earth against the retaliation we’re certain to receive. This war’s about to get dirty.”

“Ordered by who?”

“Ordered by *him*,” Up said. “Dr. Space-Claw. The commanders have voted. He’s Acting Admiral until the government can meet and give the matter proper consideration.”

Taz didn’t know what to say.

“This is all my fault,” she said. “Pedro was right. I shouldn’t have gone looking for the past. If I had stayed put, you would have been at the meetings, and you could have stopped them-”

“I don’t think I could have,” Up said, still looking blankly at the wall behind her. “He’s got this way about him

– they were all his from the moment he stepped into the room.” He finally focused on her. “And if you hadn’t gone out, we would have never learned about the robots’ vulnerability to water.” He let go of her hands and dropped onto her bed, the fight gone out of him. She had never seen him look so defeated.

After a moment he said, “You saved my life today.”

“Pedro helped,” she said, sinking to her knees in front of him. “Besides, you’ve saved mine a hundred times.”

He snorted. “At least.” His face grew serious again. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

She wasn’t sure. All she felt now when she thought of it, home and family and that awful night, was hollow.

“You know,” he said. “I think we need a new reason to remember your birthday. Something not quite so terrible.”

Taz frowned. “Ten years ago-”

“Ten years ago,” he echoed, putting a finger to her lips. “I met you.”

She was sufficiently silenced. They stared at each other, for a long moment. Two survivors in a world of destruction.

“Come on,” she said finally, because if he said anything else like that she was either going to cry or kiss him, and she wasn’t sure how he’d react to either. “Let’s get you out of those wet clothes.”

He raised his eyebrows, and she laughed, a half-laugh, and threw a pillow at him.

Chapter Sixteen

The Cazadora

The atmosphere on the bridge was grim. Every eye was on Up, waiting for him to give some brilliant order, pronounce some last-ditch, fleet-saving plan. Seventeen ships already lost. Nine disabled. And then there was the *Cazadora*, running quickly out of cannons, and seven others still hanging on, still fighting.

A burst of yellow flame in the viewscreen. Make that six.

Up looked at the unceasing line of robot vessels stretched out before them, left and right as far as the eye could see. Each ship linked to the next like a row of children playing Red Rover, an impenetrable wall of nothing but death. There must be hundreds of them. Hundreds.

And Space-Claw had thought, with a distress call to ships within the region and their skimpy reserves, that the G.L.E.E. could match *this*?

The bridge rocked as the *Cazadora* took another direct hit. Up managed to stay upright, his hands clenched firmly on the back of the captain's chair.

"Shields?" he called, as his Rangers staggered to regain their balance. Taz stood calmly at the sensor station. She had stayed on her feet as well.

"Twelve percent," she said, and though her voice was steady, her eyes were asking him *What now?* When the shields failed altogether, the *Cazadora* would be lost.

Another cloud of smoke and debris in someone else's viewscreen.

"Commander, urgent call from engineering!"

Up gestured for the communications officer to put it through. An unfamiliar, panicked voice came through the radio.

"Commander Up, we've been hit! Direct hit to the warp core – we've got a leak!"

"Where is Lieutenant-Commander Davis?" Up asked sharply, as the eyes of the Rangers around him grew wide with fear.

"He's – he's dead, sir. He was right next to the core when it-"

"Lieutenant Taz!" Up barked, not needing to hear the rest. "Take your team down to engineering. Evacuate the crew and assess the damage – we need that engine working, dammit!"

Taz saluted and picked up her zapper, several Rangers moving to join her. Up caught her arm as she passed.

"Don't try and be a hero, you hear?" he said. "If it can't be saved, then get your team back up here. I don't want you down there when that core goes."

She nodded. It wasn't the right thing to say, not when their chances of survival had shrunk this low, but it was the best he could do. He was sending her because he trusted her, and he hoped she knew that. *But come back to me, Taz. If we die today, I want it to be together.*

Taz was too restless for pushups. She paced the floor of her quarters, picking things up, rearranging them, folding and refolding uniforms, flopping onto her bed and getting up to pace again. Then, finally, a knock.

She wrenched the door open, and her face fell a little. "Oh," she said. "I thought it might be-"

“Sorry to disappoint you,” said Pedro, crossing his arms and leaning against her door.

Taz shook her head. “It’s just that I haven’t seen him all evening, and he’s not in his quarters – I just figured tonight, you know, before the battle...”

She trailed off. Pedro simply looked at her. “You mean before we all march off to our heroic deaths?”

“You know it’s hopeless,” she said. “The prelim reports of the robot forces- the G.L.E.E. doesn’t stand a chance.”

“There’s always a chance,” he said softly. Then, after a moment, “Do you want me to go?”

Taz considered this. “No,” she said, and stood back to let him in. “I could use the company.”

“I brought cards,” he offered. “And some Plutonian whiskey. It’s not tequila, but-”

“I’ve sworn off tequila,” she said, taking the deck of cards from him.

“Pity,” he said as they hauled her desk across the room. She took the chair. He settled himself on her bed. “I’ve always enjoyed your renditions of those perennial favourites - ‘Fly Me to the Moon,’ ‘Space Cowboys,’” He paused. “‘Boy Toy.’”

“Cierra la boca, or you’ll never get another,” Taz said, shuffling the cards. “Want to make things more interesting?”

“What, with money?” Pedro waved his hand. “Who’s gonna need it after tomorrow?” He cracked a sly smile. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“No stripping,” Taz said, tossing his cards at him and taking a sip of the bright pink liquid he offered. She made a face at the sweetness of it.

“What, scared you’re gonna lose?”

Taz paused, and looked at him over her own cards. He raised his eyebrows, challenging her.

“Fine,” she said, leaning back in the chair and propping her feet up on her desk. If Up wasn’t coming, then she could do with a distraction. “I never lose.”

Engineering was a mess.

The lieutenant who had called up to the bridge met Taz as she arrived, four Rangers on her heels. “I couldn’t save him,” he said, his head moving rapidly from side to side. “I couldn’t-”

There was a human arm and a few more unidentifiable organs lying haphazardly on the deck beside the warp core. Behind her, she heard Pedro gag.

“Get out of the way,” she said to the lieutenant. “No one can save him now.”

Taz gave the order to evacuate, and approached the pulsing engine, a crystal humming at the centre of it. The heart of the ship. Sickly green liquid, thick and metallic, pooled beneath it. She wasn’t an engineer, but it didn’t look good.

“Pedro,” she said. “Our chief engineer is dead. His second-in-command is useless. You worked in engineering before you moved up to the bridge, *sí?*”

Pedro came up beside her, his dark eyes shining green in the light of the core as he pressed his fingers against the cracked glass containing it. “The leak is too big. It’s only a matter of time.”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear, *hombre,*” Taz said. Not the *Cazadora*, not Up’s ship. Dead goddamn Space-Claw and his *estúpido* final stand.

“Just look at it, Taz,” Pedro said. “It’s dead already, and that warp core material is unstable. With the right equipment, we could contain it for a short time, but we’ve got to separate the ship before all of engineering blows to hell.”

Taz pressed the button on her radio transmitter. The *Cazadora*'s sophisticated communication system had failed early in the battle with a hit to their communications array. "Up?"

"What have you got for me, Taz?"

"It's *desahuciado*," she said. "We've got to separate engineering from the rest of the ship."

A long pause. "We'll be easy pickings without our main engine."

"Even easier if we blow ourselves up for them."

Up growled through the crackling radio. "Finish the evacuation, and that includes you and your team, Lieutenant. Then seal it off. I'll start the countdown."

Up sat high up on a metal walkway in engineering, nursing a bottle of hundred-year-old scotch. Far below him, Lieutenant-Commander Davis was doing a final check, making sure his section was in top shape for the battle tomorrow. It was the night watch, and most of engineering was dark, save for the greenish glow cast by the warp crystal in the core. This was the heart of his ship. It was Up's favourite hiding place.

Tripp had given him the scotch, for his fifteen-year anniversary as a Ranger – Tripp, who'd been killed by his own Rangers, people he trusted. Friends. And for what? To provoke the robots into retaliation, to send every ship in the fleet to certain destruction, to ensure the end of the human race altogether?

Up had faced death before. But it never felt as sure as this. And he'd never felt so powerless to stop it.

"What would you do," he'd asked Tripp once in a drunken bar, feeling philosophical. "If you knew this was your last night alive?"

Tripp hadn't hesitated. "I'd run straight to Rosie," he'd

said, smacking the bar, making their glasses jump. “And tell her exactly how I feel about her. And then I’d get down on one knee and we’d make sweet, sweet love all night long-”

It hadn’t been too long after that night that Tripp had married his Rosie. Up had stood beside him as best man.

He thought of Taz, wondered how she was passing the long hours til morning. She too had faced death, but never quite like this. Not waiting helplessly for it to come to them.

He should be there with her, he knew he should be. But if he went to her now, admitted his fears, told her what his heart truly wanted...

Wouldn’t that be giving up hope?

Taz and Pedro walked the length of engineering, making sure that everyone was out. Even with the leaking core, it was strangely quiet down here, oddly detached from the battle raging around them. Their footsteps rang on the metal walkways.

“I’ve been looking at that chain of robot ships,” said Pedro. “You know, I think that if you hit one with a big enough missile, the reaction might just ripple out down the line – destroy all the bastards at once.”

“I believe they’ve thought of that,” Taz said. “That’s why they have a monstrous forcefield surrounding them. One our cannons haven’t been able to penetrate.”

“I was reading the other ships’ transmissions on the bridge. The *Brighteye* has pinpointed the shield’s frequency, but it’s scrambled. They’re working on it now – Commander Li has good people on that ship, they’ll get it eventually.”

“Okay, next problem,” she said. “Say they do unscramble the frequency and are able to disable the robot shields. The whole fleet is out of cannons, and not one of

our ships has a missile big enough to do the kind of damage you're talking about."

"No missiles, no," said Pedro, suddenly stopping. "But how about half a ship?"

Taz stared at him, and pulled the radio from her belt.

Taz leaned back in her chair, fully clothed, and watched as Pedro hauled his shirt over his head. The boy might be an idiot, but he was easy on the eyes. And she was starting to feel tipsy enough to appreciate that fact.

"Had enough?" she asked.

"You wish," he said, sitting back down. He'd already lost his boots, socks, jacket.

"You know, this reminds me of the time at the Academy when Big Z stole your clothes from the locker room-

"And I had to go all the way back to our bunk with nothing but my boots, ha ha," he said. "Bet you wouldn't be so amused if you knew that our class spent most of third year trying to see who could get in your pants first - there was a bet on."

Somehow this didn't surprise her. "You sleazebags," she said. "Nobody won that bet."

"Big Z came close," he said, dealing the cards again.

"Shut your mouth," she said, flushing red. "That was a bunk party, no one knew what they were doing that night."

"I made them stop, after a while," said Pedro, looking intently at his cards. "I thought you deserved more respect than that. It must have been tough being the only girl in our year."

Taz looked at him, really looked at him now, his dark hair falling over his eyes. "Nothing I couldn't handle," she said.

"You want everyone to think that," he countered. "But you don't always have to be so tough, Taz."

“Ten minutes to ship separation,” said the *Cazadora*’s cool, inhuman voice as Rangers buzzed around the bridge, preparing for the imminent procedure. Up held the receiver closer to his ear.

“Taz, that’s insane. Even if they can unscramble the shield frequency we have no way of controlling when that core’s going to go.” *It could happen any minute – why are you still down there?*

“No, but we can, listen, Up! Pedro can rig up a wireless trigger – something to do with chemicals and reactions and some *mierda*, I don’t understand it – and we can blow the core ourselves once we’ve separated it from the *Cazadora*!”

Up looked up at the sinister line of robot ships. If there was even a chance it could work... “Tell Pedro to do it. I’ll get Li on the line and see if she’s made any progress on the shields.”

Commander Li sounded tense, but when she acknowledged that her team on the *Brighteye* had in fact just managed to unravel the scrambled frequency, Up felt a short stab of hope.

Maybe they could save what was left of the fleet after all.

“Prepare to disable their shields,” he said, and explained the plan.

The bridge rocked once more.

“Our shields are down, Commander! Repeat, shields are *down!*”

The best plan in the world wasn’t going to save them if the robots’ cannons got to them first. Up turned back to the radio.

“Li? We need some help over here.”

“*¡Mierda!*” yelled Pedro, as the *Cazadora* shuddered. He

threw the pieces of the metal trigger device he was holding to the deck. "It's fried. I've tried six times, it's shot."

Taz turned to the other ensigns standing warily by. "Are you *sure* it's the only one we've got? We're running out of time!"

"We've searched the place, Lieutenant, it's clean. That's it."

Taz turned back to Pedro. "Is there any other way? Can't we just send the damn core to them and hope it blows up when it gets there?"

Pedro buried his head in his hands. "No, it has to be precise. The inertia of the separation will carry it in the right direction, but we have to trigger it just as it reaches the underbelly of the ship, where their cores are, or the explosion won't be big enough - it'll just fizzle out and we're still dead." He rapped his forehead against the metal worktable. "The only way-"

"Yes?" Taz said.

He raised his head, slowly, and looked her in the eye.

"We could do it manually."

His meaning took a moment to sink in.

"You mean, one of us-"

He nodded.

There were four pairs of eyes on her. Eyes she was responsible for.

"Show me," she said.

The others raised halfhearted protests. Pedro just kept looking at her.

"I'm the senior officer here, dead goddammit! *Muéstrame!*"

A bead of sweat rolled down Pedro's temple as he eyed her over his cards. His uniform lay in a pile on the floor.

"Not much left to lose," Taz said, smiling. "Getting

nervous?”

“I’ve got nothing to hide,” he said, with false bravado.

She showed her hand, and a look of delight crossed his face.

“Full colours,” he said smugly, and spread his cards.

Taz stared at the cards, then at him. She swung her legs off of the desk, then walked toward him, slowly, one step at a time. It was a little tricky to keep her feet moving in a straight line. His eyes grew wide as she approached.

“What should I take off first?” she whispered. It was the liquor talking.

Pedro swallowed.

She leaned in close, her lips brushing his ear. Slowly, slowly, she reached up to her neck, his eyes following her every move. Unhooking the chain that held her dog tags, she slipped it off and dangled it in front of him, dropping it into his lap.

The ferocity with which he seized her arms startled her.

“Why are you so cruel to me, Taz?”

The *Brighteye* hovered protectively over the *Cazadora*, taking its hits, giving the ship and its precious last weapon all the protection Commander Li could spare. Up watched another G.L.E.E. ship explode in the viewscreen and closed his eyes. “Get Lieutenant Taz on the line,” he said. “I need good news.”

She didn’t have it. “It’s the trigger, Up, it’s faulty. We’re going to have to do it manually.”

Manually? “No, there have got to be other options. I’m not sending one of my Rangers in to die for this.”

“For the destruction of the whole fucking robot armada? If we don’t do this we’ll *all* die today. You know that, Up.”

“Five minutes until ship separation,” said the *Cazadora* calmly.

“I’ll do it,” said Up. “It’s my ship.”

Silence. “No you won’t. You can’t get here in time, *idiota*.”

Up slammed a fist into the control panel. “I will *not* give this order, Taz!”

“You don’t have to.”

“Lieutenant-”

Her voice shook a little as it came through the radio. “It’s – it’s been an honour, Up.”

No. No. No. “Taz! TAZ!”

The signal had gone dead. Up dropped the receiver and ran.

What did you say when it was the end of the world? How did you tell your lieutenant that if you could do it all again, you would have told her the truth a long time ago? Why did you waste so many years telling yourself you were too old, she was too young, it was against the rules, she didn’t think of you that way, she didn’t want you the way you wanted her? Why didn’t you at least try?

Up looked at the empty scotch bottle. He opened his hand, and the bottle fell to the deck with a shattering crash. No one else was left to hear it. He steadied himself on the railing of the walkway. It was time to follow Tripp’s lead - and tell her.

She was a dead woman walking. Now that the decision had been made, Taz felt strangely lighter, but her Rangers would no longer look her in the eye. Only Pedro came over and took the radio from her shaking hand.

“He loves you, you know,” he said, so that only she could hear.

“Two minutes to ship separation,” the ship’s voice said.

Taz took in Pedro’s words, his sad eyes. “You had better

get going.”

She returned the salute each ensign gave as they left, casting troubled looks back at her. Pedro didn't move.

“Ensign-”

“I can't just walk away from you,” he said. “I can't let you do this.”

“It's me or the whole damn fleet, Pedro,” she said, feeling more certain with each syllable.

He was still shaking his head. She grabbed him by the shoulders.

“This is what we trained for, Pedro. This is it, *hombre!* I've got a job to do, that's all. And so do you. You need to get the hell out of here. Go! Tell Up-” but there she stopped, because she didn't know what she could possibly say.

His hands were on her elbows, and his face scrunched as if in pain. It was a long moment before he spoke, and when he did, his voice was dark, determined.

“Tell him yourself.”

His grip tightened on her arms, and before Taz could react he pushed her backwards several feet, forcefully, until finally he released her and the momentum propelled her to the deck. She scrambled up in time to see Pedro punch a code in the wall and the separation forcefield spring up between them, hot and electric blue.

“*Pedro!*”

She slammed her hands into the forcefield, ignoring the searing burn as sparks flew.

They looked at each other through the barrier, only inches apart but it was worlds too far.

“Pedro,” she whispered this time. “Don't-”

There were tears on his face, and on hers too. Their wetness felt alien on her cheeks.

“It has been an honour, Taz,” he said, his voice distorted by the forcefield. “All of it.”

“Ten seconds to ship separation,” the *Cazadora* calmly intoned.

His eyes searching hers for one more, too-short moment, Pedro turned and walked toward the warp crystal.

His kisses tasted sweet, and pink, like the Plutonian whiskey. He wanted her. It was so nice to know that someone wanted you like that. Her hands explored his nearly naked body as he pulled her onto the bed, whimpering against her lips. She let him tug her tank top over her head, why the hell not? She didn't owe Up anything. If he'd wanted more than friendship from her he would have come by now, tonight, when it was their last chance-

Pedro drew back.

“You're thinking of him, aren't you?”

Taz went very still, her lips parted, her face hovering above his.

He pushed her off of him, and got up, picking up his clothes from the floor.

“I can't do it, Taz, I can't – dead goddammit I want to, but I can't, not knowing all the while you're wishing it was him-”

Struggling to buckle his belt, he wrenched open the door and left her lying there with a half-empty bottle of whiskey and the scent of the wrong cologne on her sheets.

Up paused as he heard a door open, and drew back into a shadowed corner of the corridor. It wouldn't do for anyone to see the commander of the ship sneaking into his lieutenant's quarters this late, even tonight. He peered around the corner, and then his entire body went cold.

The door that had opened was Taz's. Someone emerged, someone taller and broader than his lieutenant, pulling a

shirt haphazardly over his head as he walked briskly away down the corridor.

It was Pedro.

After a long moment, Up turned and walked back in the direction he'd come.

Up raced through the ship, the maddening countdown echoing in his ears. *Too late, too late, you're too late*, it said, *she's done it, she's gone* -

“Ship separation initiated.”

Up rounded the corner in time to see Taz throw herself at the forcefield.

“PEDRO!”

And then he understood.

The barrier fizzed and snapped as with a shudder, the engineering section of the *Cazadora* began to fall away from the rest of the ship. Up rushed forward and dragged Taz back from the forcefield, now showing them the blackness of space, the heart of his ship growing smaller among the mass of robot enemies as the *Cazadora's* auxiliary engines kicked in, putting distance between them. He wrapped his arms around Taz, pressing her back to his chest, holding her firmly as she struggled, still shouting, a stream of fluent Spanish that he couldn't understand, and one name, over and over.

The void of space lit up orange.

It was the biggest human success in the conflict's history. There should have been a parade, some kind of commemoration at least, but this was war and there wasn't time for such things.

There was barely a funeral. Hundreds of flag-adorned coffins had been laid to rest in this grassy hill on Earth today. Pedro's was just a marker, a flag, a framed picture

taken when he graduated the Academy. A bugler played, and words were said, but Taz hadn't been listening. She sat now, at the place they'd marked as his even though he wasn't there, and spoke words of her own, words of their homeland, words her mama would say over her grandfather's grave when they'd bring flowers to brighten the cracked summer earth. She was still alive, and the sky was still blue. The grass was green.

Hesitant footsteps.

"It's okay, Up," she said, not looking up. "You can sit."

He did, awkwardly in his blue dress uniform. He always looked uncomfortable in it but he shouldn't. He looked good, like a soldier in one of those old war movies he liked to watch.

"He's a hero," Up said quietly, looking at the picture. The Ranger in the photograph had eyes full of life – he was too young to be dead, blown to fiery pieces in space.

Pedro looked good in a dress uniform too.

"He always was," she said. "But it should have been me."

"I will be eternally grateful," said Up. "That it wasn't."

They sat in silence.

"He loved you, you know," said Up, eventually. She looked at him. His eyes were fixed on the clover he was tearing nervously between his fingers.

She took it from him, and scattered the pieces in the grass, over the place where Pedro's body would never lie.

"I know," she said. "But he shouldn't have."

Chapter Seventeen

War

The dissonance of human screams. A metallic whir, a robot's tread. A hot zapper in her hands, set to kill. Pedro, his eyes accusing, looking at her through a blue forcefield. Up, unblinking as the guts of half a dozen Marines splatter across his face. The smell of shit and death in each trench they left behind, each body they left unburied and unburned. The cold purpose in each robot's metal face, faces modelled after their human creators, a constant reminder of the arrogance that had brought them to this point, the idea that they could create life, when all they had created was hell, living, breathing hell...

Taz couldn't tell her sleeping nightmares from her waking ones anymore.

She lay awake and shivering, looking at the thin strip of clouded stars through the opening of the trench they called home tonight, somewhere in Mexico, deep within robot territory. The destruction of both the robot and human fleets had not ended the fighting, merely relocated it to Earth, where it was hand-to-hand, dirty, real. Taz was a foot soldier now, one of a few dozen left under Up's command after weeks of stark, blooded warfare. They were all that was left of the *Cazadora's* homeless crew. Pedro had only been the first to die.

She'd woken herself up screaming every night since it had happened, something she hadn't done since she was a girl at the Academy, and she hated herself for it. The only

woman left on the team, and she was the one letting the grimy truth of war get the best of her, when she was asleep, defenceless, powerless to stop the raging images through her mind. She could face them awake. She was still here, wasn't she?

Sometimes their missions were successful. Sometimes they managed to destroy an important outpost, a stash of weaponry, a whole league of robots. But there were always more. More outposts, more weapons, more robots. And the G.L.E.E. was growing weaker and weaker.

They persisted, not just because of their orders but because they had to in order to survive, moving their makeshift base every few days, sending out spies and praying to a dead God that they'd return, blowing up everything robotic they could find. Searching for some ace in the hole, some way to end the ceaseless robot reign, some chance at saving the human race.

It wasn't a question of hope. The Rangers had long ago given up on that. It was only Up's cold determination that was holding them together now.

Because Up – Up had changed. Taz saw now the soldier she had only caught glimpses of before, when he'd rescued her from her *quinceañera*, when they'd met their enemies in combat. She saw now the man who had piloted the *Eagle* back to Earth on sheer willpower, who made alien children draw back in fear even as they cheered his name. The man who had destroyed a Bird of Prey with his bare hands. The man who intimidated even his own Rangers. The man they whispered slept on a bed of fire...

Gone was the Up she knew, the Up who let his guard down and laughed, the Up who liked to listen to her read and had learned to dance with her and whose favourite movie was *The Karate Kid*. In his place was Up the commander, Up the soldier, Up the solid wall of stony

muscle, Up who could look a hoard of murderous robots in the eye and not even blink. Up who may as well be a robot himself.

She had heard of this Up, the Up the galaxy called hero. But never before had he put this face on for her.

The stars traced familiar patterns in the Mexican sky.

A sudden flame, small and hissing, lit up across the trench. Up sat on his sleeping bag, the orange glow of a cigarette illuminating his face. Up was always smoking now.

“You’re awake,” he said. It wasn’t a question. Even his voice seemed cold to her.

Taz sat up and hugged her knees to her chest. “Nightmares,” she said. There was no point in hiding it. She’d been keeping them all awake for weeks.

“It’s his name you scream,” he said, his face a mask. “Every night.”

He didn’t have to say which name. It hovered in the air like a ghost between them.

“He haunts me, Up,” she said, and she didn’t know why she was telling him. The relief that he was talking to her, perhaps, the hope that maybe he was still her Up, the one who’d taught her everything she knew, the one she’d idolized since she was fifteen, the one who had been her dearest friend. “His face, in my dreams. He sacrificed everything for me.” *For us. So I could have a second chance to tell you-*

Up’s eyes, in the flickering light, seemed a little less stern. Almost pained. “I know you and Pedro-”

“What-” she said in a low voice, searching his face, “-do you know about me and Pedro?”

Up was struggling. “That you and he- that you were-”

Understanding hit her. He had it all wrong. “He was my friend,” she said. “And he loved me, but I never loved him

back the way he wanted me to.” She took a deep breath, and said the next words before she could change her mind. “It was never Pedro that I cared about.”

She had said it to him once before, but not in a language he could understand.

Up went very quiet.

“Commander Up?” called the Ranger on watch. “Message from Headquarters, sir.”

Up looked at her for a long moment before getting up, putting out his cigarette with the toe of his boot, and walking away.

Taz was alone again.

Their attempted assault on this robots’ hideaway had not gone well. They’d been surprised just as they’d pulled the pins on the grenades meant for the stash of weaponry – a huge, winged robot, white and blue, had dropped from the sky before them. Some of his Rangers had managed to throw their grenades... some of them hadn’t. More deaths on his watch. On his conscience.

The winged robot was faster, more maneuverable than any Up had ever seen. The Rangers’ zapper fire rebounded from its armour, sending them rolling out of the way. The robot raised its own rifles and then became a white blur in the sky. Up couldn’t get a mark on it.

A hoarse yell rang out as a stream of rifle fire found its target in an ensign’s chest.

“Hey, you big hunk of scrap metal!” Up yelled, trying in vain to draw its attention. *No more, no more of them. It’s me you want, big boy, it’s my team-*

The robot dropped to the ground with an earth-shattering *thud* and advanced toward him, raising a powerful rifle toward his chest -

And then it looked down as a sharp metal rod emerged

from its own breastplate. The winged robot shuddered, sparked, and fell to the ground, revealing Taz standing behind it, a look of shock on her face as the jagged metal scrap was pulled from her hands. It was covered in blood.

“Are you hurt?” Up asked sharply, taking her hands, turning them over, checking for injury.

She shook her head, and pointed.

Blood, real human blood, was bubbling from the robot’s chest where Taz had impaled it. Up stared at it for a moment, then knelt and pulled at the robot’s neck, seeking a latch, a clasp, a way in.

A whirring sound, and the robot’s head opened up to reveal a young man, blond, round-faced, dead. It wasn’t a robot at all.

There was a terrible retching sound as Taz threw up behind him.

The Rangers whispered of it, a human within a robot, their enemy suddenly made flesh before them. They wondered where it had come from, whether there were more, whether he had joined the robots willingly or if he was a brainwashed prisoner of war. They sent the corpse and its metal exoskeleton off to the wartime headquarters, and tried not to think about how many more of their own they might be destroying, might have already destroyed, with each grenade, each rocket launcher, each zipper blast.

In an effort to take their mind off of it, Up moved their base again, this time to the ruins of an ancient Mayan fortress. Once a tourist attraction with ticket booths and fences, it was now forgotten and lonely, a sentinel overlooking the stormy Caribbean sea. He liked the idea of it, making it a fortress again, its blackened stones serving their protective purpose once more. It was better than digging another trench, at least.

He let his Rangers set up the radio equipment, the sleeping quarters, the makeshift kitchen, and climbed up to the top of the fortress' tallest pyramid-like structure, a temple perhaps, the closest to the cliff's edge. He took out a cigarette, though his supplies were getting low, and struck a match, letting the night wind numb him, listening to the crashing waves.

Four more of his Rangers dead today. That made two hundred and thirty-two men and women who had looked to him for leadership, and who he'd led only to their deaths. He added their names to the list he'd vowed never to forget. It was too long now, far too long.

Movement at the corner of his eye. Up tensed, then realized that it was a human figure, in white and green, too small to be anyone but Taz. He watched her creep to the edge of the tall black cliffs, peering over at the moonlit waves, the slim strip of white sand below.

"It was never Pedro that I cared about."

Her words had echoed in his brain all day. He'd allowed himself a moment of hope, after weeks of pushing her away, putting distance between them. He told himself he was giving her space to grieve, but really he knew he was just hurting her so as to try and soothe his own hurting heart. Did she mean what he thought she'd meant?

He watched her test her weight on a tentative set of wooden stairs once intended, he assumed, to help tourists find their way to the beach below. They listed now at a frightening angle, but Taz seemed to have decided that they were stable enough, for she crept lightly down, occasionally sidestepping a missing plank, or railing. Up could hear the structure creaking under her weight. He frowned.

The full moon illuminated her path. She reached the sand, and immediately tugged off her black boots, dusty and war worn now. Her utility belt came next, and her

bandana, and then her heavy camouflage pants.

“Taz, what are you doing?” Up said into the wind, leaning farther over the edge of the temple. Waves taller than he was smashed violently into the black rocks dotting the beach. It was not the kind of night you’d want to go for a swim.

She’d been ashen-faced all day. He thought of the young man in the robot costume, the blood spurting from his chest, the stained metal scrap Taz had killed him with.

Up climbed down the temple a lot faster than he’d climbed up.

The sand was soft, gentle, a rolling massage on her aching, boot-trapped feet. She wiggled her toes and breathed in the air. There were no metal smells here. No burning robots, no zapper fire, no blood. She took a step, and jumped back as the remnants of the most recent wave tickled her feet, cool and churning and so, so inviting. She walked out into the surf, feeling the pull of the undertow, letting it lead her deeper. She stood, waist-deep in the water, waiting for the next wave to come and take her -

Strong arms wrapped around her just as it arrived.

She kicked, and opened her mouth to scream, but swallowed salty water instead. She gasped as her head emerged from the water and she found herself thrown over a broad, slippery shoulder.

“Up, you big *idiota!*” she coughed, trying to spit out the taste of salt. “What are you doing? Put me down!”

Up was rubbing the salt from his own eyes. “What am I doing? What are you doing, Taz? Are you *trying* to kill yourself?”

She hammered on his back with her fists, for once hating his strength. “Kill myself, what are you talking about? I’m a goddamned Starship Ranger, not a child. *Put me down!*”

He dumped her unceremoniously back into the water as another wave, this time smaller, crested around them, and she struggled to regain her footing. The water that had been waist-deep on Taz barely made it to Up's thighs. He'd removed his utility belt and body armour to come out after her, and his chest and feet were bare. His remaining uniform clung to him in ways that would draw anyone's attention.

She turned her gaze upward, and found him looking at her with perplexity. "So if you're not trying to kill yourself, what the hell are we doing out here?"

She stared at him a moment. "*Yo estaba jugando,*" she said. "I was playing."

Up stared back. Then he put his face in his hands. His shoulders were shaking.

"Are you *laughing* at me?" she said.

It erupted out of him then, a great guffaw, and it was the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard. She couldn't help it - laughter bubbled out of her too, the first since Pedro had died, and it felt good. She took advantage of the moment to push Up backwards into the water just as another wave came upon them.

He came up spluttering, and the chase began.

They stumbled out of the waves eventually, dripping and gasping for air, and collapsed side by side on the sand, looking up at the falling moon. It was an unearthly, beautiful place, but Up was distracted by Taz's bare legs, the shape of her body beneath her translucent tank top. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east.

"They call this place *Zama*, the City of Dawn," she said, when they had caught their breath. "My uncle took us here once. I think I was seven or eight. We didn't live near a beach, so it was one of the only times I can remember that I

got to play in the waves like that. It's one of my favourite memories."

"There weren't a whole lot of waves in Alabama, either," said Up. He couldn't remember the last time she'd shared so much about her childhood with him, and he felt oddly touched. They watched the hidden sun draw closer.

"I never killed another person before, Up," she said.

So it was bothering her. "I know," he said. "You did what you had to do. And you saved my life doing it."

"Do you really think a human would join them willingly?" she whispered to the sky, not looking at him but something far above that he couldn't see. "Betray their own race?"

"Others have," Up said. "Like your friend Mr. Brown..."

He had a sudden vision of Taz in a red dress, moving as gracefully on the dance floor as she did on the battlefield. Taz, dirty and bruised in her fatigues, shouting orders, mowing down rows of robots with zipper fire, bending to help a fallen comrade. Taz, a ball of anger and grief, always fighting for the family she could never get back. Taz lying here next to him, sticky with salt and sand and flushed with exertion, her dark eyes a reflection of the moon above. Different, but the same. And he wanted all of them. All of her.

His hand found hers, and she let him thread their fingers together, hers so much smaller but equally calloused, equally worn. The rightness of it overwhelmed him.

"Taz," he said, turning to her. "I-"

He stopped. Taz had closed her eyes, and her breathing had become even, peaceful. The sun was peeking out over the edge of the sea, giving everything a pinkish glow, making her look like some kind of sea-swept, dark-haired angel. She was sleeping soundly for the first time in weeks.

Up smiled, and closed his eyes too. Here, in this place,

he couldn't help but feel like they had all the time in the world.

Taz was slurping up rehydrated noodles with the rest of the team when Up beckoned her over to where he crouched, one ear pressed to the receiver of the team's radio. He put his finger to his lips and turned the receiver just enough so that she could listen too.

"They're called Wing Gundam Zero units," said the scratchy female voice on the other end. "And they're incredibly sophisticated, they're operated directly through the human brain, so they're instinctive, that's why they can move so fast. They're damn near impossible to destroy, the one you sent over is the only specimen we've managed to get."

Up nudged Taz proudly, and she gave him a halfhearted smile.

"But we're estimating that they've got thousands of them, Up. You've seen what just one can do, and that was just a prototype. The G.L.E.E. is running out of resources."

"You mean running out of Rangers, Li," said Up.

"Well, yes," the radio said. "We need to stop these things *before* they get them off the ground. And luckily for us, there is one thing – besides human operators – that these bastards need to make the units work. According to our intelligence reports, they've already reached an agreement and will be transporting the material back here to Earth within the week."

"So we've got to get to this stuff first," Up said. "And blow it to hell."

"It's the only shot we've got left, Up. If the robots get those units operational, it's all over. And there's only one place in the galaxy that has enough phason for them to do it."

Up's eyes locked with Taz's, and she felt a sharp jolt of fear, a sudden feeling that something was about to go very, very wrong. "So where are they sending us, Li?"

"The Klingon homeworld, Up. You're going to Qo'noS."

Chapter Eighteen

Qo'noS

“Our sensors have determined that the phason deposit is hidden within these caves,” Up said, tapping his finger on a worn paper map of the Klingon home world, the only one the G.L.E.E. had been able to scrounge up on such short notice. Nobody visited Qo'noS unless they had a very good reason to. “And it’s heavily guarded – we’re picking up robotic activity throughout the area.”

“And us with barely a dozen full Rangers on board?” Taz said, shaking her head. “There’s no way - we can’t mount an attack with those odds.”

The paltry team of gathered Starship Rangers shifted nervously. Starship 13A-1 was a sleek ship - fast, stealthy, and small enough to escape the notice of most advanced sensors and radar systems with the help of a little cloaking technology. It was a good ship, one of Space-Claw’s newest models, though Up had turned his nose up at the unimaginative name. But it was hardly the *Cazadora*. A full complement of crewmen barely numbered thirty-six.

“Spa- I mean, Dr. Claw kept our numbers small for a reason,” Up continued. “This is all about stealth. Ensigns, you will be responsible for creating a diversion - one large enough to keep the robots’ attention away from the cave when the phason is being held.” He looked at Taz. “Lieutenant Taz and I will take the explosives in to the caves, find the phason, and destroy it.”

She looked back at him steadily, resignation in her eyes.

“But Commander-” began one ensign.

Up held up his hand. “Once the diversion is in place, all of you are to get to the drop pod and get yourselves back to the starship. When the Lieutenant and I emerge from the caves, we’ll contact you for a pickup.”

The ensigns eyed each other nervously.

“And that is an order, Rangers. No heroics necessary. Dismissed.”

He turned to gaze at the passing stars through the viewscreen as the ensigns left the ready room. Taz came to stand beside him.

“It’s a suicide mission, isn’t it?”

He looked down at her, and his chest tightened. “Probably. But if we succeed-”

“Then humanity gets another chance,” she said. She reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly. “We will succeed. We’ve got you, Up.”

“And who do I have?” Up said, almost to himself. Her faith in him was almost too much to bear. He didn’t deserve it. He didn’t deserve her.

She looked up at him, and smiled. “You’ve got me.”

He closed his eyes, and squeezed her hand back as Starship 13A-1 hurtled humanity’s last hope through the emptiness of space.

Starship 13A-1’s primary drop pod landed on Qo’noS’ sickly green surface, in a deserted area of jagged hills and caves not far from the identified phason deposit. The team disembarked and lay flat on the top of a hill, the planet’s violent winds whipping their hair, toppling equipment.

“They’ve got motherfucking Autobots and everything,” said Up over the wind, looking through binoculars. “The robots have a lot more allies than we’ve given them credit for.”

“They’re working with Cybertron now?” Taz said, grabbing the binoculars from him. “*Dios muerto!* There are thousands of sentinels here, Up!”

The Autobots loomed high above their smaller robot counterparts, swarming the valley below them like a hoard of flesh-eating ants. A chill went through her that had nothing to do with the wind.

“The plan is the same,” Up said. “Get in, blow it up – get out.”

If we can.

Up gestured for the Rangers to follow him, and they crept as close as they could to the caves without drawing the robots’ attention. “This is where we part ways.”

The ensigns’ faces were drawn as they saluted and made their way to the far side of the plain with their explosives, their only defence against all those enemies.

It was just the two of them now.

Their sensors found them an entrance to the cave that was unguarded, an animal’s hole, likely, barely wide enough for Up’s shoulders. Taz helped tug him through, and then they were standing in near darkness, a damp smell filling their nostrils. She felt a brief moment of panic.

Would she ever see the sky again?

Up was still wearing his soldier’s mask, but she felt his hand on her shoulder, and relaxed. She was a Starship Ranger, after all. This was what she had enlisted for.

A distant boom, a few loose pieces of shale tumbling from the ceiling. That was the diversion.

“Let’s go, Lieutenant,” Up said.

The cave was murky, the tunnel twisted. They followed the dim light of Up’s sensor until they reached a large, open area and stopped short.

A huge, hulking metal carapace stood before them, a tank on two legs. Behind it, a mound of shiny red mineral,

glowing faintly through the cave.

“Metal Gear,” said Up, and Taz knew from his voice that he had seen it before.

He turned to her.

“This is going to be one tough son of a bitch,” he said, pulling out his zapper and checking to see that it was fully charged. “But its weak spot is in the legs. If I can get it off balance...” He took her by the shoulders. “I’ll keep this bastard busy. You set the charges.”

He wanted her out of the way. She looked up at him, accusingly. He’d never tried to be protective of her before.

“Taz-” his voice broke. “Taz, just do it, all right? Destroying that phason is the most important thing to me right now.”

His eyes were trying to tell her something more.

Taz nodded, slowly, accepting if not understanding it. The explosives hung heavily from her belt, and his fingers gripped tightly to her shoulders before he released her and turned to face the robot.

He advanced on the walking tank, the red phason behind casting an eerie light on the scene. Taz pressed herself to the wall of the cave as she side-stepped discreetly toward the deposit, her eyes on the monster, on Up.

Watching Up fight was like watching magic at work, a paintbrush on canvas, a dancer onstage. He leapt from the floor of the cave to one of the robot’s legs, moving too fast for it to see him coming, his zapper seeking weaknesses in its armour, finding them, exploiting them. The robot screeched, a horrible sound of grinding metal, and shook him off. He rolled out of the way of its massive feet -

Taz shook herself, and started moving again. Up was doing just fine. He was right - she had a job to do now.

She reached the phason, felt the heat radiating from it, and wondered just how combustible it was. The charges she

had were small – they’d been counting on the material itself to do most of the exploding. And then the opposite problem: if the explosion was *too* big... they hadn’t been expecting to find it hiding in a cave.

A click, a beep, and the charges were set, scattered around the mound as evenly as she could make them. Taking the trigger from her belt, Taz turned around to look for Up. She found him straining under the weight of one massive metallic foot, his shirt torn, his muscles bulging as the robot tried vainly to crush him like a bug.

Taz swung her zapper rifle from around her back. “Hey, Metal Head!” she bellowed, levelling the rifle. “Over here!”

The robot turned, its foot still poised above Up. Up grimaced and with a great effort, pushed it away, causing the robot to teeter precariously. Then he ran toward her.

“Charges ready?” he called as the robot regained its balance and lumbered after him.

He was bringing it straight to the phason.

“Ready,” she said, her thumb on the trigger.

He reached her, and took her free hand. Together they stood with their back to the deposit, facing the oncoming robot head on.

“On my mark...”

Taz held her breath as the robot drew closer. Twenty feet, ten, five-

“NOW!” yelled Up, and Taz squeezed the trigger as they ducked between its legs and ran faster than Taz had ever run before, somehow keeping up with Up’s strides, putting as much distance as they could between them and the deposit before -

Taz felt herself lifted off her feet and Up’s hand ripped from hers as the phason exploded, and the metal monster with it. She was flying, flying through the air as the world blew up red, dust and rocks and metal everywhere, and then

she hit ground and bounced, her body crying out in protest as it was thrown back again, the sound of tearing muscle and breaking bones resonating in her ringing ears.

A moment's stillness, and then she yelped and rolled out of the way as the great, hollow body of Metal Gear landed with an earth-shattering crash beside her. Everything was silent.

"Up?" she called, her voice sounding as broken as the rest of her felt.

The sound of movement somewhere nearby. "I'm here."

He came crawling, blackened and bloody, picking his way carefully through the debris and reddish dust. Taz struggled to sit up, stifled a gasp, touched her torso lightly. Broken ribs for sure. Hopefully nothing important had been punctured.

Up reached her, and helped her sit, both of them leaning in exhaustion against the remains of the walking tank. The metal was warm to the touch.

Rrrr. Rrrr. Rrrr.

They looked at each other. Then, Up raised himself up high enough to peer over the top of the tank. The smoke was starting to clear.

"Shit, Taz, we've blown a hole through the roof! And there's a cave-in along the path we came in, too - we're lucky the whole thing didn't come down on us!"

Wincing, she pulled herself to her knees and looked over the top of the robot corpse. Greenish light streamed through where none had been before, illuminating the depths of a black pit where shining red mineral had once lay. Taz felt a brief moment of jubilation. They'd done it. Now the G.L.E.E. would stand a fighting chance -

Her joy was quickly replaced with a realization. They'd gotten the job done, but they'd also announced their presence loud and clear. Just down the gaping main tunnel,

the only one left clear, a hundred shining rows of robot sentinels came, marching in unison toward the remains of their precious phason. And them, trapped among the debris. No way out but through.

Taz dropped back to the ground, Up beside her.

“There are too many,” she said. *We really are going to die here.*

Up was looking at her intently.

Then he reached out, took her face in his hand, and kissed her.

This kiss was raw, desperate, rough, but it spoke of everything she was feeling and told her everything she needed to know. She pressed herself into him, her hands on his chest, then sliding them around his neck, keeping him close, praying to a dead God that it would never end, that one kiss could keep the end of the world at bay. He was warm and solid and strong and everything she had always known him to be, but now he was hers and she never wanted to let him go -

He drew back, just far enough so that their breath still mingled, his moustache still tickled the bottom of her nose, his hand was still tangled in her hair.

“*Te amo*, Taz,” he whispered into her lips. There were tears on her face. She didn’t know if they were hers, or if they were his.

She kissed him again, sweetly, slowly, and they stood together to face the end.

They fought back-to-back for as long as they could. It all became a blur, a blur of metal and robots and gunfire and pain. Taz fought like she had never fought before, fought for love rather than hope, her back pressed against Up’s, his strength becoming hers. When they were separated it was by sheer numbers, and then there were robots all around



One kiss could keep the end of the world at bay.

her, robots who'd come looking to die. She fought through the pain, through every part of her that wanted to give up, give in, let it be over. She fought because she knew that as long as she was fighting, Up would be fighting too.

Then a shadow crossed the greenish light, and she found herself looking up, and up, into the impassive faces of two monstrous Autobots. The sentinels she'd been fighting dropped away. They were dwarfed in comparison.

“Taz!”

She backed up, the cave wall behind her, the Autobots advancing. *No, Up! You have your own fight. Don't get distracted by-*

One of the Autobots reached down and picked her up as easily as a child would a toy. From this height she could see the impromptu battlefield, strewn white with robotic corpses, and Up, a grey blur among them, running towards her – and Taz could see what he couldn't, looming behind him, the massive form of an Autobot so powerful that every child on Earth knew its name.

The Autobot's grip was crushing. Taz couldn't draw enough breath to warn him, could only watch in paralyzed horror as the second Autobot lashed out with snaking tentacles for Up, lifting him straight up in the air, holding him spreadeagled and struggling as the evil belly of Optimus Prime began to open, a lethal, spinning saw extending slowly from its metal arm.

And Taz found the will to cry his name, to beat the robotic hand clutching her with her fists, with her legs, with everything she had, but it wasn't enough.

His torn scream seemed to cut her in half.

Chapter Nineteen

Human

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

She didn't know what it was, but she was going to kill it.

She reached out, blindly, and felt a jagged pain shoot up her arm. Everything was so bright, burning through her eyelids, pulsing, pounding in her head. She tried to open them, but everything felt so heavy.

Squeaking footsteps, and a stifled gasp. More footsteps.

“Doctor, she’s awake!”

Taz had to disagree. Staying awake was too much work. She let herself drift again.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

“She’s not doing well.”

“Can you blame her, honey? What she went through on that planet-”

What planet?

Through her eyelashes, Taz saw a wave of red hair as someone bent over her. The first voice spoke again, closer now. “She saw it all. No one should have to-” the voice paused. “Lieutenant Taz?”

Taz tried to respond, but her body didn't seem to be working properly.

“What is it, doctor?”

“Her vitals are improving. Keep an eye on her tonight – if she wakes, I want to know. *Before the Admiral does.*”

I am awake this time, Taz tried to say. *Don't go. Please. Tell me what happened.*

The voices faded away, and she was alone again.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

This time, Taz managed to get her eyes halfway open.

“Good evening, Lieutenant.”

It was a different voice, a voice that sounded familiar to her but too close, like she was used to hearing it through a radio or a newsfeed. It was so deep, so low it seemed to resonate in her bones.

“I hope you don't mind that I added a stimulant or two to your IV – it was imperative that I talk to you, and your lovely doctor is reluctant to see the importance of that.”

She struggled to see, every millimetre she raised her eyelids a battle. Lights exploded in her vision, and when they faded, everything around her was metallic, a buffed silver sheen. She closed her eyes again. *A flash of spinning silver -*

“You've had a difficult few days, Lieutenant. The doctors weren't sure if you were going to make it,” the voice seemed to smile. “But I've been told that you're a fighter. Certainly anyone who came out of that cave on Qo'noS alive would have to be.”

A cave – a reddish glow -

“Broken ribs, a skull fracture, multiple lacerations...” Taz seemed to feel each injury afresh as the voice reeled them off like a laundry list. So she'd been fighting – fighting robots. Well, that was nothing new. “You're lucky

the second drop pod showed up when they did, or you wouldn't have stood a chance.”

The smoking remains of a hulking metal tank -

“Of course, they weren't supposed to show up at all, but orders from the Galactic League are nothing compared to a crew's loyalty for their commander.”

Their commander - Commander Up -

Up, locked in battle with the metal monster, Up taking her hand as they ran from the exploding phason -

“You'll be happy to hear that your mission was a success – the entire stock of phason was destroyed and the robots have been unable to power the rest of their Wing Gundam units.”

Up crawling toward her through the debris, Up's hand on her face -

“The tides have turned, Lieutenant, for the first time since this war began. The robots are weaker than ever, their military structure is collapsing. Between the loss of their fleet and what we've discovered about the fallibility of certain models to water, it won't be long until the robots are finally nothing more than the slaves we created them to be.”

Up's warm mouth on hers, his crushing embrace - Up telling her that he loved her, before they made their final stand.

“The war is over, Lieutenant. And you played an important role in its end. You should be proud. The G.L.E.E. is grateful to you.”

Up's blood splattered across her face.

Her eyes flew open.

“Up-” she said, or tried to say, her throat raw and unresponsive.

The voice fell silent.

She struggled to sit up. The voice sat on a chair across the room at the foot of her bed. He was tall, and dressed in

black. As her eyes began to focus, they drifted down to the shiny metal gloves he seemed to be wearing where he should have had hands.

Dr. Space-Claw.

“Up-” she tried again. The problem was, she didn’t know what to ask. She had seen it. She had seen it all.

Space-Claw shifted his weight, and paused. “Commander Up was sawed vertically in half by the Autobot Optimus Prime. His injuries-”

“Say it,” she rasped. She had to hear someone else say it.

“Lieutenant,” Dr. Space-Claw said, his voice smooth, calm, and she hated him for it, more than she had ever hated anyone. “His injuries were extensive. Some would say that he died on that battlefield.”

He died. There it was. Up died. Up was dead. Up who was the reason she was alive, Up, who had always seemed invincible. Up, who loved her. She tried to understand it, feel it, accept it, but her brain felt nothing but numb.

“Lieutenant,” the acting Admiral said again, waiting to continue until she looked at him, dully. “*Some* would say that he died. I would disagree.”

What are you talking about, you estupida son-of-a-bitch? Stop playing games with me. I saw it happen.

“You see, Lieutenant,” Dr. Space-Claw continued, unperturbed. “I am not your average doctor. Where others see a corpse – I see... potential.”

A corpse, a corpse, you hijo de puta, you don't care, do you, that he wasn't just another disposable Ranger to me, he was the man I love -

“And as you know, Commander Up is a key figure for the G.L.E.E. - a hero, someone to rally around, someone to bring hope. And now, at this crucial juncture in history, that role is more important than ever. So it was imperative to me to ensure that the history books tell a different story than

the one that would have been written that day.”

Taz stared at him, trying to understand what he was saying. Her head was pounding, the corners of the room starting to swim, her heart beating far faster than it should. *Please. Please get to the point. Please leave me alone with my misery. Please just let me die.*

“Lieutenant,” Dr. Space-Claw said, a farce of a smile on his smug face. “Commander Up may have died on that battlefield, but he is not dead.”

Not – dead?

“Not today, and with any luck, not for a long time. It has taken several days of intense surgery, but my team has been able to successfully reconstruct the Commander’s missing limbs and interface his organic tissues with specially designed -” Space-Claw chuckled and shook his head. “But you don’t need to hear all the details. Not yet. Suffice it to say that Commander Up is alive – and I believe that he is going to be just fine.”

Up – is – alive?

A sharp pain shot through her chest, and Taz heard her own raw voice cry out in pain as the constant beeping rose in pitch and alarms began to sound. She gasped for breath that wouldn’t come as uniformed medical personnel rushed into the room, shouting instructions, rolling over equipment...

Everything went a hazy, dull, comforting grey.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

“The Admiral himself came to see her, did you hear? Gave her stimulants – Dr T was raging mad.”

“Yeah, and it made her flatline, I wonder what he came to talk to her about.”

“The Commander of course.” A pause. “They say he rescued her from the robots when she was a young girl – and they’ve been together ever since.”

“How romantic! And sad... how is the Commander?”

“It’s terrifying, honey, like something out of a horror movie - they’ve got him in stasis, hooked up to all these tubes and machines – he doesn’t even look human anymore. I hear the Admiral has been experimenting on him. They say he saved the Commander’s life – but that don’t look like living to me.”

The voices were whispering, but it felt like they were bouncing painfully around inside her head. Taz winced, and tried to speak. A weak gasp came out, and the voices stopped.

“Lieutenant, can you hear me?”

Taz opened her eyes. A round-faced woman in a nurse’s uniform was leaning over her. “Yes,” she croaked.

“Page the doctor,” the nurse barked at her companion, and Taz heard squeaky footsteps fade away.

“You’ve been through some tough stuff, honey, but you’re stable now, you’re going to pull through just fine, don’t you worry,” the nurse continued as she checked Taz’s vitals. “Dr. T’s not going to let the Admiral anywhere near you until you’re out of the woods, so to speak.”

Everything was all mixed up in her head. The robots, the blood, Dr. Space-Claw’s visit - “Up?” she asked hoarsely.

The nurse’s eyes filled with sympathy, and she didn’t answer for a moment. “They say he’s alive, honey.” She raised Taz’s hospital bed to a sitting position, and held a paper cup of water to her lips. “Just a sip now. It will help with the dryness.”

Taz took a grateful sip, felt the liquid cool her parched throat. She swallowed.

“I – I don’t understand,” she said, testing her voice. *Why*

aren't you sure?

The door opened. A woman in a white G.L.E.E. lab coat stood there, a tall woman with kind eyes and long, reddish hair.

“Dr. T,” said the nurse, looking relieved. “The patient is awake.”

Obviously, thought Taz, but she refrained from saying it. Too much work.

The doctor nodded, and the nurse left, after giving Taz what was likely meant to be a reassuring squeeze. The doctor approached, and as she did, Taz realized that she was several months pregnant, her belly straining against the buttons of her uniform. There was a sadness deep in her eyes.

“Tell me - about Up,” Taz managed, before any more silly questions or platitudes could be exchanged.

The doctor looked at her searchingly before pulling a chair up to the bed and taking a seat. “They tell me you witnessed what happened to him?”

A spinning blade, a spray of blood, a scream she had never wanted to hear - “Yes,” she said.

“Then you know that the saw cut him in half.” The doctor was nothing if not blunt. Taz held her gaze. “No one should have survived that. In fact, it was only part of him that did – the second drop pod’s team was only able to recover the left side of his body.”

Taz suddenly felt violently nauseated. The doctor handed her a pink, plastic, kidney bean-shaped tray. She gripped it tightly.

“He was dead, Lieutenant. I knew that the moment I saw what was left of him. And I think you must have known that too.”

Taz forced the nausea back down. “But then how-”

“Dr. Claw,” and the doctor spat the name like its taste

was foul, “shouldn’t have dropped the news on you the way he did, and his stimulants nearly killed you. I wasn’t on duty, or I would never had let him anywhere near this room. He may run the Galactic League now, but you’re my patient and he has no jurisdiction over you here.”

“What did he do to Up?” Taz asked, quietly, but impatiently. She had to understand.

“You are aware that Dr. Claw is a specialist in robotics?”

Some kind of cold dread gathered deep in Taz’s stomach.

“Yes,” the doctor said. “He’s built a new body for the Commander, or part of one anyway. He’s found a way to fuse human tissue with robotic wiring. Silicone and flesh, blood and wires, and a human heart, that’s what’s left of Commander Up.”

The ball of dread burst, and its edges were sharp.

“But he’s alive,” she managed.

“They don’t know that yet, whatever Claw told you, and whatever the nurses are gossiping about,” the doctor said. “He’s in stasis. They haven’t attempted to revive him yet – they’ve been waiting on you.”

“Me?”

“That’s why Dr. Claw was so eager to see you – he wants a familiar face there when they wake him. If Up remembers you-”

If Up remembers me?

“- then it proves his – *treatment* – worked. It proves that he’s still alive – still human.”

Somehow – impossibly – this seemed worse than death. The possibility that Up would not be human, that he could go on as a shell, a robotic husk, and nothing more... “Do you – do you think he’s still human?” she asked tentatively, hating how weak she sounded, hating that it there could even be a question of it.

The doctor looked sadder than ever. “I don’t know,

Lieutenant. All I know is that since Up doesn't have any family, there was no one to speak for him when he was lying there on that operating table." She looked at Taz. "They say you knew him best, Lieutenant. Do you think he would have wanted this?"

A half-life, an experimental existence? Taz dropped her gaze to her hands, and thought of his fingers entwined in the Mexican sand with hers. Would he ever hold her hand again?

"I don't know."

The stasis tank was as frightening as the nurse had said it was. A filmy whitish liquid nearly obscured the contents within, thick tubes and wires snaking throughout both the room and the tank, making a grotesque octopus out of the figure at its centre. Taz could just barely make out his shape, the shape that was supposed to be Up, dwarfed by the machinery around him. She made to rise out of her chair, press her face to the glass, but a firm hand on her shoulder restrained her. She turned to glare, but found her doctor's gaze elsewhere, a look on her face so venomous that it even made Taz draw back a little.

Dr. Space-Claw had entered the room.

"Ah, Lieutenant, we meet again," he said warmly, coming over to Taz's wheelchair with a broad smile on his face, his arms spread wide. *What, no apologies for nearly killing me the last time we met?* "I want your face to be the first thing the Commander sees when he awakens. If you would, Dr. Tripp."

Taz barely had time to register the familiar name before she was wheeled toward the waiting operating table with enough fury that she began to worry she'd be tipped over. It had been her doctor who'd insisted on the wheelchair, not her - she wanted to be standing on her own two feet when

he saw her again. She looked up at the observation room above. A number of doctors and scientists had gathered, no doubt out of some twisted curiosity to see if the Admiral's experiment had succeeded. Was she the only one who cared about the person they had come to save?

"Begin the ascension process, Junior!" Dr. Space-Claw proclaimed with a kind of sick delight.

A rather red-eyed young assistant flicked a few switches and pulled a lever. Machines, whirring, beeping, all unintelligible to Taz. Her eyes stayed locked on the figure in the tank.

The top of the tank slid open, and two large robotic arms reached in to unhook the wires and tubing and carefully lift the figure out of the goopy mess, laying him shining and naked on the operating table. Taz drew back as Dr. Space-Claw's assistant ran forward to clean him up and drape a blanket across him from the waist down. She looked up at her doctor, who Space-Claw had called Dr. Tripp, and the woman nodded, a heartbroken look on her face. She seemed to understand the silent request, and helped Taz to stand unsteadily from the chair as the room buzzed around them.

"You're Rosie, aren't you?" Taz asked quietly. "Tripp's wife."

A single tear escaped her doctor's eye, and she put her hand on her belly. "I don't know what my husband would have wanted either," she said. "But if there had been a chance for me to see him again – for him to hold our son once more, see our daughter born-" Her face hardened. "I'd have taken it – even from Space-Claw. Robot or not."

Taz understood perfectly.

She stepped shakily up to the table and looked at the man she loved.

She didn't know what she had been expecting, some sort of monstrous half-Up, half-robot gargoyle, but it was just -



She stepped shakily up to the table and looked at the man she loved.

Up. She couldn't tell at first where the man ended and the metal began – his skin fading seamlessly into silicone across his chest, where the assistant was now carefully placing electrodes and other sensors. His silver hair had been cropped close to his head and his moustache was gone – it was the first time she'd seen him without it. He prided himself on that damned thing. He looked so much younger without it.

She leaned closer. The scar on his left eye was still there, but now that she was looking, she could see changes, miniscule ones, that others may not have noticed. An odd smoothness to his newly grafted skin, a lack of blemishes. Scars she'd given him, scars others had given him, had simply been erased.

Had his memories?

Had his humanity?

She looked again at his still, cold face as the assistant said, "The patient is ready to revive, Da- Dr. Claw."

Space-Claw loomed now, rubbing his hands together eagerly. "Proceed, Junior. Proceed."

Panic set in. *No, not yet, I'm not ready, what if he's not himself, what if he doesn't know me, what if-*

"Crash cart on standby," Junior said.

Machines whirred once more, and all eyes turned to the heart monitor next to the operating table. It was his human heart that had to start working, to handle the combination of blood and nanotechnology that would now flow through his veins. Taz alone kept her eyes on Up, on his face, on his chest, looking for a flutter of movement, a hint of life-

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

The dreaded beeping was suddenly the most wonderful sound she'd ever heard.

His chest rose, suddenly, and there a flurry of stifled cheers and gasps from the observation room. She ignored them and bent closer to him, pressing her hand gently to the left side of his chest.

She could feel his human heart beating there.

His eyelids trembled once, twice, and then opened, glassy and unfocused, looking up at the ceiling above. She took a deep breath, and then moved into his line of vision, her face above his. His eyes, his beautiful blue eyes, found hers, but she saw no recognition there.

“Up,” she said, wishing that they were alone and not standing here in a room full of interested mad scientists to whom he was nothing more than a cutting-edge medical experiment.

The room fell eerily quiet.

“Up,” she said again. Her voice broke a little.

He looked down at her hand, resting over his heart. His left fingers twitched, and then slowly, excruciatingly, he drew them up along the bed and onto his chest until they met hers.

When he spoke, his voice was raw, and his speech slurred, but it didn't matter, because he said the only word she needed to hear.

“Taz.”

Chapter Twenty

Shame

The man who once was Commander Up sat in a bath, looking at his hands.

The water was as hot as he could stand it, the skin on the left side of his body searing and reddening in protest, but it took his mind off the dull, constant ache throughout him where flesh met metal, a relentless reminder of what he had become. He held his hands in front of him, fingers spread, and turned them over. The right hand was still slower to respond. It had taken days of practice just to be able to twitch one of its alien fingers.

The hands looked the same, but they weren't. One was muscle and bone, creased, timeworn skin, scars and memory, and the other -

With immense effort, he closed the robot hand into a fist. Silicone and nanotechnology, a clever facsimile - for a piece of human technology it was fucking unreal.

But it wasn't his.

Mirrors surrounded the hot tub area of the physio centre, and he often wondered if this was meant to be some kind of twisted motivation, a sick punishment for its patrons. Everywhere he looked he was forced to face his shadowed reflection. His hair was growing back, but his face was still as bare as a baby's bottom - he hadn't needed to shave once in the six weeks since they'd woken him in his new body, his new life. The loss of his moustache made him feel strangely vulnerable. He looked younger without it - but

somehow older too, shrunken, a ghost of the man he'd been before. He was losing muscle mass. He struggled just to walk from his room to the physio centre, let alone fight or handle a gun. He was barely a man at all.

“Up?”

He could see her in the mirrors, hovering hesitantly in the centre's doorway.

“Come in,” he said softly.

She perched herself on the edge of the hot tub. “You're not supposed to come down here by yourself.”

She wore a hospital nightgown, white and sleeveless and far too big for her, like most G.L.E.E.-issued clothing. Her hair was getting longer - she was letting it grow out to cover the large patch that had been shaved to fix her skull fracture. Taz was looking a lot less... Taz-like these days.

Still beautiful, though.

“It helps,” he said, keeping his head down, not wanting to see the pity in her eyes.

“I brought you something,” she said, and he looked up. She held out a small, tattered book. He could see a Spanish title on the cover.

“You still have it,” he said.

“Of course I still have it,” she said, frowning at him.

“But the *Cazadora* -”

“I always kept it with me,” she said, looking surprised that he didn't know this. “In my pocket. They nearly incinerated it with the rest of my uniform when I got here, but Rosie saved it for me.”

Up was tremendously touched.

“I thought maybe I could teach you to read it,” she said, and now it was Taz who was looking at the floor.

“I'd like that,” he said. He drew his knees up in the hot tub, first the left, smoothly and easily as butter, and then the right, which took all of his concentration for a minute or so.

He could feel her watching his laboured movements, and his shame, his constant shame, grew a little more. He sought a distraction. “How did your training go today?”

Taz was silent for a moment. “It’s going well,” she said. “I’m at eighty percent of my normal range of movement.”

“That’s great, Taz,” he said weakly. “That means they’ll discharge you soon. Space-Claw’s eager to get one of his war heroes back on the field for the clean-up effort.”

She made a non-committal noise. “Space-Claw is a *sucio, perro lamiendo científico loco.*”

“Yes he is,” said Up, tracing designs in the water with his left hand. “But he saved my life.”

Something in her eyes softened. “He did,” she whispered.

A sharp pain shot through Up’s chest. He closed his eyes and doubled over, easing his breath slowly out through his mouth, then inhaling again through his nose. He felt Taz’s small hands on his back and shoulder, rubbing reassuringly as he repeated the exercise until the pain subsided.

“Dead – goddamn – nanobots -” he said, hating his weakness, hating that she was there to see it. “Heart – still getting used to them.” Space-Claw had said this particular side-effect should fade over time. Up couldn’t wait.

She looked at him the way she always looked at him now, with pain, with pity, as if he was a sick child, a hurt puppy, a useless, wasted old war hero. What he wouldn’t give for her to look at him, just once, the way she used to – with admiration, with trust, with what he had begun to hope might even have been love.

But who could love half a man?

He didn’t want to meet her eyes, but she gently turned his chin. Her hair was uneven and choppy, framing her face with the beginnings of dark curls - her beloved red headband had been incinerated with the rest of her uniform.

“You should get some rest. We’re going to try something new for your physio session tomorrow.”

He eyed her warily. “It’s not fine motor skills practice again, is it? I don’t think I can handle chopping any more onions.”

She gave a small laugh, a reassuring sound. “And here I thought it was you who made the onions cry. Come on, I’ll help you.”

Damn her, she knew he was too weak after that attack to get out of the tub himself. He’d been planning just to stay there until his human skin shrivelled as much as it was able to shrivel – or at least until she left. He was wearing G.L.E.E. issue gym shorts, but she handed him a towel and looked discreetly away as she helped him stand, leaning heavily on her as he adjusted the towel around his shoulders and maneuvered both of his mismatched legs over the side of the hot tub. Her strength taunted him. He had always taken his own for granted.

“I’ll find a wheelchair,” she said.

“No, dead goddammit Taz, I can walk.”

She kept her arm around his waist and let him continue to lean on her until he felt well enough to walk on his own. His pace was excruciating, his limp pronounced. She insisted on seeing him all the way back to his room. He wondered if he had a shred of dignity left.

“Do you need-”

“No,” he said, more sharply than he’d meant to.

She hugged the book he’d given her to her chest, then held it out to him. “Here – take it. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He took it. “Good night,” he said.

There was a moment, as there always was, of hesitation. With one more sad smile, Taz turned and left. He went in to his room alone.

Rosie came to check on Taz just as she'd climbed wearily into her own hospital bed. The mattresses here made the ones on starships seem luxuriously thick. Her muscles were ready to resign in protest.

"You did well at physio today, Taz," her doctor said, one hand on her back as she eased herself gracelessly into a chair next to the bed, her massive stomach practically needing a seat of its own. "I think we'll be able to sign your discharge papers soon."

Taz didn't say anything.

"You don't look pleased about that," Rosie said dryly. "Not my usual patient response."

"If you discharge me," Taz said carefully. "Then I'll be reassigned."

"Likely to the clean-up mission, yes," Rosie said. "Chasing down stray robot ships in space. A new starship, maybe a promotion. You are a war hero, after all."

Taz shook her head. "I'm not the hero, Rosie."

Her doctor was quiet. "Up has a long road ahead of him. He's doing better than expected." *Considering he shouldn't really be alive at all* – she didn't say the words but Taz heard them loud and clear.

"You mean he's going to be here for a long time," she said.

"Yes, he will," Rosie said. "He's relearning how to use his body, how to walk, how to write, even. That will take time. Months – years."

Years. "The Up I knew," said Taz, and there was a stupid quiver in her voice, "Would have met that challenge head on. He would be fighting robots again before *Día de los Muertos*."

"He's not the Up you knew," said Rosie. "But he's still Up. He's just – lost his confidence. He's lost everything he

was.”

“I know,” said Taz. *I tell myself that every day.* It didn’t make it any easier to see it.

Rosie was watching her with an irritating kind of understanding in her eyes. “Taz,” she said, rubbing her belly thoughtfully. “Do you love him?”

I do, of course I do, she wanted to shout it, but it was so hard when all she could see was his shame, his crumpled, broken form, the pain in his eyes. *I love him.* She tried to form the words but they wouldn’t come.

“He needs me,” she said instead. It was the truth.

Rosie looked at her, hard. “I happen to agree with you, Lieutenant. You’re the only person Up has to lean on right now. If you were reassigned-” she broke off, tapping her fingers on the arm of her chair. “I won’t discharge you.”

“You – won’t?”

“Not yet – not until you ask me to. I’ll leave instructions for my replacement. I still have some pull around here.”

A weight, a great smacking big one, fell away from Taz’s shoulders. “Thank you.”

With a good deal of effort, her doctor stood. “Now, we should both get some sleep. I hear you’re helping out with Up’s physio in the morning – and I’ve got a lot to do before this little one comes.”

Up felt better this morning. He’d managed to shake off the nurses and dress himself in his G.L.E.E. issue sweats, and his breakfast had remained in his human-robot hybrid stomach. He pulled himself taller as he entered the physio centre. In daylight it was almost a cheerful place, a large, bright space with weight machines and treadmills, the hot tub in the corner. He was moving slowly, but if he really concentrated, he could almost walk without a limp. Almost.

Taz was waiting for him, and she was the only one there.

“I told the doc you’d be more comfortable if he wasn’t here today,” she said, hands on her hips. She wore sweats to match his and her signature tank top. Her hair she had pulled up into a rough, miniscule ponytail at the back of her head. This was a different Taz from the tough son-of-a-bitch Ranger in camouflage and dog tags, but she looked healthy, young, whole. Everything he wasn’t. His mood dampened a bit.

“So what *are* we doing then?” he asked.

She crossed her arms and looked at him defiantly. “We – are going to learn to dance. Together.”

She was daring him to refuse. “You know I’m no good at dancing, Taz.”

“Well, you’re relearning everything, aren’t you?” she said. “What better time to start from scratch?”

He thought about how easily she’d moved across the floor at that ball on Europa, how right it had felt to twirl and catch her, how annoying it had been to watch the spy do it better.

He held out his hands. “Okay.”

Her arms fell to her sides in surprise. “Okay?”

Up gave a lopsided shrug. *Why not?*

They started with salsa, because that was what Taz knew best, and because its steps were simple enough to break down into bits and pieces. Up found, to his surprise, that being forced to move slowly made it easier to perform the steps accurately – he didn’t step on Taz’s feet once.

Patient was not a word he would have ever used to describe Taz before, but that’s what she was, patient and understanding and behaving completely unlike herself. Something about that bothered him. He didn’t want her to treat him differently than before. He almost would rather insults.

Her smile never faded, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Hey y’all, the nurses told me I would find you here – *dead God*, woman, *what* have you done to your hair?”

Aw, shit.

Taz froze mid-spin, and turned to face the newcomer with an accusing finger. “*You.*”

A slender man with elaborately styled eyebrows gave a little bow and a flourish. “Alejandro, the one and only, at your service. And darling, if I might say so, you could really use my services right now.”

Taz’s eyes widened in what could only be called fear as Alejandro pranced over and pulled out her ponytail, fluffing out her hair to get the full effect. He put a hand over his heart.

“Hey, it wasn’t my fault they shaved half my head while I was unconscious, was it?” Taz said, rescuing her elastic from the stylist. “What the hell are you doing here, anyway?”

“You are as charming as ever, Lieutenant,” Alejandro huffed. “I’m here to see the Commander. By special request – I need to take some measurements.”

Up slowly backed away. Taz turned to him accusingly.

“Hey, thanks for coming by, Alejandro,” Up said weakly. “Maybe we can talk about this later...” *Shut up, shut up, please shut up.*

Alejandro turned back to Taz, his hands on his hips. “I am working on a hairpiece for the Commander, if you must know. An *extremely specialized* piece of work, only a real artist like myself would be able to handle it.”

Taz looked at Up in bewilderment. “A hairpiece?”

“A moustache!” exclaimed Alejandro. “The greatest moustache ever recreated. With it, Commander Up will regain his authority, his manhood – he’ll be twice the Ranger he was before! And all thanks to me, of course.”

Dead God, man. Can you make it sound any worse?

“That is,” said Taz. “The most *ridículo* thing I’ve ever heard.”

There wasn’t anything he could say. Taz let out an exhalation of frustration.

“I’m done dancing for today,” she said, turning to go.

“Wait!” Alejandro cried dramatically. “At least let me have a look at your hair, darling – I’m sure there’s *something* I could do -”

Taz spun around. “Touch my hair and I will strangle you with that goddamned scarf you’re always wearing around your neck.”

The stylist touched his scarf protectively. “It’s an *ascot*,” he said icily.

Up watched her go, the full force of his shame returned to him.

They didn’t discuss the moustache fiasco, but they did continue their dance lessons. They branched out into different styles, learning together, trying to remember what Madame LaViolet had taught them all those years ago. It seemed to be working – Up’s mobility was improving, and he was having fewer attacks. The physio doctor was impressed with his progress and pronounced Taz the best thing he could have prescribed for the Commander. Up almost smiled at that.

Up was quiet today, but he was always quiet now, withdrawn, remote. They were attempting a waltz, and he was focused on his feet instead of her eyes, but she didn’t remind him otherwise because she knew he needed to concentrate.

“Do you remember the Ambassador’s Ball?” she said over the tinny music of the physio centre’s radio.

He glanced up, only for a moment. “Of course I do.” The brassy tones of some dead jazz singer invaded the space

between them. “You couldn’t fake an Alabama accent for beans, Mrs. von Tuppington.”

“Well, at least I could dance,” she said, and then immediately regretted it. He was trying so hard.

“You really were the most beautiful woman there,” he said, almost too softly for her to hear.

She stopped moving, one hand on his shoulder, the other clasping his human hand. His robot hand felt cold on her waist. Why wouldn’t he look at her?

“Up-” she said.

He dropped his hands. “I think I’ve had enough dancing for today. I’m- I’m tired.”

She watched him go, trying vainly not to limp, but there was pain in every step. It wasn’t fair that he was reduced to this, a man who’d once been so strong, the best goddamn Ranger in the entire League. She wanted to hit something.

The physio centre didn’t have punching bags, so she went to the chin-up bar instead. She was almost back to her pre-Qo’nos strength, and every burning muscle, every rep felt like a small victory. Relief filled her, relief to be channelling her energy into something brainless and physical instead of being positive, being patient, being what Up needed her to be. She was exhausted. She didn’t stop.

“You look beat, Taz. Why don’t you call it a night?”

Rosie stood there, a clipboard in one hand, the other on her back. Taz dropped to the floor, circling her shoulders, and grabbed a towel.

“I should be saying that to you,” she said. “Shouldn’t that baby be here by now?”

“Tomorrow’s my last day of work,” Rosie said, still looking at her with concern.

Taz sighed. Doctors. “I’m fine, Rosie, I’ve just been doing a lot of dancing.”

“And chin-ups, I see,” Rosie said, crossing her arms over

her belly. “But that’s not what’s tiring you and you know it.”

“What are you now, my shrink?” Taz asked crossly.

“You’re trying to be what you think Up needs,” Rosie said. “But it’s not working, is it? He’s improving physically, sure, but emotionally – he’s more distant than ever.”

It was true, but that didn’t mean she had to like hearing it.

“You’re not his doctor, Taz, or his therapist. You’re more than that. You need to be more than that.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Taz said through gritted teeth. “He’s pushing me away. He’s been pushing me away since -” *Since Qo’noS. Since Space-Claw turned him into what he is today. Since I watched him die.*

“He’s only pushing you away because you’re letting him,” Rosie gave a sad, distant smile. “Connor did that sometimes, when work was tough. When we were feeling far away from each other – emotionally, I mean – we always found a little physical closeness went a long way.”

Physical closeness. “We’re not you and Tripp,” Taz said.

Rosie’s face darkened. “No, you’re not,” she said. “You’re both still alive.”

Shit.

Taz dropped back against the wall. “I’m sorry, Rosie.”

“You should be,” she said, and there was anger in her voice. “If I could have my Conner back today-”

She didn’t finish this thought, but turned to leave. “You and Up have been given another chance. Just – don’t waste it. Don’t give up on him.”

Up woke to a burning sensation running the length of his torso, along the line where human met robot. It wasn’t an attack, it wasn’t as sharp as that, but he rubbed his chest and winced, curling up against the pain his own faithless body

was bringing him. It was worse than usual tonight.

When it didn't subside after a few minutes, he carefully swung his legs over the side of his hospital bed and slowly dressed in gym shorts and a G.L.E.E. t-shirt. Technically the physio centre shouldn't be open at this time of night, but there was nothing else that would dull the pain.

The hospital hallways were darkened and deserted, the only light coming from the bluish computer screens and a crack flooding through the door of the nurses' station. Sneaking out should not be this easy, but everyone in the League was still on a post-victory high. Jobs weren't being done the way they should. He wasn't complaining.

He didn't turn on any lights when he reached the physio centre, just let the moonlight streaming through the tall glass windows guide his way. He turned on the hot tub, giving it a moment to warm up, then took off his shirt and stepped inside, holding tightly to the handrail as he settled himself in a seated position on one of the tubs' inner benches.

Relief melted into his human bones. His robot ones didn't feel anything at all.

Across the room, the door opened.

"Up?"

He watched her approach in the mirrors, dressed in the same white nightgown, her hair the same wild mess around her head. "I – I couldn't sleep. I came to your room but you weren't there."

She didn't sit this time but stood against the mirror, facing him, her hands behind her back. She looked nervous. Why?

"Up, you and me-" she burst, and then looked down at the floor. "It's always been you and me, right?"

His forehead creased.

"I know this has been hard, but I want you to know that I

still – I mean, it doesn't change -" Taz shook her head. "*Oh, mierda.*"

She looked at him now, and despite his best intentions, he found he couldn't look away, that her dark eyes held his in a way that no one else's could. She approached the hot tub, and, without looking away from him, stepped lightly into the water.

No, no, Taz, what are you doing? Don't do this, not now, not when I can't be the man you need me to be, not when I'll never be that man again – you deserve better, you deserve so much better -

Her nightgown billowed mermaid-like around her as she crossed the space between them. She stood in front of him, for once the taller one, closer than she'd come in weeks, even in their dance lessons. The moonlight made her look luminous, ethereal. He couldn't get enough air, and his human heart responded, hammering out a goddamned salsa beat as she reached out and touched his face, gently, a question in her eyes.

I can't, Taz, I can't -

He couldn't help it, his hands, both hands, found her waist through the water, through the flimsy material of her nightgown. She closed her eyes briefly at his touch.

He wanted her more than anything.

She pressed her forehead to his, her eyes swallowing him whole, and then she kissed him there, on his forehead, between his eyes, the tip of his nose, then the place where his moustache used to be, a trail of kisses so sweet he wanted to cry.

"How can you still-" he whispered, closing his eyes.

She climbed up onto the bench and wrapped herself around him, holding him tightly. He buried his face in her neck and hugged her back, feeling her warmth, her humanity, realizing what he'd been missing, remembering



“It's always been you and me, right?”

what this felt like, to have her in his arms.

They stayed like that for a long time.

She stayed with him that night, and learned that even when he slept he was in pain, his forehead creased, his muscles tense. She didn't sleep at all, but tried to memorize him, grow accustomed to the changes in him, get used to the warmth of his left side and the coldness of his right.

"We can do this," she whispered to his sleeping form. *As long as you stay strong.*

She left early in the morning, before the nurses could come in and have something new to gossip about, but she couldn't bear to wake him. "I'll be back soon," she said quietly, touching his left hand. She'd go to her room, get freshened up, come back in time for their dance lesson.

She had just pulled the door to Up's room closed behind her when she heard, "Well, isn't *this* something?"

She turned around and put on her most fierce glare. "Can it, Alejandro, or you can kiss your ascot goodbye."

"You know I always *knew* there was something going on between you two," Alejandro clapped his hands. "So, tell me everything!"

"There is nothing to tell, *idiota*," Taz said, striding very quickly down the hall, wishing she was wearing more than a too-big, still-damp hospital nightgown.

"Fine, *be* that way," the stylist said, and to her dismay he followed her. "But it's way more fun to kiss and tell."

"*Dios mio*, what do you want? What are you doing here?"

"Up's moustache! It's finished, I wanted to give it to him." Alejandro held out a burnished wooden box.

The tonto moustache.

"You may not understand it, girlfriend, but to the Commander, this is much more than a moustache. It's a

symbol of pride. It's his status."

"Men are *estúpidos*," she said, but she could almost understand.

"Don't I know it," Alejandro said, and before she could stop him, he was reaching out to twirl a lock of her hair between his fingers. "I really could help you with this, you know. I could even give you that short hairstyle you've always favoured... with a few improvements, of course. You have so much potential, darling. It's *criminal* to let it go to waste."

She eyed him, and touched her own hair. She did miss her old style, and much of the hair she'd lost had grown back in. Maybe it was time to bring the old Taz back.

"Have you got any headbands? Maybe in red?"

Up wondered if he'd dreamed it all when he woke and Taz wasn't beside him. The ache had returned, and he was slower than usual getting dressed, thinking of her small body next to his, her soft lips on his skin. *It happened, it must have happened.*

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, a bent old man struggling to tie his own shoes. *But how can she even look at me like this?*

A knock on the door, and he opened it to see not Taz but Rosie in her lab coat, with a boy of no more than two perched on her hip.

"Hi, Up," she said, shifting the little boy's weight. "I thought I'd bring Ty in for a visit before my leave begins tomorrow. I don't believe you two have met."

"Dead God, Rosie," Up said. "He's the image of his daddy."

He was. Tripp's eyes, his chin, heck even his nose were staring up at him in apprehension out of the little boy's face, and the finality of his friend's death washed over him

anew. Rosie's smile was sad, but proud. "I know. Say hello to Up, Ty."

"Hello," the little boy said seriously.

Rosie set him on the ground and he toddled about, looking curiously around the room. "You look well, Up. I think those dance lessons have been good for you."

He eased himself into a chair and gestured for her to do the same. "And you're expecting another one soon," he said, awkwardly gesturing in the direction of her stomach.

"Very soon," Rosie agreed, her eyes on her son.

"Is anyone—" Up hesitated. "Is anyone looking out for you, Rosie? Is anyone helping you out?"

"Connor's mother moved in a few months ago," she said. "We don't exactly see eye to eye, but she loves my little boy, so that's something we have in common." Her face grew serious. "I'll be fine, Up. It's you I'm worried about."

Up watched the little boy pull a series of books off his shelf.

"Ty, don't do that," said Rosie.

"It's okay," said Up, eyeing the one the boy had in his hand. "Hey Ty, buddy, can you bring that one to me?"

The boy considered him, and then brought it over.

"Thank you," Up said, taking it carefully in his hands. It was Taz's book of Mexican folk tales. He traced the unfamiliar words with his left finger. She'd said she wanted to teach him to read it.

Rosie was watching him.

"I take it back," she said, pulling Ty onto her lap. "I think you'll be fine. You're in good hands."

He looked at her, his old friend. "She deserves better than me."

"She doesn't *want* better than you," Rosie said. "Up, you have been falling for that girl for as long as I've known

you. Tripp knew it, I knew it, I think everyone knew it but you. Don't you give up on her now."

"But how -" Up's voice cracked, and he squeezed his eyes shut in shame. "When I'm like this- how can she still-"

Rosie's look wasn't pitying, but it wasn't unkind. "Well," she said, hoisting herself and her son out of the chair. "I offered to discharge her, and she wouldn't take it." She smiled and briefly touched his cheek. "She's still here, isn't she?"

After they left, Up sat holding the book for a long time. He imagined himself as he once was, strong and tough instead of broken, hearing the satisfying sound of zapper fire on metal, leading men into battle, his lieutenant, the best of them all, by his side. He imagined Taz in a white dress, if she'd put one on, him in dress uniform, giving her a ring, kissing the life out of her and not caring if anyone saw. He imagined Taz with a swollen abdomen, a baby on her hip, a little boy with a face like his. He imagined her reading to them like she did for him, like her mama had done for her, he imagined teaching them to climb, to do calculus, to fight. He imagined having a family at last.

Suddenly he started to laugh.

He couldn't ever have a family now. The injury had seen to that.

Laughter turned to racking sobs, and then Up was crying, crying for the first time he could remember. Everything surfaced, everything that had been building up in him since he'd first woken up to Taz's tearful face, to his broken body, to this half-life he'd been left with. He gasped for air. He couldn't stop.

Taz, dressed in sweats and her new haircut, stood frozen with her hand poised to knock. The sound coming from behind Up's door was a sound she'd never imagined, never

dreamed, never wanted to hear. Not from him. It was the sound of a broken man, a man who'd given up, a man who had nothing left.

I have to go in. I have to be there for him. I have to be strong.

She ran.

Chapter Twenty-one

Tears

After.

It was strange to be looking at the stars from below.

Their light fell softly into the room where Up sat, perched on the edge of his bed, unmoving. A book lay beside him, a small book with a tattered cover, a book he'd first found in the rubble of a broken schoolhouse. After a while, he picked it up.

"Historias y leyendas de México," he read, slowly, his accent laughable, each syllable a struggle to pronounce. Well, the title wasn't so hard to understand.

He reached over to tap the computer screen next to his bed. "Translator, please. Spanish to English."

It was a beautiful old book, though the pages were torn. Faded illustrations showed images of ghostly figures, talking animals, twisted old witches. Up stopped at one, a once-richly coloured drawing of a couple, a man with a sword, a veiled woman, their faces turned toward each other, their eyes full of love. Drops of browned blood discoloured the page, disguising some of the words. Was it hers?

"La Calle de la Quemada," he read aloud. Taz had read this one to him before. With the help of the translator, he began to read it for himself.

In childhood, we dream, dreams of fame and fortune, of great adventure, of fantastical creatures and magical

worlds. Some dreams stay with us as we grow, others die within us, and some we die chasing. There lived a man once called Don Luis de Velasco, a man who dreamed of power and wealth, a man who left his homeland of Spain and came to Mexico to find it.

“Up – that’s an unusual name, isn’t it?” Dr. Renley leaned back in her chair and shuffled a few papers around in her hands. “And it’s the only one listed on your file, Commander.”

“It’s the only one I’ve got.”

The psychiatrist eyed him over the top of her thick-rimmed glasses. “You’ve only ever had one name? Even as a child?”

Up remained stony-faced.

Dr. Renley turned her eyes back to the file in her hands. “It says here you were raised in an orphanage. Did the administrators there give you the name?”

When Up continued to remain silent, she put the file down on her desk and folded her hands. “This is *your* counselling session, Commander. We can avoid the easy questions if you’d like to. Would you prefer to talk about your feelings?”

They stared at each other. Up crossed his arms. The movement was becoming easier, more instinctual. But he just felt so tired. Nothing mattered anymore, so what was the harm in answering a few questions? “Not much to tell. I was just another war baby that showed up on the orphanage’s doorstep when they were already full. I was given a number, not a name. It was the other kids started calling me Up.”

“And why was that?” Dr. Renley asked smoothly.

Up leaned back in his chair. “I reckon it was cause I was always looking at the stars.”

The doctor took this in. “And you were never adopted?”

“Caused a fair bit of trouble for them at the orphanage. Getting in fights all the time. Who’d want me?”

“Did you always dream of being a Starship Ranger, Commander?”

Up paused. “I did. Those stars were awfully inviting.”

“So you enlisted when you turned eighteen.”

Up chuckled, a hollow sound. “Sixteen. I ran away from the orphanage when I was sixteen.”

“But the enlistment age-”

“I lied,” Up said simply.

Don Luis had a daughter, just one. Her name was Beatriz, and when they came to Mexico all marvelled at her beauty, her lily-white skin, her waterfall-dark hair, her luminous eyes. Her father found his dreams, and their fortune grew, but that meant little to Beatriz, for Beatriz dreamed of love.

Her suitors were numerous, but despite her father’s pleas, she would not have any of them. She saw not love but lust in their eyes, lust for her beauty, lust for her wealth. Beatriz dreamed of completeness, of finding the other half of her soul, of someone who would understand her better than anyone ever had. Someone to wake up to each morning. Someone to dream with.

Before.

Up woke with tears on his face. He blinked a few times, and looked down at Taz, resting curled against his chest. She was frowning, and even asleep she was filled with tension, coiled like a small tiger about to pounce. He was grateful she was there. He always slept better when she was

able to sneak out of her room to stay with him at night - her presence seemed to help keep the pain away. He reached out to gently brush a dark lock of hair from her face. She stirred, and Up hastily wiped the wetness from his cheeks.

“Morning,” he said, as she stretched and looked up at him.

“*Hola*,” she said sleepily, searching his face with her eyes. Could she see that he’d been crying? He pressed a kiss to her forehead and nudged her up, maneuvering his legs onto the floor.

“Knock, knock, you two!”

Taz groaned and buried herself back under the thin hospital blanket. They’d learned very quickly that it was impossible to keep secrets around this place. Whatever it was that their relationship was becoming, the entire nursing staff of the G.L.E.E. hospital seemed to consider themselves co-conspirators in the matter.

A nurse with curly hair and a round, kind face poked her head around the door. “Not interrupting anything, am I honeys?”

Taz’s hand emerged to throw a pillow at the door. Up waited patiently.

The nurse ducked the impromptu projectile. “Just wanted to let you know that Dr. Tripp was admitted last night, she’s had her little girl. And what a sweetheart! Red hair, just like her mother. They’re resting now, but Dr. T asked if you would visit when you can – both of you.”

“Rosie’s had her baby?” echoed Up.

“About time,” came Taz’s voice from under the blanket.

“I’ll leave you to it, now,” the nurse said, giving Up a saucy wink. He pressed his face briefly into his hands as she left, then turned and pulled the blankets down far enough to see Taz doing the same thing.

She lowered her hands and they looked at each other.

Her new haircut always made her hair stick up all over the place when she first woke up. Her eyes were still sleep-filled, her skin a little puffy. He wanted to get back in the bed and kiss her a thousand times over.

“Are you ashamed of me?” he asked instead.

Her eyes flashed with something he couldn’t read. “Stop asking *estúpido* questions, Up.” She rolled lightly out of the bed and walked toward the bathroom. “Let’s go and see Rosie. And don’t forget, we’re sparring today. I hope you’re ready.”

She said it playfully, but he couldn’t help but hear a warning there. Had he imagined it?

They arrived at Rosie’s hospital room to see her awake but looking exhausted, little Ty sleeping beside her, a bundle of squirming blankets curled in her arm.

“Rosie,” said Up.

“Hi, Up,” she said, in a shaking voice. Her cheeks were creased with tears. “Hi, Taz. Thanks for coming.” She smiled, and pressed a kiss to the top of the bundle. “This is Ree.”

“Ree?” asked Taz.

“Rheanna, it was my grandmother’s name,” she said, looking at the bundle with love. “But Connor had a thing for nicknames – Ty hasn’t been Tyson since the day he was born.” She took in an unsteady breath, and gave them another small smile. “She’s awake - would you like to hold her, Up?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think-”

“Don’t be silly,” Rosie said, raising the bundle toward him. Doubtfully, he reached out and took it, nestling it awkwardly against his left arm, and his chest.

It – she – was so tiny. Her little eyes struggled to open, and a miniscule hand emerged from the blankets to grasp at him. He let her wrap her hand around his right index finger

- her grip was surprisingly strong. “Hi, Ree,” he said. “Your daddy would have been so proud of you.”

The baby scrunched her face together and let out a whimper. Up held her quickly out to Rosie.

“You’re not going to break her,” said Taz, reaching out to take the baby, letting her nuzzle into her chest. She bounced her gently, and the whimpering subsided.

“You look like you know what you’re doing,” Rosie observed.

“Had a lot of cousins,” Taz said, something misty and far away in her eyes. “Do you mind if I sit?”

Rosie gestured her consent, and Taz took the baby over to the rocking chair by the window.

“How are you doing, Rosie?” Up asked quietly.

Rosie tried to smile, and shrugged. “Oh, you know.” She stroked Ty’s hair as he nestled closer to her in his sleep. “I just didn’t ever think I’d be doing this alone.”

“Is there anything-”

“No, Up,” she said. “Unless you can bring him back.”

She looked so sad. Up thought of the first time they’d met Rosie on the *Eagle*, Tripp practically falling over himself in an effort to impress her, a small smile on her face, amusement in her eyes. He thought of their wedding, watching Tripp pick her up and swing her around, both of them laughing, their joy contagious, their happiness complete. They’d fit each other so well. It wasn’t fair that they had been torn apart.

He looked at Taz, who was engrossed in the baby, telling her something in Spanish, stroking a tiny cheek with her finger. They had always fit together, too. That must have been why he’d taken her back to the ship with him, her and her torn dress and her defiance, why he’d fought for her to go to the Academy at fifteen, why he had thought of no one else while he was on the *Eagle* those three uncertain years.

Why they'd made such a great team.

Something was different between them now, even as they tried to become something more. But who was he kidding? It was him – he was the one who was different. And he couldn't ever be the same man again.

“By all accounts, you did well at the Academy,” Dr. Renley read, peering through her glasses. “Top of your class, well-liked, respected by your peers. No mention of causing any trouble at all.”

“The Academy was the first place that felt like home,” Up said. “I needed the discipline. Military life suited me.”

“And you made friends there?”

Up eyed the papers in the doctor's hands. “What's the file say?”

Dr. Renley raised her eyebrows. “It says that you did. Particularly one Connor Tripp. And that he was the trouble-maker.”

“Tripp liked to have a bit of fun, that's all,” Up said. “We were young and stupid then, can you blame him?”

“You served with Tripp several times in your career, did you not? You took your fighter pilot certification together?”

“Yes,” Up said. “He took to it better than I did, I'm more suited for combat.” He paused. “Or I used to be.”

“And when you both served on the *Eagle*, you made him your second-in-command when you were unexpectedly promoted to Commander, is that right?” Dr. Renley was watching him intently, far more so than he appreciated.

“There weren't many Lieutenants left to choose from,” Up said, frowning. “And I knew I could trust him.”

“It was on the *Eagle* that Tripp first met his future wife, Dr. Rosie Baker, is that correct?”

“Why are you asking me this? What does it have to do with anything?”

Dr. Renley folded her hands. "I'm your psychiatrist, Commander. It's my job to try and understand you, and where you come from, and that includes the relationships you've had with those around you. You seemed to have lived a rather solitary life, Commander. The Tripps appear to be some of the few individuals you've let get close to you."

Up continued to eye her suspiciously. "Yes. That is where they met. Rosie was on the medical staff - it was her first starship assignment."

"And when you were attacked by the robots?"

"We lost most of the medical team, yes. Rosie became the ship's doctor. She stepped up beautifully."

"That must have been a very difficult time for everyone on the ship. Did you believe all along that you could bring the *Eagle* home, Commander?"

Up was silent for a long time. "No," he said finally. "But I had to put on a good show for the crew, didn't I, or we'd have never stood a chance."

"Did you ever get lonely?"

"Lonely?"

"In those two and a half years without contact with anyone on Earth. Tripp had Rosie."

"Tripp didn't *have* Rosie. She was engaged to some fellow back home, someone her parents had arranged for her. I don't think she ever loved the guy, but she was too good of a person to betray him like that." Up shifted uncomfortably. "It was only after the *Eagle* had returned to Earth, and she had broken it off with him, that they were able to be together."

"Nevertheless, would you deny that it was on the *Eagle* that your friends fell in love?"

"Well - no-"

"So then," the psychiatrist continued, looking

annoyingly pleased. “Tripp had Rosie. Who did you have, Commander?”

Up was silent.

It was at a village dance that Beatriz first met Don Martin de Scópoli, an Italian gentleman, a Marquis, and her father's next potential suitor. Their eyes met from across the room, and Beatriz was struck by the way he held himself tall, the keen look in his eye. They met in a dance, and he proved his mind as keen as his look, his words like those of a poet. They challenged each other, in the dance, and in conversation. They were equals. He complimented her beauty, but Beatriz was struck by his as well. Their eyes never left each other once.

Up stepped onto the mat in the hospital rehab centre. He and Taz were not the only patients there today, there were others working with therapists, using the weight machines, on the treadmill. He bent his head, feeling exposed in a t-shirt and sweats, remembering a time when he'd strip down to his waist and take anyone to the carpet, showing off for the cadets, showing off for her.

“Hey,” Taz said. “*Mirame.*”

He looked at her, standing on the other edge of the mat. She was wearing her red headband again, and she looked more the Ranger he was used to.

“Forget them,” she said. “It's just you and me, okay?”

Dropping his gaze, he stepped forward, and she did the same, dropping into ready stance.

“Okay, Up,” she said. “You remember what to do.”

It took concentration, but he managed to get his robot leg to sink into the same, crouched position. He raised his hands in a defensive pose, his fists near his face, his elbows shielding his chest. They'd been practising punches,

shadowboxing, jabs and uppercuts and hooks, but this was the first time they were going to practice on each other.

“Are you ready?” she asked, so that no one else could hear. “You first.”

He nodded.

His first punch was slow, stiff, and she blocked it easily. “Look at me, Up. That’s what you always used to tell me, remember? Never take your eyes off your opponent.”

He tried again.

It was so different now from the first time they’d fought, when he’d been the teacher and she the student. Or when they were equals, circling each other, challenging each other, putting on a show for the other Rangers on the *Cazadora*. She was getting frustrated.

“Hit me!” she said, blowing the hair from her eyes, pulsing back and forth on her feet. She aimed a blow at his head, but she wasn’t really trying and he was able to push her fist away. He aimed another, and she blocked him again.

“Up, you can do better than this!” she said. This time her fist was faster, and hit its target. He fell back, blinking at the sudden pain in his cheek, remembering what it felt like, remembering when he would have barely felt it at all.

“Hit me back!” Taz growled, opening her hands wide so that she was defenceless. “I can’t make it any easier for you, Up, hit me back!”

His eyes met hers, and he shook his head.

Taz dropped her hands. “Up-”

He turned his back, on her, on the others watching, on his weakness, and walked away.

The attachment between Beatriz and Don Martin soon became known, and the men of the village were enraged. Suitors knocked on the door of Don Luis’ mansion, demanding an audience with his daughter. Don Martin was

stopped in the streets and challenged to duels. It wasn't long before the first dead man was on Beatriz's conscience. Soon the local police were picking up a new body each morning from her father's front yard.

Don Martin was fighting because he had to, fighting to defend her, and it was all because of her beauty. Every drop of blood spilled felt like a knife through her heart.

“Hey, Lieutenant! When you coming back to the fight, eh? Still got some robots to clean up, and you're down here just sitting on your arse. You look healthy enough to me.”

Up stopped in his tracks, just before he entered the hospital cafeteria. The voice was unfamiliar, but it carried the authority of a Ranger – was there a ship in port?

“I'll come back when I'm ready to, *idiota*,” Taz's voice replied. “You guys having some trouble up there on the *Bright Eye* or something? Need a little help?”

“I hear she's been screwing the Commander,” said another. “That's why she's still here, cause she can't get enough of his-”

“*Cierra la boca si usted sabe lo que es bueno para usted*,” Taz said, her voice dangerous.

The voices fell silent for a moment.

“The Commander!” Someone laughed. “Didn't you hear, he was all chopped up by the big bad robots on Qo'noS, he ain't got no balls! He wouldn't be enough of a man for Lieutenant Taz anymore -”

There was a thud, and then shouts and the scraping back of benches. Up started to move, and then froze again. What could he do, other than give them evidence that their claims were true? He couldn't help her – he couldn't even throw a proper punch. He leaned back against the wall, listening to Taz's stream of Spanish insults, her opponents crying out in pain. He closed his eyes, hating himself.

“Break it up! This is a hospital, not a karaoke bar, for dead God’s sake!”

The sound of more scuffling, and then the doors burst open to reveal Taz shaking off a hospital security guard and seething with anger. She stopped short as she saw him, cowering against the wall. Shock, and something worse than that, filled her face. Her cheek was beginning to swell, and blood streamed from a cut above her eye.

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Taz turned and stalked off. Up hung his head.

“Your career has been a successful one, Commander. Graduating top of your class, quick promotions in every field, widely acknowledged as a respected leader, a war hero. The return of the *Eagle* was nothing short of miraculous, and the *Cazadora* was instrumental in the destruction of the robot fleet, which all would acknowledge to be the turning point in the Robot Wars. And your actions on Qo’noS ensured the robots’ defeat. The only reason you’re not a Rear Admiral already is because you refused the promotion, and there is little doubt you could have been Admiral someday if you’d wanted to be.”

Could have been.

“The newsfeeds have been calling you a super-soldier. Dr. Claw has been careful to praise your sacrifice – and, admittedly, his own medical prowess in bringing you back. You’re the Robot Wars’ greatest hero. How does that make you feel?”

“I was just doing my job,” said Up. The psychiatrist wasn’t blinking, and it made him uneasy. “I wasn’t trying to be anyone’s hero.”

“What happened on Qo’noS-”

“What, getting sawed in half?” Up said bitterly.

Dr. Renley paused. “Yes, that. You should have died,

Commander Up. But instead you were saved, brought back to life by a man who – unless I’m wrong – has convictions you don’t agree with, using the kind of controversial technology that pioneered your enemies.”

“You’re not going to ask me how I feel about that, are you?”

Dr. Renley eyed him. “Just doing my job, Commander.”

“I should have died,” Up said. “Doesn’t that say it all?”

Beatriz’ tender heart could not bear it any longer. Too many had died for her, needlessly, recklessly. Her beauty was a curse. If only she had been born ugly, plain. Don Martin would never have loved her, nor any of the others – loneliness would be better than this guilt-ridden fate.

The brazier was red-hot and filled with coals, water sizzling into air as her tears fell upon them. The curtains were closed, her bedroom sweltering. Beatriz sent up a silent prayer as she knelt above the brazier, her perfect face raised toward the heavens. She choked back a sob, and pushed her face into the fire.

“Maybe we should go back to dancing,” Up said, twirling a noodle on his fork, forcing his robot hand to learn the simple movement, practising it over and over.

They were eating dinner in the hospital cafeteria. Taz looked up, but he kept his eyes downcast. He couldn’t bear to see the bruises on her face and know that he had done nothing to prevent them.

“Dancing helped you get your mobility back,” she said. “But you can’t dance a robot to death. How are you going to get back on active duty without learning how to fight again?”

“Maybe-” He didn’t want to say it. “Maybe I’ll never be able to fight again. Maybe I can’t go back on active duty,

Taz.”

Her fork paused in mid-air. “What?”

“Just look at me, Taz,” he said, finally lifting his eyes.

What did he want her to say? That it didn’t matter to her if he was broken, washed up, doomed to a desk job for the rest of his career? That she didn’t care if he wasn’t the hero the press made him out to be anymore? That it didn’t bother her that he walked with a limp, that his moustache was fake, that the idea of hitting someone, shooting someone, killing someone now turned his stomach instead of giving him a rush?

Yes, that was what he wanted. He wanted her to tell him that she loved him anyway, no matter what. Instead, he saw disappointment in her eyes.

“Dr. - Dr. Claw! What a surprise! We weren’t expecting you today!”

Up stiffened.

“Well, being Admiral keeps you busy, you know, but I was in the area, and I thought I would drop by and check up on my favourite patient – they told me he’d be here in the cafeteria.”

Taz looked at Up in alarm as Space-Claw’s voice drew nearer. Then she stood, looking defiantly at someone over his head.

“Ah, Lieutenant, how good to see you again!”

“*Mierda*,” she said. “Up’s not your patient anymore, Space-Claw. What do you want?”

“Now, now,” Space-Claw said. “There’s no need for hostility.”

Up stood, his back to the Admiral.

“I think there is,” he said quietly. He turned.

“Commander,” said Space-Claw jovially, but there was an edge to his smooth, deep voice. “You’re looking well.”

“Am I?” said Up.

“I would have thought you’d have been pleased,” Space-Claw said, a frown on his face. “I’ve given you a working body, Commander. Another chance at life.”

“But I never asked for it, did I?” Up said, his voice rising unusually high. “Who gave you the right to make me your experiment? Your plaything? Why couldn’t you have left me be?”

“Dead?” Space-Claw said evenly. “You’d rather I left you dead?”

“Than this?” Up said, gesturing with his left hand at everything he’d become – weak, sterile, less than human. The tears were coming now, and he couldn’t stop them. He was powerless.

The cafeteria had fallen completely silent. Up choked back a sob.

Then hands on his arms. Taz had jumped over the table and planted herself between him and Space-Claw, her back to the Admiral. “Up- Up, what are you doing? What are you saying? You don’t really want to be dead.”

He covered his face in his hands, wanting them all to go away, even her. Especially her. His shoulders shook.

“You don’t really want to be dead,” Taz repeated, though she sounded less sure.

“Commander-”

He felt Taz turn. “Shut up, Space-Claw. Go find someone else to play mad scientist with.”

Her hands gently pulled Up’s away from his face, and there it was, the evidence of his failure shining wet on his cheeks, in his eyes. Hers were unreadable again. She stared up at him for a long time.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said finally, and taking him by the hand, she led him away from Space-Claw’s astounded face, from all the prying eyes, from everything.

“There’s someone you haven’t mentioned yet, Commander. Someone who, unless I’m mistaken, has played a significant role in your life these past eleven years. The newsfeeds have varying opinions on your relationship, and the nursing staff yet another – I was hoping that you could help me understand it better. Certainly you have let this person closer to you than anyone else, even Conner Tripp.”

Up remained silent throughout this speech, gripping the armrests of his chair very tightly.

“Tell me about Lieutenant Taz.”

Up stared at the psychiatrist for a long moment, then got up and walked out the door.

Beatriz waited for Don Martin behind a black veil. When he saw the veil, matted with drops of blood and clinging flesh, he dropped to his knees before her and pulled it carefully away. Where there had once been eyes were blackened holes, her cheeks open craters. Kissable lips had become nothing but a horrid, gaping grin.

“My love,” he whispered. “What have you done?”

She could not speak.

“Beatriz,” he said, “It is not for your beauty that I love you.”

Tears fell from her monstrous face.

“Only this morning I asked your father for your hand,” Don Martin said, tears shining on his own. “And my intentions have not changed. Beatriz de Velasco, will you have me for your husband?”

He knew what she was going to say when she came to his door that night, dressed not in sweats but a full Ranger’s uniform, swinging her hands together nervously, like she did before a fight.

“I’m leaving, Up. I’ve been discharged.”

He sat on the edge of the bed, and didn’t say anything. Rosie’s words echoed in his brain. *‘I offered to discharge her, and she wouldn’t take it.’*

“I’m going to the *Bright Eye*, to help with the clean-up effort. They gave me a promotion, I’m a Lieutenant-Commander now. Commander Li said she never thought she’d see the day when you picked me up all those years ago.”

“Congratulations,” he said dully.

“Up, I-”

He looked up.

Her eyes were big, and dark, and guilt-ridden. “I just can’t-”

“Just go,” he said.

Her face scrunched up, and she crossed the space between them in two swift strides. He closed his eyes as he felt her warm lips press softly to the top of his head.

“Good luck,” she whispered, and her voiced cracked a little.

Then she was gone, and Up was left alone, in the starlight, with nothing left of her but the book she had left behind.

The wedding of Don Martin and his Beatriz was one of the most sensational anyone in the village had ever seen. Don Luis spent his fortune to give his daughter the wedding of her dreams, and no one had ever seen a happier bridegroom. Beatriz wore a white veil, and took her husband’s hand, and knew that she had finally found the other part of her soul, and that nothing would ever tear them apart.

Some dreams stay with us as we grow, others die within us, some we die chasing.



And sometimes dreams come true.

And sometimes dreams come true.

With shaking hands, Up closed the book. The sky was clear, and the stars were bright tonight. He looked up at them, tracing patterns he'd memorized as a boy, when the vastness of space had been just a dream. He wondered where she was now, among the stars without him. He wondered if he'd ever reach them - reach her - again.

The tears came once more.

Taz watched the Earth fall away beneath her as the *Bright Eye* climbed into the stars, her forehead pressed against the viewscreen in her new quarters. Her face was dry - she'd vowed that there would be no more tears - but her heart was in a thousand pieces. She'd made her decision, she'd hardened her resolve, and she'd done it, she'd left him, the man who was her everything. He was falling apart, and she couldn't keep watching it happen, knowing she was powerless to stop it.

"He'll do better, if I'm not there," she told herself. "He'll pull himself up without me to depend on. He'll have to."

She knew it was a lie.

"I'm sorry, Up," she whispered into the glass. "It's me. I'm just not strong enough."

One last, rebellious tear rolled down her bruised cheek as the starship took her away.

Chapter Twenty-two

Starship, Part One

“SPECS! Get me some readings on this thing, now!”

The mop-topped ensign pushed her glasses up on her nose and frowned as Taz propped her zapper on the boulder in front of them and levelled it, looking across it as a shadow loomed far larger than it should have at the mouth of the cave below.

“According to my spectrometer, it’s not your standard robot sentinel, Lieutenant-Commander, it’s -”

“An Autobot,” Taz said, a shiver of anticipation rushing through her as the shadow materialized into its hulking metal form. They hadn’t been expecting that.

“I thought they had all been destroyed -”

“So did I,” said Taz quietly, setting her zapper to kill.

Specs eyed her warily. “Lieutenant-Commander, this is just a recon mission, isn’t it? Commander Li-”

“The Commander didn’t expect us to find a dead goddamn Autobot though, did she?” Taz said, taking careful aim. Not one of the bastards should be left alive. Not according to her. “Besides, what Li doesn’t know-”

“But Lieutenant-Commander -”

“Shut up, Specs, I’m trying to concentrate.” *This one’s for you, Up. Just like every other.*

She pulled the trigger.

The explosion below far exceeded the power of her zapper. Taz shoved the ensign down and both Rangers covered their heads as stones and bits of cave rained down

on them.

“What the hell was that?”

Specs scrambled for the device that had earned her her nickname. “The Autobot seemed to have been carrying a load of particularly potent explosives. You destroyed it all right -”

“Along with half the cave,” said Taz, peering over the ledge. “And – uh oh.”

“They don’t look happy, do they?” Specs said, wiping her glasses on her shirt.

“Not at all.”

“I don’t think the Commander’s going to be very happy either, is she?”

“Shut up, Specs,” said Taz, swinging her zapper around her back. “Save your breath. We’ve got some running to do.”

“Of all the reckless, incomprehensible things you’ve done since you came to this ship, Lieutenant-Commander, *this* -” Commander Li threw her hands up in the air. “Attacking a robot base unprovoked! Completely blowing the cover of our entire spy operation on this planet! Destroying half the bloody cave system! You’re lucky you haven’t started another war!”

Taz’s jaw was locked, her fists clenched at her sides. Best to let her run herself out of steam, that’s what Taz had learned these past two years on the *Bright Eye*. It was the only way to deal with the Commander when she got into a mood like this. Her palms itched to hit something, though. She’d have to make a trip to the gym later. Or maybe find a mouthy private to use as a punching bag instead...

“I accepted your assignment here as a favour to Up,” Li said, now leaning heavily on the desk between them. “And because by all accounts you’ve always been an exceptional

Ranger. But believe me when I say that you have been *nothing* but trouble since you came to the *Bright Eye*, Lieutenant-Commander. Sulking in your room, picking fights in the mess hall, disobeying orders at every turn – you’re acting like a child. A reckless, lovesick *child*.”

Taz looked up, and her fists clenched even harder. *Lovesick?* Okay, *now* she wanted to hit something. Preferably the Commander.

“They always said that Up was the only one with any pull over you, and I think I’m starting to understand why. I believe it’s time you were reassigned, *Lieutenant*.”

Taz blinked in surprise.

“As of right now, you are no longer a Lieutenant-Commander on this ship. You are hereby demoted for insubordination, and you will consider yourself lucky that I’m not pursuing further action on the matter. There’s a transport heading for Earth tomorrow. I want you on it.”

It was all Taz could do to keep her voice steady. “Will that be all, Commander?”

“You’re dismissed.”

She managed to contain herself until she was in the corridor, and Commander Li’s door had closed behind her. “*Put a estúpido, yo te mostraré la insubordinación -*” She slammed her fists into the curved metallic wall, ignoring the ensigns scurrying as far out of her way as they could get. “*Put a engreído, sólo espera -*”

She sagged then, back against the opposite side of the corridor, and rubbed her hands. A demotion. And they were sending her back to Earth for reassignment, back to where he was...

Up would be so disappointed in her.

Who was she kidding? She’d abandoned him. He probably hated her.

Taz rubbed her face in her hands. She and Li had never

gotten along, but a *demotion*? She couldn't get off this fucking ship fast enough.

"*Adios*," she said to the Commander's door, giving an exaggerated salute. She turned on her heel and stalked off.

Up looked up and smiled as the door opened and Ty Tripp ran in, waving a colourful picture above his head, his mother and sister behind him. "Hey there, little Ranger!" he said, picking up the little boy and setting him on his lap. "What's that you've got there?"

"I made it for you, Up!" Ty exclaimed. "See? There's you, and there's your new starship, and there's all the dead goddamn robots you're going to kill!"

"Ty!" said Rosie, bending to give Up a friendly kiss. Little Ree reached out for him, and he settled her on his other knee. "Where are you learning language like that?"

Up had the grace to look sheepish.

"So how *are* you feeling about your new assignment?" Rosie said, settling herself in a chair and pulling off her shoes, wincing as she rubbed her feet.

Up frowned. "Well, I won't be killing any robots," he said, tickling Ty. "It's a peaceful mission. We've got to find someplace for all us humans to live now that -" *Now that we've effectively destroyed our own planet with all these blasted wars.*

Rosie watched him thoughtfully. "But how are you really feeling, Up?"

"Well, I can tell you I can't wait to get out of here," he said. "Two years cooped up in a hospital would drive anyone to madness."

"Good, and I'll try not to take offence to that," said Rosie, smiling. "I know you'll be fine. Dr. Renley tells me you've been doing really well in your therapy sessions."

A therapy session was one thing, though. Being back out

there, with a team to command, a mission to complete – that was another entirely.

He made sure to give the kids, and Rosie too, an extra big hug when they left today. “Thank you for everything,” he whispered, sincerely. He didn’t know how he’d have gotten through the last two years without them.

After they had gone, Up returned to his desk, and the mission roster he’d been sent that morning. The team of Rangers under his command was small, but one name stood out above the rest, the one that had haunted him every day since she’d left.

Taz.

She held the paper with the words on it, the words that had brought her here. *Reassigned to Starship 15A-2, she read again. Peaceful mission to an uncharted planet, accompanying several hundred civilian colonists. Commanding officer -*

Two letters.

“Up,” she said, looking at the hospital’s glassy facade.

She’d been standing here for a long time. This place, its sunshine, the laughing afternoon seemed so alien to her now that she’d grown accustomed to distance and darkness. People hurried by in either direction, and they were a study in contradiction. Worry and relief, mourning and joy, sickness and health. Families reunited, and some torn apart. None dared come close to her, for she was wearing her mask, the one she’d perfected, the one that made people take a step back, the one that made them leave her alone. Precisely what she wanted them to do.

She stood now, twenty feet from the door, unable to take a step further. She pretended to be a tough son of a bitch.

She was a coward.

“Taz?”

She turned to see Rosie, slimmer than she'd ever seen her, standing with her hands in her lab coat pockets and an analyzing look on her face.

"Hi," she said, her mask slipping a little. She stuck her hands in her own pockets.

"I thought you were off fighting robots on the *Bright Eye*," said Rosie. Her voice was not friendly.

"I was," Taz said, looking at the ground now, anywhere but those accusing eyes. "I've been – I've been reassigned."

Rosie wasn't an idiot, she could see the newly changed insignia on Taz's uniform, and she would know what it meant. "It's been a long time since you left, Taz."

A moment of silence. "How-" she stopped. "How is he?"

Rosie seemed to contemplate her answer. "I think you'll see the difference in him."

What does that mean? "Will he see me?" she asked, before she could regret it. She wouldn't blame him if he didn't want to. She was almost hoping he wouldn't.

Yes, she was a coward.

Rosie sighed. "Of course he'll see *you*," she said, and Taz frowned. "He's still in the same room." *You know where it is*, her eyes said, and it was another accusation.

"Thank you, Rosie," Taz said, and now it was decided, she would have to go in. She sought for something else to say. "How are – how are your little ones?"

"Ty starts school this year," Rosie said, her eyes softening just a little. "And Ree has already decided that she wants to be a Starship Ranger just like her daddy was."

Taz tried to smile, though it felt rusty and odd on her face.

"Go on," Rosie said. "Just – don't expect -"

The doctor shook her head and clamped her lips shut. Taz, a little perplexed, nodded and took that first step forward. Then another. Soon enough she was walking

through the hospital lobby, standing in the elevator, looking at the door she'd turned her back on so long ago. She felt as if someone else was controlling her body, like she was just a spectator in some unbidden act of puppetry. She wanted to turn and run again.

*What am I doing here? I made my choice two years ago.
Didn't I?*

Some invisible string made her knock.

"Come in."

It was his voice, the same one, gruff, drawling, familiar. A stabbing bit of hope penetrated her panicked haze. She pushed open the door.

He was sitting at a desk, looking through papers, his hair thick and silver, his moustache in place above his lip. He wore a simple G.L.E.E. t-shirt and sweats, and his feet were bare. She stood in the doorway, taking him in, trying to force her brain to catch up with the rest of her. He hadn't looked up yet. But surely he could hear her heart beating.

"Up?"

He went very still. Slowly he raised his eyes to where she stood, and blinked.

"Taz."

He stood then, and she could see that he'd been building muscle mass again, that his mobility was infinitely better than it had been when she'd left. There was just the slightest limp in his gait as he came around the desk and stood several feet away from her, staring at her the way she was staring at him.

She didn't know what to say to him, even though she had been the one to leave, and now the one to return. It wasn't fair, none of it was fair, but she waited for him to speak first.

"I wondered if you'd come," he said finally. "When I saw the mission roster."

That's not why I'm here. It was just the push she'd needed. She swung her fists together nervously.

"Do you... want to sit down?" Up said awkwardly. She took the chair he offered and he returned to his desk. The silence between them was worse than she could have ever imagined.

"So you're back on active duty," she said, her tone falsely bright.

"First mission back," he said, and his voice betrayed his nervousness.

"You look – you look good," she said, and she meant it.

"The doctors at the rehabilitation centre know what they're doing," he said.

Silence again.

"But a demotion, Taz," he said now. "What did you do?"

She shifted uncomfortably. *I lost control. I've been losing control since I left you.* "Let's just say Commander Li and I didn't always see eye to eye."

He must have known there was more to it than that, but he didn't press. His eyes flickered up to hers, and she was struck by the blueness of them, by how well she knew them, how she'd never forgotten them. He picked up the papers on his desk and shuffled them a few times.

"Have you been – happy, Taz?"

"Happy?" She was truly surprised by the question. "When have I ever been happy, Up?"

Hurt flashed across his face. *No, no, I didn't mean it like that. It's just been so long...* She shouldn't have come. She was just going to cause him more pain. She stood.

"I should go. I just thought I should see you before – before the mission began."

He looked disappointed, but he stood as well. "I'll see you on deck tomorrow then, Lieutenant."

He saw her to the door, and they both reached for it at

the same time. His left hand brushed her fingers, and suddenly she was back in his arms on Europa, on Qo'noS, in the moonlit steam of the physio centre. Her stomach felt like it was filled with nanobots. She'd thought two years would have been enough time. She'd been kidding herself.

"See you tomorrow," she told his feet, because if she looked at those blue eyes now she might lose it completely. She could feel him watching her as she hurried away.

The commander's uniform felt strange to him now, restrictive, heavy, like he was wearing someone else's Halloween costume and it didn't fit properly. He adjusted the black headband around his forehead and made sure his moustache was laying straight. It was a good parody of the man he'd used to be – would he be able to convince his team that he was still that man, that Starship Ranger?

Would he be able to convince himself?

He felt for the compact mirror lying in his pocket, and with one last look at the commander in the bathroom mirror, left his room. He didn't have anywhere to go, or anywhere to be, not yet. But he didn't feel like staying put.

Starship 15A-2 was a fast ship, built for deep-space travel and capable of traversing distances in days Up could have only dreamed of in his early career. The colonists he was responsible for had been loaded onto the ship months ago from Farm Planet, frozen in cryotubes, and so the ship's hallways were quiet despite its significant size. A small complement of Rangers were accompanying them, of course, but Up was hoping he wouldn't run into any - he wasn't quite ready to meet them yet. Just lifting off into space had sent his system into shock after two years on the ground. He was still trying to slow his pulse.

Keep it together, Up. Remember what Dr. Renley said. Breathe.

The layout of the ship was unfamiliar to him, and he was starting to wonder if he would be able to find his way back to his room when he saw a door labelled Recreation and Training: Target Practice, Holodeck, Gym.

The gym. Tentatively he pressed the panel to open the door.

She was there, of course, sparring with a punching bag, setting a furious pace, spinning and kicking, each impact sending a dull thud throughout the room. He was struck anew by her strength, her beauty. She'd been nothing but a dream to him for two years and now here she was, in the flesh, red bandana, dark eyes, fury and all. The door closed behind him with a loud whirring sound, and she whirled at him, fists raised.

"Oh," she said, dropping them again, grabbing a towel, and approaching. "Hi - hi, Up."

He watched her pick up her zapper, and sought for something to say that wasn't *dead God, you're beautiful*. "She's quite a ship, isn't she?"

She looked relieved at his choice of topic. "Three dozen cannons, super-light speed, and a holodeck? I'd say she's quite a ship. Is she yours?"

"A ship called 15A-2? Not likely. She belongs to the G.L.E.E. More of Space-Claw's new protocol, like these new *privates*, or whatever it is they call them, but I'm not a fan. A ship needs a name, dammit."

A pause. "You miss her, don't you?" Taz asked. "The *Cazadora*."

He didn't answer for a minute. "She was the first ship that was truly mine. I christened her myself, took her on her maiden voyage-" He drifted off. Neither of them mentioned her last.

"I've always wondered about that," said Taz, after a minute. "Why you chose a Spanish name for her."

“The Huntress?” Up smiled, a little shyly. “Reminded me of someone I knew.”

Taz blinked, several times, and appeared to be rendered speechless.

“O-M-D-G!”

Taz’s eyebrows disappeared underneath her hair. Up turned to see a Ranger in the blue uniform of a science officer, who squealed and tackled the lieutenant in a one-sided hug.

“*Phillipa!* Oh, ew, you’re kind of sweaty and gross.”

“Watch it, watch it, watch the zipper, are you *loco, chica?*”

“Phillipa, I didn’t know you were on this mission! And Charles too!” The Ranger threw her arms around Up, who patted her on the back, confused. She stood back and tossed short blond hair over her shoulder, surveying them both with her hands on her hips. “It’s February, remember? Like the month, but a person! You saved my life at the Galactic Ambassador’s Ball! You told me I would make a good Starship Ranger! And look, here I am, on my very first mission ever, and we’re all together again. Isn’t this wonderful?”

“*Jesucristo,*” said Taz. “You made it through the Academy?”

“I totally did!” February exclaimed. “Phillipa, girl, we have so much to catch up on! And I’m, like, so happy you two are still together, you are definitely the cutest couple I’ve ever seen. And I have an eye for these kinds of things. I can tell when two people are totally in love.”

Up and Taz looked at each other, and then back at February. “No,” said Up awkwardly. *Not anymore.* “We’re not-”

“Oh, but I’m totally interrupting!” February said. “I’m just looking for Commander Up, wanted to meet him in

person since it's my first mission and all, but I guess he's not here. I'll just be off then, I've got a meeting with this G.L.E.E. Ambassador guy Junior anyway. I'll let you two continue your little moment! Don't mind me! Just pretend I was never here!"

She gave them an overly obvious wink and skipped down the hallway.

"She still thinks-" said Taz.

"Yup," said Up. "Looks that way."

She shook her head and almost smiled, and his heart's reaction was far greater than it should have been. He should be angry, he should be upset that she'd left, but he'd never been able to bring himself to hate her. How could he blame her for seeking freedom when all he could offer her were chains?

He was going to have to pull out the mirror soon if his thoughts went any farther in this direction. He could feel his breathing getting shallow. "Have you ever used a holodeck before?" he asked, gesturing at the door to the room adjacent.

"No," she said. "Can it really be programmed to look like anywhere?"

"If you have the know-how, it can *be* anywhere," he said, pressing a few buttons on the panel next to the door. "Where would you like to go?"

"I – I don't know," she said, watching him work the panel and frowning.

"I can make it into Europa," he said, "If you feel like dancing. Or that Graali moon if you're in the mood for battling giant snakes. Or I can even make it look like the *Cazadora* -"

"Or Qo'noS?" she said, and then immediately clapped a hand over her mouth.

His body reacted to her words before anything else – it

gave a start, and then Up could feel his human half start to shake. He closed his eyes and put his hands on his knees, willing himself to stay calm. *Breathe in, breathe out.*

Taz put a tentative hand on his arm. "I'm – I'm sorry, Up, I don't know what I was thinking. I never meant–"

"S'okay," he managed, straightening, opening his eyes. "Just – just a sore spot, I guess. That and robots. Still having trouble getting used to them, too."

He didn't know why he was saying it, shouldn't he be pretending to be strong? But he'd tried pretending before, and it had only pushed her away. Maybe she could handle the truth. She deserved to know the truth, anyhow.

"Taz?" he said, leaning against the wall. Her eyes reflected the lights of the holodeck panel beside him. "I don't know if I'm ready for this mission."

The look on her face was one he hadn't seen there before. For a moment, he wondered if it might be fear. Then it was replaced with determination, and she seized him.

"You are ready," she said, a gloved hand on either of his arms. "They wouldn't have discharged you if you weren't, wouldn't have given you this command. Your doctors must have believed in you. The Galactic League believes in you." Her eyes were locked on his. "I believe in you."

A tear escaped his eye, and she saw it, but didn't say anything more. She released him. "Besides, you have nothing to worry about. This is a peaceful mission. No robots. No battles. No problem."

"So, this is the rescue squad, huh? Ay, look at you. None of you have what it takes to serve under Commander Up."

Taz was fuming. They were idiots. They were all idiots. The starship had arrived at the alien planet. The *idiot* G.L.E.E. Ambassador – as luck would have it, none other than Space-Claw's son Junior – had sent February down to

the planet *by herself*, and now they'd received a distress signal from her com badge. The peaceful colonization endeavour had just become a rescue mission, and she was stuck with a squad of Rangers that must have been recruited straight from the circus. A Farm Planet bumpkin, a zap-happy private, and fresh from the *Bright Eye*, Specs – the girl who couldn't run ten metres without tripping over her own feet.

“*The Commander Up?*”

She turned her back to hide the small smile that crept onto her face, despite her frustration. It was nice to know that his reputation was intact. She half-listened to their chatter, checking the charge on her zapper, thinking of what it had been like to see Up in uniform again, looking so much like his old self. It had given her hope. Of course he was nervous. He hadn't been on active duty for two years. Who wouldn't be? But as long as he could put up a front for the team...

“... but now, he's like a total wimp. Like the other day, he was in the cafeteria, just *crying* in front of everybody.”

Taz turned. “Hey!” she barked, one hand raised threateningly at Krayonder. “You got something to say about the Commander?”

“Uh – no -” The private said, suddenly looking worried. “Oh – I forgot, you guys fought in the Robot Wars together!”

“Sí, *we fought in the fucking Robot Wars together*. “Yeah, Krayonder,” she spat. “Where he saved my life a hundred times.” *And gave his human life for mine...*”

“Well, yeah, he was like, a super-soldier!”

Rage filled her. Stupid private shooting his mouth off. Time for damage control. “What do you mean, *was?*” she said, swinging her fists together dangerously.

Taz was silent as the drop pod descended toward the planet below. Tootsie was nattering on to Krayonder about something or other, but she wasn't listening. She stood with her back to the wall, one foot up, and her zipper semi-raised in the direction of the dead goddamn robot that *idiota* Junior had sent down with them. Is this what humanity was reduced to? Now that they'd conquered the robots, they'd decided re-enslaving them would be the next logical step? Inhibitor chip or no, robots couldn't be trusted, she didn't care what Space-Claw or his son said – she'd always known that son of a bitch Admiral was *loco*.

And Up – Up stood beside her, his eyes downcast. He seemed calmer now, even if it had taken a whole dead goddamn song-and-dance routine for her to get him to that point. She stole a look at him. His first encounter with the crew hadn't exactly gone well. She hadn't realized how changed he really was, what Rosie must have tried to warn her about at the hospital. Who was he, this man going on about hurt feelings and apples in your candy basket, pulling out a mirror for a sappy pep talk, crying on her shoulder in front of everyone? The commander who'd tried to slink out of going down to the planet at all?

At least he wasn't cowering behind her anymore, as he'd done when the robot first appeared. It had been all she could do to ignore the fact that Up's hands were on her hips, and that she was starting to feel very warm again just thinking about it. *What are you doing to me, Up, you big idiota?*

She was over him. She had to be. The man next to her – he just wasn't her Up anymore. She'd thought that maybe she might have found him again – but she'd lost that Up a long time ago.

The drop pod landed with a light jolt. Up looked down at

Taz, whose face was set in an angry soldier's mask, her eyes not leaving the robot, her zipper clenched tightly in her hands. "Do you remember," she'd said on the deck of the starship, "When we met at my *quinceañera*? And you saved me from those killer robots who tried to string me up like a *piñata* and smash me open so they could eat my guts?"

"Yeah," he'd nodded. How could he forget? "I destroyed them."

"That was tough!"

She'd been trying so hard, he could tell, even through her disappointment with him. "You told me something once," she'd said, swinging her hands in that way she had. "That no matter how hard you get knocked down, you've got to get back up. So now it's your turn – get back up!"

He'd caught a glimpse then, for a moment, of the Taz he loved best. The one with her defences down, the one he'd last seen laughing in the sand on that beach in Mexico-

Aw, shit.

He was still in love with her.

And he'd let her down.

"All right, boys and girls," he said, trying desperately to sound like the commander he used to be. "Follow me."

It was nighttime on the alien world, and they'd landed in some sort of a jungle, rife with buzzing sounds and all kinds of imaginative noises that gave them all pause. Specs' namesake spectrometer indicated that the science officer's com signal was coming from the direction of a series of tunnels not far off. Zappers came out, and were held at the ready.

It was certainly the most – colourful - team he'd ever been in command of. Krayonder seemed to be on the verge of a panic attack. The Megagirl robot unit – which still made his heart quiver - kept up a steady stream of quips

about the weakness of her human allies. And then there was Taz.

“I’m going to shoot this metal bitch!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down there Taz!” he said, casting a worried glance at the robot and reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder. As nervous as the Megagirl unit made him, that ambassador Junior said that she was part of the team and he wouldn’t put it past Taz to follow through on her threat. He wouldn’t be given a very good review on his first mission back if he let one of his team members shoot another. “She’s just telling jokes.”

When Taz and the robot continued to make threatening gestures at each other, he gently turned his lieutenant in the opposite direction. “Let’s all split up. Everybody look for February by themselves – come on, Taz.”

He took her hand, almost without thinking, and the look she gave him was full of confusion. She pulled hers away. It felt a bit like a punch in the gut. *Oh. Right. I can’t do that anymore.*

The odd-looking mammal encased in mucus should have been their first indication that something seriously strange was going down on this planet. But nobody was expecting an overly large, maggot-like creature to burst from its stomach – even Taz cried out in alarm as the Rangers huddled together, zappers raised against the shadowy forms that suddenly surrounded them.

They were giant bugs. Every last one of them, buzzing, towering, slimy, deadly. And they were everywhere.

Dammit, dammit, dammit. This didn’t look good. Up tried to keep the Rangers calm, ignoring Taz’s look of exasperation. “Until we know these bugs mean business, nobody shoot, dammit, nobody shoot!” He didn’t want any of his Rangers’ blood shed without good cause.

“Kill, kill, kill.”

It was the Megagirl unit, her hand glowing red, sending zapper fire toward the advancing shadows. The monstrous insects reared and bellowed, and came toward them, spitting, hissing, swarming. There was no choice now. Up tried to resist the urge to close his eyes as he took aim, squeezing the triggers of his zapper pistols even as his stomach seized up for doing it.

Somewhere in the midst of the zapper fire and squealing insects, he lost track of Taz. Panic seized him, even though he knew she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. *Where had she gone?* They seemed to be gaining the advantage - the bugs began to fall back, and then her voice out of the darkness.

“Stop, stop! Stop shooting, I got her!”

Up sagged with relief as Taz emerged, pushing an unconscious February before her. Krayonder rushed forward to lift the science officer over his shoulder, and Taz swung her zapper off her back. “All right, Rangers, let’s get out of here, come on!”

The team made for the drop pod, but then Tootsie Noodles’ voice rang out above the din -

“Hey where’s Megagirl – *Megagirl!*”

Up paused on the ramp of the drop pod. The Megagirl unit was still surrounded by bugs, their stingers ineffective against her metal body but nonetheless making it difficult for her to escape the swarm.

“Come on!” Taz said again, stopping just ahead of him.

“We gotta go save her!” Tootsie pleaded. There was just something about the look on his face... Up knew what that look meant.

“Up, she’s a stupid robot, let’s go!”

Up looked between them, Taz and Tootsie and the robot, and groaned. “Oh, Taz, I can’t leave her behind! The look on Tootsie’s face would make me cry like a baby for

weeks!”

Taz was looking at him as if he'd gone insane.

“Wait for me,” he said. *Please. Don't give up on me. What if it was you back there?* “I'll be right back.”

He stepped off the ramp and into the insect swarm. “Dammit!” he heard Taz exclaim, and then she was beside him, and the rest of the Rangers were fighting too. Megagirl extracted herself from the fray, and they started to fall back.

Maybe he should have, but Up never expected the robot to leave them behind.

The planet was disgusting. Sticky. Hot. Buzzing. Populated with giant insects. Taz had never considered herself a squeamish person, but this planet just might change her mind. And the G.L.E.E. were hoping to start a human colony here?

There were a thousand things she could think to call that *pedazo de mierda* robot Megagirl, but none of them were bad enough. They'd been alternating between running and walking for hours, attempting to keep out of sight of the bugs, though they never seemed to be out of earshot of them. Even good-natured Tootsie was on edge, and Taz wasn't sure who was going to kill Krayonder first, her or Specs. And Up -

It was all his fault. His fault for going back for the robot, his fault for not being the leader, the man she needed him to be. His fault for being so – so *soft*.

Maybe it was the heat. Maybe it was Krayonder's incessant wailing. But when Up started talking about expressing themselves through “I feel” statements, something snapped, and Taz let out a sound that was part animal and all frustration.

“You want to know how *I* feel?”

Up straightened and rested his hands on his hips. “Well –

of course I do, Taz.”

“I feel like-” She could feel the rage that had been slowly building up inside of her since the day of his injury, the day everything had changed. It was boiling hot now and there was no more keeping it in. “- cutting open your belly and filling it with jelly!”

The morons behind her gasped. That insult hadn’t even made sense. Her brain was buzzing with anger. Or maybe it was the dead goddamn bugs.

Up, looking perplexed, put his arm around her shoulders. “Taz, is something bothering you?”

Is something bothering me? Is something bothering me? She shrugged him off of her, and then did what she always did when someone was pissing her off, though she’d never done it to Up before.

She punched him, across the face. He doubled over - he hadn’t been expecting it.

“Ow! My mug – that hurt.”

I know it hurt! It hurt because you are *soft* now. You are so soft you couldn’t even handle leaving a *robot* behind! And now *we* -” she strode over to stand with the other Rangers. “- are all dead!” She gave an angry salute. And then she saw the look in his eyes.

“Taz – please, stop – now my feelings are hurt, too.”

The expression on his face was eating into her heart, but it only made her angrier. He had no right to look so helpless, so pathetic. Not Up. “You want me to stop?”

He nodded.

“Hit me back.”

He just stared at her, so she hit him again. This time he fell to the ground.

“Hit me back!”

Slowly he raised his head, and they stared at each other, Taz and the man she used to love.

“You -” She’d never been good at words. She tried to find the ones that explain how she was feeling, why she was doing this, why the pain in his eyes was hurting her worse than she was hurting him. “You are a sad, spayed little puppy.” She crouched and whimpered for emphasis, knowing full well that now she was just being cruel. She stood again. “And the old Up – the Up who made me what I am – he would have never let this happen.”

She took a breath. “And now I see. I see that Up – he did die in that Robot War.” Standing over him, she reached down, and gently touched his face, which he had turned away. A thousand emotions overtook her, and when she spoke next, she spoke softly. “And I will never get him back.”

The sight of him, crumpled on the ground, not resisting her tirade, not fighting back, not getting back up when he needed to - that was what drove her over the edge. She caught the edge of his *estupido* false moustache and pulled. It came off with a sharp ripping sound. Complete shock filled his face.

“My moustache! You ripped it off – you ripped off my moustache!”

“*Sí*,” she said as she pressed Alejandro’s masterpiece to her upper lip. She slammed her fists together, and then pointed at herself, wondering if she had finally, truly lost her mind. “I am in charge of this mission now! So everybody who wants to live – come with me.”

She left him huddled on the ground, and told herself that she didn’t care if he followed.

She was lying.

Chapter Twenty-three

Starship, Part Two

Up needed a smoke.

It was strictly against Rosie's orders, but to hell with it. What was the point of having a second chance at life if you couldn't enjoy its small pleasures anymore? He twirled the cigar between his fingers for a moment before lighting it, and bringing it to his mouth. The heady smoke was calming, and he closed his eyes briefly in satisfaction.

He'd been pacing his ready room, slowly, his limp more pronounced after the day's adventures. *Up* had assumed that Space-Claw had assigned him to this mission because it was supposed to be an easy one – escort the colonists to the alien planet, scope it out, drop them off with their gear, and then coast back to Earth – but that was clearly not the case. Giant insects and a rogue Megagirl unit – and now the news that a G.L.E.E. starship had even crashed here eighteen years ago, with one solitary survivor. Thank dead God for Bug. They'd still be trapped on the planet - if not already becoming a tasty spider snack - if it wasn't for that boy.

Hit me back!

Taz's voice, her words, echoed in his brain, and he took another drag to try and ease the pain splitting his heart. She had never looked at him like that. She had never spoken to him like that. And now it was all too clear what she really thought of him, of what was left of him when the super-soldier was gone.

And now I see. I see that Up – he did die in that Robot

War.

It *was* an afterlife of sorts, he supposed. He remembered everything – finding the tallest tree so that he could watch the stars from its branches as a child, kissing that cute female cadet on a dare from Tripp in their Academy days. The exhilaration of his time as a fighter pilot, having one too many whiskeys at the bar, frowning in the mirror at the premature grey developing at his temples. But mostly he remembered Taz – she coloured every part of his life since she'd come into it thirteen years ago. Her spunk, her bravery, her determination, her temper, her laugh – the one he cherished because he got to hear it so rarely. She was everywhere, and all of him, and the only thing that mattered – the only thing that had mattered for a long time.

They had come so close – she had returned his kiss on Qo'noS, and come to him that night in the hospital on Earth. She'd slept in his bed like a lover would - even if they couldn't really be lovers, not then - and she had stayed by his side every day as they danced, as they fought, as *he* fought to be the man she wanted him to be.

He hadn't fought hard enough. For himself, or for her.

He didn't blame her for leaving. He didn't blame her for any of it.

And I will never get him back.

He'd just wanted to talk, when he asked her to watch a movie with him. A little nostalgia never hurt. He'd take her friendship again, if that was all he could get - but it didn't even seem like she wanted to give him that.

The moustache business had been a low blow, though.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Up choked on a lungful of smoke and coughed. “Oh, yeah, Specs – I did.”

He had grown strangely attached to this rag tag team of his. A bunch of kids, really, relatively inexperienced and

shit-scared by the day's events by his reckoning – anyone in their right mind would be. And he was responsible for them – not just for their work, but for their well-being. “Been a heck of a day, hasn't it, Specs?”

Taz had been lurking in the hallways next to Up's ready room for a while now. She'd tried the gym, but found herself too distracted for reps, so she'd started running laps in the corridors. She'd passed Tootsie and that *puta* of a robot Megagirl on their way to the brig and thought about stopping to give the *idiota* a hand, but the country pumpkin was going on about meaningless stars and hearts made of steel and she wanted nothing to do with *that* conversation. February had shrieked “Phillipa!” and looked like she was pouncing for another hug, but Taz had managed to dodge between her and the newcomer Bug, who may have saved all their *culos* today but sure had inexplicable taste in women. She ran for what felt like miles, but she couldn't outrun her guilt.

Her path took her past Up's door before she'd even realized where she was, just in time to see a February-less Bug go in and that *idiota* Krayonder leave with a sleeping Specs in his arms and a smug look on his face. Was everyone on this damned starship coupling up? For some reason the thought made her even angrier.

She ran past, and then slowed to a walk. The team was a mess. This whole mission was a mess. Rampaging bugs, a double-crossing robot, and now missing warp crystals? And Up's suggestion to the team was to go and take a *bubble bath*?

Without meaning to, Taz turned and walked in the other direction.

Her outburst on the planet had been ridiculous, and cruel, but she'd needed to say it, all of it, she just couldn't

pretend anymore than nothing had changed. He wasn't the same Up anymore. She just had to accept that.

"Taz and I – we were fighting together..."

She froze just outside of his door. Who was he talking to? *Bug?*

"... but suddenly, Taz got flanked – by two of those terrible Autobots."

She listened, eyes wide. They had never talked about that day.

"I ran to help her -"

She couldn't, she couldn't hear any more. She stumbled backwards and ran headlong into Junior, who looked equally surprised to see her and was giving off the distinct scent of weed. "Get out of my way," she growled, and took off at a run again.

She found herself at the gym again, her refuge, her salvation, the only way she'd gotten through Up's time on the *Eagle*, the only solution to the heartbreak of the *Bright Eye*, the only means to forget again when memories of her mama or Pedro came unbidden to her mind. *Up told me he loved me that day. And then he died for me, and even when I had him back from the dead it wasn't enough, I was selfish and I left. I left him. And I never said it back.*

I never told him that I loved him too.

The punching bags, the weights, the target practice – none of it appealed to her right now. Her gaze fell on the glowing panel next to the holodeck.

"It can be anywhere – where would you like to go?"

She thought of the question he'd asked her at that first uncomfortable reunion at the hospital. "*Have you been – happy, Taz?*"

She tried to remember what happy felt like. She had vague memories of it, laughing and riding on Up's shoulders, the way he listened to her read even when he

didn't understand the language. The exuberant celebration after her rookie mission, the first time Up had held her on that Graali desert moon. The stupid thrill that went through her when their eyes met as they danced. And the overwhelming feeling of him kissing her, him loving her, even as they waited to meet their deaths on Qo'noS.

All of that felt like a long time ago.

Where have I been happy?

The answer was simpler than it seemed.

Taz bit her lip, and jabbed at a button on the panel. "Where's Specs when you need her?" she muttered, and set to work.

Up had seen a lot of things in his life, but one thing he'd never expected to see was a massive, deadly scorpion on the deck of his starship, especially not one who seemed to be engaged in conversation with the newest member of his team. Specs hid behind him as Taz crouched and aimed her ever-present zapper, unable to fire for fear of hitting February, who was clutched in its claws.

The hovering mosquitoes made him nervous too.

"Bug!" he said, putting his hand on the back of the young Ranger. "What are all them googly noises coming out of your mouth – you chatting with this thing?"

"What's going on, Bug?" Taz echoed, and for a moment it seemed like they were a team again. If the situation wasn't so serious he might have smiled.

"I'm – I'm trying to save February!"

February might be an idiot, but it was she and Bug who had figured out Junior's – and presumably Space-Claw's – plan to use the eggs they'd hoped to have implanted in her chest to create some kind of mutant weaponry. The thought infuriated him – Space-Claw's latest foray into mad science. Creating robot-human hybrids couldn't have been

twisted enough for him. And then there was the knowledge that he'd been pulled out of the hospital for this mission because the G.L.E.E. thought him incompetent – Krayonder unstable, February the bottom of her class, Taz fresh off a demotion. It all made sense now.

But it didn't make him any less mad.

"Everybody – February – I'm not who I say I am."

Up frowned, his attention back on Bug.

"Pincer here, he – he helped me switch bodies so that I could get to know all of you."

"What?" said February slowly.

Bug turned to her. "February, I'm not a Starship Ranger. I'm not even a human. I'm – I'm a bug."

The science officer let out a sound somewhere between a gasp and a coo.

"I'm a bug in a human body."

The scorpion started making its clicking and burbling noises again, and then suddenly the starship rocked beneath them. Up was thrown to the deck next to Taz. They exchanged a quick look before getting to their feet as Megagirl's monotone voice came over the communication system.

"Core set to overload, complete meltdown imminent. Pray to your dead God, puny humans, your fiery deaths are inevitable."

"It's not over yet, man!" bellowed Krayonder. He sent a spray of zapper fire at the scorpion and its henchmosquitoes. "Run! I've got him pinned down like a piece of Arturian poontang!"

It was instinctual. They ran, the high-pitched sound of buzzing wings close behind.

Krayonder's screams echoed down the corridors after them, and Up stopped. *Stupid, reckless, brave boy.* "Krayonder, no!"

Taz's face was set. "Let's go! Those *cucarachas* can't be far behind!"

"So you thought I was stupid, huh?"

Taz threw her hands up in exasperation as February whirled on Bug. "Too stupid to figure out you were a bug?"

"But you didn't figure it out and I told you twice!"

February gasped indignantly. "Don't talk to me, Bug, I've had enough of your *lies*."

She ran to Up and let out a sob against his shoulder. He patted her back. If there was one thing he understood, it was heartache. "Come here, come here. Let it out, let it out." He glared at Bug. "Look what you did."

"No, no, I never meant for anyone to get hurt, Up, you've got to believe me!"

"I-" He wanted to. Bug had proven himself a good friend. But a real bug? Up turned away. "I don't know what means anything anymore."

Taz looked like she was going to have a fit. "*Día de los Muertos*," she said, striding over and pushing Bug away. "He can't be trusted – and neither can you."

She wasn't trying to insult him. She was just stating a fact.

"Specs!" she called. "Go find Tootsie, reverse the core overload!"

The hum of the mosquitoes' wings grew closer.

"They're coming!" bawled February.

"Dammit!" Taz said, looking around and then grabbing Up's zapper out of his hand. "Give me this." She held it out to February. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

"Uh, I think so, I've used a blow dryer before."

Taz considered this. "Okay. If something attacks you, you pretend you're trying to blow dry its hair. Now go lock yourself in your room!"

"Okay, got it!" February called over her shoulder as she

left. Taz swung her zapper over her shoulder and started in the direction of the buzzing sounds.

Fear overtook him.

“Wait, Taz! Where are you going?”

She turned back to him. “I’m going to go mislead those damn bugs and buy us some time.”

No. “Taz – that sounds awfully dangerous.” You’re going to kill yourself – you’re going to sacrifice yourself for the rest of us.

Her voice changed, for a moment. “I know, Up. An old friend taught me once what it was like to laugh in the face of danger.” Her face hardened again. “So you two *idiotas* -” she pointed at him and Bug in turn, and then lifted her zapper high. “Stay out of my way!”

She was gone.

“Taz!”

He couldn’t let her do it, he couldn’t let her face them alone. The part of him that was afraid, the soft part, the part that he had let overtake him since his injury – it was quivering, it kept his feet planted firmly on the deck where they stood, when before he would never have hesitated to run after her, stand strong beside her, save her if he had to – *just like on Qo’noS.*

He looked at Bug, who looked just as lost, just as broken.

Well, Up, do you still love her or not?

And suddenly his feet were moving.

“Taz!”

She welcomed the adrenaline, the rush, that danger always brought her. The incessant buzzing hummed louder in her ears and she turned to make sure the mosquitoes had seen her, that they would follow her, away from Specs and the overloaded core, away from the Ranger’s quarters

where February would be heading-

Away from Up.

The starship's lights flashed red as she raised her zapper high. "Come and get me, you stupid bugs! *Sigueme, sigueme!* Follow the leader!"

Suddenly a sharp, deep stabbing sensation struck her in the back. "What the -"

A second stab. The pain hit then, and it was unlike anything she'd ever experienced - almost like someone was digging into her with a dull spoon. She could feel the mosquitoes' venom spreading out from the wound into her bloodstream, icy and burning all at the same time. A strangled sound came out of her throat, and she felt her knees give way. She barely felt the third stab, just struggled to take in enough air as she lay immobile on the floor and listened to the horrendous sucking sounds of three giant mosquitoes drinking her life away.

Well, she never thought *this* was how she was going to go.

"Taz!"

Up?

"Oh, Taz!"

He came after me.

She tried to say his name, but all that came out was a whimper.

"Get off her, you damn bugs!"

Suddenly the pressure on her back lessened, and she felt the mosquitoes' proboscises slide one by one from her body, each with a sickening lurch. With great effort, she turned her head to see what was going on.

"You bugs want blood?" Up growled, unbuckling the straps of his utility belt. *What was he doing?* "Then take it!"

No, Up -

“Come on, I said take some!”

One of the mosquitoes attacked, the squelching sound as it stabbed him drowned out by Up’s bellow. Then he laughed.

“Is that all you got? I said do it!”

Up, stop, please -

Another stabbing sound, another cry of pain, but he was still egging them on. Taz struggled to push herself up. The feeling was returning to her limbs.

“Come on big fella, it’s all you can eat!”

She managed to get to her knees as the third mosquito struck.

“You – damn – bugs -”

“No!” she cried, her arm outstretched helplessly as he fell, the mosquitoes still stuck to him, still drinking, still killing him.

“Up -”

He wasn’t moving.

“Damn you!” she cried. Her voice broke. “Damn you, you damn fool! Damn you and your big damn heart!”

The corridor was quiet for all but the greedy gulping of the monsters.

She couldn’t watch, she couldn’t see him die again. Die for *her* again. *Why? Why after all this time – after everything I did to you -*

Then Up coughed.

“You want blood?”

Taz raised her head.

“Then take it.”

Up got to his feet, slowly, incredibly, and pulled one of the mosquitoes’ proboscis out from where it was lodged in his abdomen. He plunged it straight into his human heart instead.

“TAKE – IT – ALL!”

Taz raised her arms to shield her face as one by one the mosquitoes burst in a ferocious display of blood and guts. She managed to find her feet as they fell lifeless to the deck. For a moment, all was silent.

She blinked and pointed at Up, and then at the insects' corpses. "Up! How – how did you –"

"Make them violently explode?" he said, casually buckling up his utility belt again.

"Yeah," she said, still staring at him.

He was out of breath. "I raised my heartbeat – using breathing exercises."

She nodded slowly.

"Their puny bodies must not have been able to handle all my blood! Bug was right – I just needed to learn how to kill – with my heart."

She had no idea what he was talking about. But it didn't matter. She felt like laughing.

"I killed them all, Taz! I killed them all! I'm still a killer!" He threw his hands up in the air, his excitement plain, and catching, his voice rising. "Oh, I'm still a killer!"

"That's great!" she shouted back, and he opened his arms and she flew into them without a second thought, something amazing bubbling up inside her as he lifted her clear off the ground and swung her around as he hadn't done since she was a cadet at the Academy. "Oh, Taz!"

He set her down, his hands still on her waist, hers on his shoulders. "You know, Up," she said, and she couldn't stop her eyes from smiling. "I used to think that I was the proof you didn't need balls to be tough." He looked down, but she continued. "But now I know – you! *You* are the proof that you don't need a tiny skin sack of the testicles to be one tough son of a bitch!"

"Thanks, Taz," he said, and there was a light in his eyes she hadn't seen there in years. He gripped her arm, and she

gripped his back. “Now come on, let’s go help out the rest of the crew. Quick – hop on my back. I can run faster than the two of us combined.”

It was silly, it was ridiculous even, but there was no way she was turning that offer down. He helped her climb up and they charged, shouting out their rage, their joy, their exuberance. Shouting out together.

Up felt taller, stronger, faster than he’d felt in years as he ran with Taz perched on his back, relishing the closeness of her, not even trying to stop the silly smile spreading across his face. For a brief moment, she rested her chin on his shoulder, her head pressed against his, and he could smell her, the delicate scent of her still present under the blood and mosquito guts.

He'd almost forgotten what hope felt like. This was it.

They came upon February, her hand pressed against the airlock door, through which Bug was just visible. He had the scorpion impaled upon a long rod. Up set Taz quickly down on the ground and they looked at each other before turning to the scene before them.

“Why did you lie to me, Bug?” February cried through the glass.

“February-” Bug said, breathing heavily. “At first I just want to help you escape from that hatchery. But I knew I loved you the second I laid eyes on you in that mucus sac.”

I knew I loved you... Up’s eyes darted toward Taz. She was staring at Bug and February, but she seemed to be seeing through them. He couldn’t pinpoint when he’d known that he loved Taz. She’d snuck up on him, invaded his life, a feisty teenager with a long braid, a talented Ranger rising through the ranks, a woman who had taught him to dance. The only person who cared enough about him to challenge him to be better than he was.

Bug's voice betrayed his tears. February stood motionless beside the airlock panel, and Up suddenly understood what was happening.

"I know the truth now, everybody. I – I'm not a Starship Ranger. I'm a bug. But we've got a saying on Bug World, huh? The needs of the many bugs outweigh the needs of the few bugs." He tapped his chest, and his voice broke. "Or the one bug. I never really understood that until now."

"Bug," said Up, and he felt Taz look up at him. "You may be a damn bug, but you are the finest Starship Ranger that I have ever seen." Taz raised her hand in a salute, and he joined her. "It's been an honour to be your commander, Bug."

Bug composed himself, and returned the salute. "Thanks, Up. It's been a ride." He turned then to the woman still standing motionless, to the barrier between them. "February, I want you to know that even though I lied about being a bug, I meant everything else. You are the most beautiful, the funniest and – and the smartest girl I've ever met." He seemed to steady himself. "Do it now."

They stared at each other for a long moment, and as they did, Up felt Taz's small, gloved hand slip into his.

February's voice, when she spoke, was not quite steady. "Goodbye, Bug."

Taz didn't like funerals, but she had attended many over her career. She watched as Tootsie and Specs lowered the box with Bug's remains – those they had been able to find – onto the Bug World soil and stood with her fists clenched as Up came to stand beside her.

"Ten-hut!"

All four of the Rangers – and the one Megagirl unit – under Up's command stood at attention. Krayonder was alive and well, though sporting a rather nasty head wound.

Junior had gotten what was coming to him when he was attacked by infant bugs while attempting to destroy the colony and steal Space-Claw's desired eggs. Specs had managed to stabilize the reactor core, and since it turned out the warp crystals had never actually been missing at all, they would soon be returning to Earth to seek out a more suitable planet for their cryofrozen colonists to live on – with perhaps enough evidence this time to turn the rest of the G.L.E.E. against Space-Claw for good. Megagirl's inhibitor chip hadn't yet been restored, but whatever new emotion it was that Tootsie had gotten her to download, it seemed to be keeping her from killing anyone. Taz didn't want to admit it, but the robot was starting to seem almost – human.

Maybe having your best friend become part-robot himself put things into perspective for you.

“We are gathered here today to pay our final respects to our honoured dead – Bug – who we lay to rest, here in his native soil.”

Taz gazed across the alien landscape. There had never been a funeral for her mama, or her aunt and cousins. Pedro had been only one of hundreds to die the day the robot fleet had been destroyed. And Tripp – as far as she knew, Rosie had never had the chance to bid her husband a proper goodbye either.

February's gasping sobs pierced her thoughts. Taz remembered suddenly how she'd felt when she thought Up was dead, when she'd woken up in that hospital to the end of her world.

How could I have let him go – after that?

Up was continuing his eulogy.

“... but I like to think that you're still out there – somewhere.”

“Would you settle for somewhere right here?”

The funeral party turned to see a great, orange ant-like creature with bulbous blue eyes looking hopefully toward them. The other Rangers rushed to the far side of the clearing.

“It’s a damn bug!” she said, wishing for the zapper she’d stupidly left in the drop pod. Up put his arm out protectively in front of her.

“No, guys, it’s me, Bug!”

Up took a step forward, his arm still outstretched. “Bug?”

“Yeah! I know I look a little different, but you see when my body died up there – I woke up down here.”

And Taz watched in amazement, mixed perhaps with a little revulsion, as February proved herself to be far more understanding, and forgiving, and selfless, than she had ever been, and kissed the insect square on the... mandibles.

“I love you Bug! I love you so much!”

Up was beaming, and Taz felt a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. His fatherly pride really was kind of cute. Almost endearing. She reached her hand up toward him -

“Well, tarnation, y’all! This calls for a celebration of sorts!”

Tootsie took Megagirl by the hand, and Taz took a step back.

“Whaddya say we turn this here funeral – into a wedding?”

Was he *kidding*? He was asking the *robot* to marry him? She looked at Up, but there was no fear in his face now, only delight.

The ceremony was over almost as quickly as the proposal had been, and when Tootsie pulled his new wife in for a kiss, Up put his arm around Taz’s shoulders. She did the same to him.

They fit together perfectly. But she’d always known that.

As Bug's relatives and friends buzzed in to congratulate the happy couples, they turned away, briefly, to give them privacy. Up bent his head to hers.

"I think this calls for a wedding dance tonight." His voice was soft, and his eyes turned shyly toward his feet. "Will you save one for me?"

Taz suddenly had to blink, very rapidly. She nodded, and smiled.

"Si."

Epilogue

And Now We Dance

Junior Claw would surely be turning in his slimy, larvae-lined grave if he could see the scene on the deck of Starship 15A-2 tonight. Six Starship Rangers didn't quite make a party, and the colonists on board were still in their unexciting cryofrozen state, so Up had given permission for Bug to invite a number of his kinsmen up to the ship for Tootsie and Megagirl's impromptu wedding celebration. The deck was buzzing, quite literally, with large glittery wings and shiny carapaces in every direction. The happy couple were surrounded by curious insects, listening to the romantic musings of a little purple fellow Bug had introduced to them as Roach. Krayonder was chasing Specs around the dance floor, and February was rubbing noses – did ants have noses? - with her new alien boyfriend in the corner.

It was a happy scene. Full of joy, and life, and love.

Up pulled at the collar of his white dress shirt, feeling uncomfortably warm in the fancy duds February had managed to get the replicator to cough up for him - he'd been starting to get used to his commander's uniform again. He stood to the side and his eyes traced the room, seeking out a red bandana, a Mexican temper, a pair of dark eyes.

Where is she?

He didn't want to do it, but after a few minutes' fruitless searching, he tapped February on the shoulder. "Have you seen Taz? Is she coming tonight?"

February looked confused.

“I mean Phillipa,” Up said quickly. “Have you seen Phillipa lately?”

“Oh, Phillipa!” February said, smiling and tickling one of Bug’s antennae with her finger. “She had better be coming, it took me long enough to talk her into wearing the dress I replicated for her, and it’s just the sweetest thing!”

“Thanks, Feb,” Up said, nodding at Bug, who gave him a very large, bulbous wink – could ants wink? Bug was probably the only person in the galaxy – besides Rosie, of course, who knew everything – who knew why he would be looking for Taz tonight.

He left the party deck, and thought about knocking on the door to her room, but his feet took him elsewhere. They knew where she would be.

He was surprised when he entered the gym to find it empty. The punching bags hung still and quiet, the weights untouched on the floor. Then his eyes fell on the illuminated holodeck panel, and a door left slightly ajar. Moonlight, real, earth-bound moonlight, streamed through the crack.

He hesitated, and then crossed the distance to the holodeck. He gave the door a tentative push, and found himself in Mexico.

He knew the place right away. Starlit waves crashed upon white sand and a rocky shore. He could smell the sea, taste the salt in the air. High above him the stark, crumbling ruins of *Zama* looked on. And there she was, sitting on a tall black rock, hugging her knees, looking out at the ocean. She turned her head at his approach.

Up stopped, several feet from her, and they looked at each other. Her bandana had been discarded for the night and her hair lay flat against her head, making her eyes seem somehow bigger, more vulnerable. A pair of black heels lay

forgotten in the sand, but she was wearing February's dress, a simple one in a deep bluish-purple, its skirt pooled around her, her legs bare and drawn close to her.

He wondered what she saw in him, an old man with a limp and a fake moustache, a man who could only pretend to be tough, a man who was half a robot. The flame of hope that had been alive in his chest since he'd killed those mosquitoes flickered a little.

"You asked me," she said, quietly. "When I first came to see you in the hospital again, if I had been happy."

He waited.

"I'd been miserable, on the *Bright Eye*. I gave you the wrong answer. I said I never had been."

Yes. That had hurt.

She slid down from the rock and stood before him, barefoot in the sand, her eyes downcast. "But I figured it out – I know where I was happy now."

Up thought of her laughter, of chasing her through the waves, collapsing on the sand, her falling asleep in his arms... "Here?"

"Here. At the Academy. On the *Cazadora*, or Europa. That damned desert moon. Anywhere." She took a breath. "With you."

She looked up then, and he thought his heart might burst, it was beating that fast.

Her voice shook. "But I gave up on you, Up. I gave up on you twice."

She blinked, and looked down again, and he closed the distance between them.

"Taz," he said, wanting to reach for her, wanting to hope, afraid to. "*Mi querida*. I gave up first. How could I expect you to do what I couldn't?"

"I shouldn't have left you," she said. "I knew it as soon as I was on that dead goddamned ship. I hated myself for

being so weak.”

Up wanted to chuckle. “You, weak? Never.”

She didn’t smile, and then he did reach out, to place one hand on each arm. Her skin was soft, hot to the touch of his human fingers. “Hey,” he said. “*Mirame.*”

She looked up, slowly, and her eyes found his.

“I knew why you left,” he said. “And I understood. But I’d have waited forever for you. Taz, it’s - it’s always been you and me, right?”

She blinked, rapidly, close to tears. “I’m sorry, Up.”

He looked at her beautiful face, the one he knew so well, the soldier’s mask gone, and just Taz, his Taz, left. And somehow, he found the courage she had tried so hard to tell him he still had.

He bent, and caught her lips softly with his.

It was a question. He drew back, and her eyes were still closed. She opened them, and for a moment, her eyes were all there was.

Then she reached up and pulled him back down.

He was overwhelmed by the sheer force of her, the fire in the way she touched him. She kissed him like she meant it, like she was apologizing for their lost time, for everything, and he responded, wanting her to know that it didn’t matter, none of it mattered, that his feelings for her had never changed, they never would, they had been there all along. His hands traced the shape of her back, feeling the three large bumps that would someday fade to scars, ones that would match his own.

“I love you,” she gasped against his lips.

He pulled back, ever so slightly. He tried to find his voice to respond, but it had gotten lost somewhere behind the lump in his throat.

Taz stood on her tiptoes and kissed a tear gently from his face. “Well, don’t cry about it, you big *idiot*. I always

have, you know. You must have known.”

He kissed her again, his hands in her hair, getting lost in her mouth, her taste, her breath, her small hands on his chest, the shape of her pressed against him. He kissed her until they both were gasping for air. Taz closed her eyes against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her, tightly, marvelling that she was his, that she loved him, that she was here, after everything.

“I know I promised you a dance,” she said, after a few minutes. “But I don’t think I’m ready to go out there yet.”

“Well, I suppose you’ve still got a tough son-of-a-bitch reputation to maintain,” Up said. “Even if mine is shot.” He stepped back and held out his hand. “Dance with me here?”

There wasn’t any music, but they didn’t need any. They listened to the waves, to the wind, to the stars, to the sound of each other breathing. They danced slowly, simply, and all Up could think of was her body pressed to his, her face tilted upward, the love he felt for her reflected in her eyes.

The moment was disrupted when she laughed as he tripped spectacularly over a stray rock, taking them both tumbling into the sand.

“You’d think that after all these lessons we would have learned to dance by now,” he said, a bit ruefully, rubbing his side as she rolled over, still laughing.

“I think we’re getting there,” she said, bending over him with that smile he loved.

And then everything was Taz, and her kiss on the moonlit sand, and Up knew that she was right.



. About the Author

Karri Justina Shea is a writer, teacher, and overgrown fangirl. When not playing gleefully in the worlds of others, she is creating her own – current projects include a gender-bent dystopian fantasy, a time-travelling romp for middle grade readers, and a contemporary YA novella exploring the ever-evolving world of the internet. She's not entirely sure why, but her stories always seem to involve at least a little bit of magic.

A proud Prince Edward Islander, Karri currently lives and looks for magic in beautiful and bohemian Prague. Connect with her online at www.karrijustinashea.com.

. About the Illustrator

When she was little, *Kendyll Romine* spent her days drawing fairy princesses in big fluffy skirts. Today, she still does the same thing, except she made the smart decision long ago to draw people with actual bone structure instead of noodle limbs. When she's not travelling the universe with a certain man in a bow tie, she can be found wasting far too much time on the internet at swirk.deviantart.com.

Learning to Dance is the first work Kendyll has illustrated, and she certainly hopes it won't be the last. Her biggest dream is to one day attend Pigfarts and become a Starship Ranger.