

Prologue.

The phenomenon of telepathic abilities is one that modern science has still not been completely able to explain. The great breakthrough discovery in 2010 that telepathic abilities were a genetic trait occurring in roughly ten percent of humans opened the door to many new areas of scientific research, most notably that of the suppression of said abilities.

Specialized drugs suppressed the natural abilities growing in the telepath's brain. Devices known as inhibitors were engineered for the sole purpose of blocking telepathic brainwaves. A mere two years after the discovery, these methods of control were made not only legal, but mandatory with the passage of the Mental Protection Act by nearly every nation in 2012. Inhibition, as it was known, did not go over well with the small minority of telepaths in Earth's population. The devices were cumbersome and intrusive, and the drugs had a myriad of undesirable side effects. And as with every major scientific breakthrough, accompanying discovery and enlightenment came ignorance, prejudice and fear.

Normals feared telepaths for their abilities, fretting over the possibility of a malicious telepath reading someone's mind for evil intents. Though telepaths numbered few, the panic existed on the national level. The institution of Inhibition calmed the world down, but also made them feel empowered. For a period of many years, telepaths were scorned and spat upon, and treated as something less than human. Eventually left bereft of several basic human rights, they collectively declared that they had had enough, and in they cast off the suppressing drugs and devices in revolt.

In order to combat the growing Rebellion, the united nations met in 2026 and agreed to the creation of an international police force known as the "Enforcers", whose sole purpose it was to police the telepaths and make sure the laws of Inhibition were upheld. And though nobody yet knew it, these first few steps were the early years of a war that would rage for decades.

A new era for mankind began when humans discovered the secrets of faster than light travel in 2045. An explosion of exploration and colonization fever defined the following decade, and before anyone noticed, the Rebellion had crept offworld to the newly colonized planets. As mankind's reach grew among the stars, the Rogue telepaths' reach grew with it, secretly spreading everywhere it could.

By 2069, the war still showed no signs of ceasing. Rebel telepaths still battled their Enforcer counterparts, matching their numbers and brute force with clever schemes and elusive tactics. Both sides had been locked in stalemate for many years, and neither could seem to gain the upper hand. But a Rogue telepath by the name of Marlin Kilbury was on his way to making a small but crucial tip to the balance of the scales of war.

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1.

A low whine permeated the cabin of the *S.S. Confidence* as the main drive thrust the vessel forward through slipstream. Outside, pale whites and greens flowed past in an intricate weave as they washed over the ship's coaxial bubble, protecting it from the ravages of slipspace that raged scant meters from it's hull. The effect was sometimes quite nauseating for some people.

Marlin turned away from the viewport, and glanced idly around the cabin from

behind his dark glasses. The *Confidence* was a light Gunboat destined for the Kitara system, to aid in the defense of a military Starbase there from marauding Rebellion ships. Although the *Confidence* was five hours away at top speed, it was still called to assist. The base contained some rather delicate information that could not be allowed to fall into Rebellion hands. Although the Rogue fleet was outnumbered at least five to one, everything was going as planned.

Posing as a pair of Enslaved telepaths, providing their services to the government in order to fight the Rebellion, Marlin and his partner Tanya Hawker had been brought aboard just before departure. The original plan was vague, simply stating that two operatives would be inserted aboard a military vessel which would then travel to the Starbase in Kitara, allowing them to obtain whatever secrets it was that the Enforcers had hidden in their databases, and then to escape on the vessel they had arrived on.

Marlin and Tanya were quickly chosen, and were allowed to pick their vessel. The *Confidence* was the obvious choice, as it was berthed at Inala Outpost, their home port, and carried only a light Enforcer crew and no telepathic detection equipment that could possibly give away their true intentions. Although this was technically illegal for a military vessel, the *Confidence* was in a big hurry to assist in the Kitara system, and her understaffing was overlooked.

Marlin grimaced briefly as he pondered just how deeply he'd gotten himself in this time.

He glanced over at Tanya. At least he had her along. While Marlin's abundant talents leaned more towards deception and misdirection, powers over the mind, Tanya was a full-blown telekinetic. Very few things known to man could stand in the way of the full maelstrom of her ability. She could probably even reduce the ship to scrap if she felt like it, Marlin reflected.

Tanya felt his attention on her, and looked over at him across the aisle, smiling faintly. She had long brown hair that shimmered when it moved. Swept cheekbones and a small, pointy nose gave her an almost impish look. Tanya had the large eyes that were a genetic trait of telepaths, and hers were a deep brown. Many people would heartily agree that she was quite a striking woman, if she wasn't one of "those".

Marlin returned the smile, and glanced away quickly. Now was not the time to be thinking of attraction. Though he was secretly in love with Tanya, his task meant too much to everyone he knew and loved to allow himself to be distracted. He shifted position in his seat, and closed his eyes.

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In the vastness of space, a bright point of light blinked into existence.

The light grew larger, and larger. It took on an oblong form. Then it split down the middle, and widened. Streamers of green and white light howled out through the tear in space, finding release, and out of this maelstrom emerged a small gunboat, bearing the letters *S.S. Confidence* on its hull. The rupture behind it closed, almost reluctantly, and was gone.

"Jump to normal space complete. Prepare to berth at starbase five one zero."

Marlin started awake as the loudspeaker blared across the room. His heart slowed its racing beat in moments, but not by much. They were nearing the most dangerous part of their mission. He arranged himself more neatly, and raised his head as one of the crew approached him. The man spoke quickly, with a scowl on his face, and Marlin could sense passively that he did not want to be talking with a telepath.

"Please make sure your seat belt is fastened, and brace yourself for docking. It may get bumpy. Sir." The last word barely managed to fight its way through the

attendant's grudging lips. Marlin nodded his thanks, and turned away, dismissing the soldier, who stalked off darkly. Marlin drew in a deep breath.

It had been several years since his last visit to an Enforcement base, and his memory from his last visit four years ago was not a pleasant one. He'd run through the sewers for days before being captured and tortured. It was only through his comrades' intervention that he had not been killed on the spot.

And here he was, marching back into the lion's den, with a smile on his face. He had to be nuts.

Marlin scratched at the small inhibitor node on the back of his neck. One of those new confounded Class D's, no doubt. The damn thing kept him from using his abilities, and was itchy as hell to boot. It would be removed when the administration of the building had need of him, believing that he and Tanya were willing servants. Or so he hoped. Until then, it was all subterfuge and playing pretend. If they were found out while they still wore inhibitors, they were helpless. Their lives would be over in the blink of an eye.

The ship lurched as it connected with the docking clamps and was moored into place. A hiss and a hum as the atmosphere and artificial gravity adjusted to match that of the station, and then a loud whir as the hatch opened. Armed soldiers appeared to escort Marlin and Tanya to the administrative offices. Unfastening their seat belts, they rose and walked at an unhurried pace towards the hatch.

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They were led at a brisk pace through utilitarian hallways, spotlessly clean metal, reflections of themselves staring dully back. Officers and technicians they passed in the halls looked at them, with their long hair and gray jumpsuits, and recognized them for what they were. Even though they were telepaths in willing service to the government, they were still given a wide berth. Marlin memorized the route they took to the administrative offices as he went. Such knowledge could be useful later.

They exited a lift two levels up, and marched down a corridor to the right. This level was furnished more luxuriously than the previous levels. Leather upholstered couches and armchairs lined the hallway outside a pair of oak doors. They were halted by a rough grip on their arms, then one of the soldiers stepped forward and knocked on the door. Immediately, a muffled voice from within bid them enter. Marlin took a deep breath, and stepped through the opened doors.

A small, aging man sat in a large, padded chair, studying them. He had long gone bald, with fringes of graying hair encompassing his smooth pate. He was perhaps five feet tall when he stood. His face was hard and angular, with a simple mustache gracing his upper lip. He seemed not at all intimidating, but he had a strong and commanding presence. Marlin and Tanya stood at attention, respectfully, as would be expected of any enslaved telepath. After a moment, the man spoke.

"What are you wearing over your eyes, mister?"

Marlin realized he had not removed his dark glasses. Mentally scolding himself, he reached up and quickly snatched them away, apologizing. The administrator glared at him.

"I'll let this one slide, mainly because we need your skills. Do not think for a moment that you would not be lying on the floor right now if it were otherwise." After a moment, "We've been informed from an anonymous source that there may be one or more Rogues loose in the facility, but our normal methods of detection have been unsuccessful. Normally, we would simply dismiss it, but in the current situation," he nodded to the battle that was being waged outside the station, "I can't afford to have any

Rogues running around my station. You are going to help us find them." He gestured to the guards, who gingerly removed the inhibitors. Several other Enforcers held their weapons at the ready, fully prepared to dispose of Marlin and Tanya at the drop of a hat.

Marlin twisted his head back and forth, loosening his neck, and feeling the sensations flood back. It was like waking up after a deep, dreamless sleep, and being able to see and smell and hear the world again. He touched Tanya's mind gently, and she responded in kind. They were free.

Such as it was.

After a moment, the administrator sent them away, to hunt down the Rogues. Each of them was accompanied by three Enforcers, both to make sure the Rogues were eliminated when found, and to keep an eye on their pet telepaths. Marlin almost wished they knew what was coming to them. Almost.

Pretending to track down a Rogue, Marlin slowly led his "team" down a service corridor, and into a maintenance room. It was just the sort of place that one could expect to find a hiding fugitive. It had the look of an unfinished, dirty part of the station, wires running in thick ropes along the ceiling, and pipes lining the walls. Lighting was limited to occasional harsh fluorescent lights, more than a few of which were burned out. The air was choked with dust and the smell of machinery and electronics, and it was particularly warm in the cramped environment. Marlin soon found his jumpsuit soaked with sweat. He felt the poke of an automatic weapon against his shoulder, and one of the soldiers addressed him unceremoniously.

"How much farther, teep?"

Marlin took a deep breath, and controlled his temper. Never attack out of anger. After a moment, he replied in a low voice.

"Shouldn't be much farther now. I think she's hiding in that closet off to the right up ahead." Two of the enforcers promptly ran ahead, flanking the door. The third stayed behind and kept his weapon trained on Marlin. They would only open the door if he told them to, though. You never knew what those damn Rogue teeps would do if they were waiting for you.

Marlin crept forward, and placed his palm flat against the door, and closed his eyes. The room was empty. No Rogue telepaths, of course. No maintenance personnel. Nothing at all.

Perfect.

Marlin backed away from the door, and nodded to the Enforcers.

"She's in there, all right. But I think she sensed we're out here. Better take her quick." One of the men nodded, and slunk forward. On a silent count of three, he flung open the door, and tensely pointed his weapon in the room, screaming out all the while.

"Hands over your head! We've got you surrounded! Don't try anything!"

Marlin tossed a blanket of darkness over the Enforcers' minds before they had a chance to realize that the closet was empty. All three slumped to the floor, instantly asleep. After depriving them of their weapons, Marlin dragged them into the closet, and locked the door. Hopefully they would be found before they suffocated, but he didn't have time to worry overly about their lives. His was now in far greater danger of being abruptly ended.

Marlin paused a moment and touched Tanya's mind. She had just finished disposing of her guards with a telekinetic push into an open electrical conduit. She would be with him shortly. Marlin grabbed one of the guards' weapons, and slung it over his shoulder. Being spotted with it meant being shot on the spot, but at this point being found, uninhibited, without any supervising guards meant the same thing as well. Marlin figured it was better to be armed. He slunk off down the corridor.

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What Tanya Hawker has not let him know was just how much trouble she was really in. Disposing of her guards hadn't been as neat and quiet as it might have if she'd found a more suitable location, but they couldn't afford to waste time. Her guards had huddled close to her as they moved at a good clip down the corridors of the station, and it was only by chance that she had come across a high voltage electrical conduit that was exposed for maintenance. She had hesitated, pretending to search with her talent for the hidden Rogue, while she waited for other personnel to pass by them and out of sight around a corner. When they were alone, she had spun around, and yanked the Enforcers' weapons out of their hands with a mighty pull of psychic will. Before they could recover from their surprise, she had shoved them into the open conduit. The corridor had still smelt of burning flesh when she bolted. She'd been in too much of a hurry to think to appropriate any of their weapons from the floor.

She was huddled in a darkened laboratory a few sections down the hall. The alarms had just sounded, so she guessed that someone had noticed her handiwork. She looked around, seeking an exit that did not lead out into the main thoroughfare. Marlin was nearby; she had to rendezvous with him if they hoped to get any work done. She tapped her foot absently on the floor, making a hollow thumping sound.

A hollow thumping sound?

She bent down and knocked softly on the floor. Of course! There would be a crawlspace between levels, to run piping and various conduits through, and for maintenance. But it wouldn't be regularly guarded. If she were careful, she should be able to traverse the distance between her and Marlin easily enough. There was only one problem. Tanya Hawker hated tight spaces.

She'd been moderately claustrophobic for as long as she could remember. Sometimes, if it was especially bad, she had trouble breathing. But it was looking as if she had little choice in the matter. Footsteps were coming down the hall, and doors opening and closing. They were searching for her. If she didn't move fast, she'd be caught. She focused her mind momentarily, yanked one of the panels free, and slid in head first. The crawlspace was about three feet high, and choked with wires, cables, and pipes of all sorts imaginable. The only light was what shone through the floor above. Tanya lowered the floor panel back into place, and sealed it just as the door opened. She froze, not daring to even breathe, and waited.

Soft footfalls thumped as rubber-soled boots tread on the floor above her, less than a foot from her nose. The lights came on, narrow rays poking through the cracks and seams in the floor. After a moment, the footfalls resumed. The person circled the room, pausing momentarily when they reached the section of floor Tanya had removed and forcibly replaced, then continued to the door. Several seconds later, a radio crackle, then a deep male voice directly above her head.

"Section 17, Laboratory Three is a negative. Nothing to report."

The boots stalked off.

Tanya's breath escaped her in a rush, and she forgot her claustrophobia momentarily in a sense of euphoria. Though her abilities were a gift, she always felt victorious when she was able to do something without them, and this case was no exception. She and the guard were equals for a minute or so, and she had outwitted and eluded him with almost no help from her talent. Smiling, she began to crawl out, under the corridor floor.

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Marlin muttered a curse as his fingers flew over the keyboard. The station's mainframe security was very tight. He tried known Enforcement security codes, secret back doors, everything he knew, all to no avail. He swore again as he slammed his fist down. He couldn't access what he needed from this console. Retrieving his equipment, he exited the room and walked softly down the corridor. He was wearing a stolen suit of Enforcer armor, under the hope that the helmet and dark visor would hide his features enough that he could pass undetected. It was better than prancing about the place in a slave telepath jumpsuit with no one watching him, and a gun slung over his shoulder. Very few guards were clad in this armor, but now that the alarms had sounded, it wasn't such a stretch that elite troops would be on patrol. He pressed a button on a small panel to open a set of heavy doors ahead of him. He was greeted with a large cargo bay.

Marlin frowned inside his helmet. The place was busy, workers running back and forth, trying to get things organized. The large crates that were now standard for interstellar shipping were all over the place, small color coded markings denoting the type of cargo they carried. He strode into the room, wrapping himself in an aura of confidence. The workers were distracted, and this mind trick would only be revealed through close scrutiny. Hopefully he wouldn't be noticed. He was halfway across when he heard the voice.

"Where are you going, soldier?"

His heart dropped into his boots. Stopping, he turned around slowly. An officer, who he guessed was his supervisor, stood not five meters away. Marlin glanced quickly about the bay. Too public to simply put him to sleep or do anything else noticeable. And he sensed that the man had a strong mind, so most subtler tricks or distractions would not work. Damn it!

"I asked you a question, soldier! Where is your destination?"

He groped for words. "The central, uh, computer core...yeah, the core. I'm supposed to make sure the teeps don't try to get in there." The man looked at him even more closely. If Marlin had to reveal his face, he would be uncovered as a telepath. What was he going to do?

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Tanya couldn't breathe. Her breath was painfully loud in her ears as she gasped for air. Wedged between a large optic computer cable and a water main, she felt closed in. There was barely enough room for her to squeeze past. The air was hot and stuffy, and Tanya had very acutely regained her claustrophobia. She had tried several calming techniques, but meditation wasn't one of her gifts. As best as she could figure it, Marlin was very close, but two floors up. How the hell was she going to get there, even if she could force herself to go on? She was hyperventilating and knew it, but there was nothing she could do. The world began to lose focus as she heard the first voice. It came from directly above her.

"Do you hear breathing?"

A second voice. "You're right. It's coming from down there."

"Check it out."

She was dimly aware of the floor panel being lifted away above her head, and could hear a faint voice yelling at her saying something about getting up and not trying anything, and then they were grabbing her arms. She lashed out reflexively with her mind and the nearest two crumpled to the dull metallic floor as blood sprayed out their mouths and noses, and she was almost certain they were dead. Then there was a loud report, and a searing pain lanced across her leg as the bullet grazed her, and she twisted and fell. Then there were more men, at least seven now, and as she tried to fight back,

one of them swung the butt of his rifle at her and her head exploded with pain, and she collapsed to the decking and knew no more.

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2.

She stands on a rocky cliff overlooking a great valley. The cliff is high, hundreds, perhaps thousands of feet in the air, and all detail of the view below is lost in the intervening distance. Yet she can still see, still FEEL every leaf, every rock, every blade of grass in awesome detail. The valley is a grand oasis, an island of lushness and life in a desert of bleakness and death. She turns to survey her surroundings.

Harsh gray flats stretch to the horizons, where mountains that are little more than enormous spikes of razor-sharp rock jut obscenely against the sky. Cracks in the barren wasteland belch forth columns of noxious, oily black fume which gradually merge with the already polluted sky. It is only over the valley that the sky is clear and sunlight shines forth. The sunlight shimmers off the silver ribbon of a great river, which meanders its way through the rich forest. Just as she feels the forest surrounding it, she can feel the river as well, the swift rush of water and the eddies in the calmer pools, and the softness of the muddy bottom.

She doesn't like it up on this cliff, this lifeless ledge of rock. She would rather be in the forest, if only to simply stand and drink in the life and bliss of nature around her. She spies a small, rocky trail that she did not notice before. It winds down the cliff's face for miles, down into the valley. Though the way looks steep and hazardous, she is not afraid. She sets out.

Halfway down, she meets it. Or more likely him, but she cannot be sure of the gender or even race of the one standing before her. It stands, timeless and ageless, in the middle of the narrow path, blocking her way. No taller than her, a black robe cloaks its form, hiding its features. An enigma within an enigma. She feels the first twinge of anger as she regards this man, this THING, that would dare stand between her and her Eden. Who are you, she asks it. Why do you come to me. Three times now I've stood before you, and always you bar my way. What do you want of me?

It does not reply, nor has it ever before. But as always, she feels a tugging at the corners of her mind. There is something she must yet do, something that will gain her access to the valley. But what that is, she has no idea. She does not see it move, but suddenly, the cold, ethereal fingers brush against her cheek, the rough fabric containing them scratchy against her perfect skin. She longs to scream or to back away but cannot, and is instead drawn closer to it, resisting with all her will to no avail...

Tanya's eyelids flew open as she awoke. Her body was covered in a thin sheen of perspiration, and her breath came in ragged pants. Another dream, the same as twice before. A telepath having a dream more than once, or sequentially as this one was, was no normal occurrence. Usually it contained some form of precognition or vision of a possible future that might be changed. Hers was more symbolic than informative, which was infuriating. She would have to consider it later, after more pressing matters were attended to.

The room was dark, and she could not see until her eyes adjusted to the low light. Even then, there was not a lot to see. Bare walls, a heavy door with a window, over which another small door was latched. The hard, uncomfortable cot she lay on. A single light dangling overhead, turned off at the moment. A simple metal table and two chairs.

She was in an Enforcement holding cell.

She managed to sit up, despite a sharp pain across her right thigh, and a stronger, duller one above her left eyebrow. The thigh was bandaged, and seemed to have been taken care of well enough. There wasn't much to be done about the swelling lump on her forehead. Her hands and feet remained free of restraints, she noticed. But she was certain that she'd been fitted with an inhibitor. Reaching back to feel the base of her skull, her suspicions were confirmed. The small, cold mass of metal that was fastened to her brain stem felt familiar, although not in a comfortable way. It took special equipment to remove inhibitors in such a way that the host could be left unharmed.

Inhibitors functioned by blocking specific brain waves emitted by the host, and, in some models, by feeding them back, resulting in a very painful rebuke for using one's talent. Inhibitors were mostly effective, being able to block dangerous psychic assaults. But some genetic quirk had so deeply intertwined telepaths' gift with their own physiology that it was impossible to impede some of the more deeply rooted functions without rendering the telepath comatose and, within several hours, dead. These unimpeded abilities helped regulate body functions, among other things. They could also be used for different means, as long as usage was passive. Such things as picking up on people's thoughts and emotions, erecting mental walls to stop psychic probing and the like were still quite possible while being inhibited.

Because of this, most telepaths also had to take the drugs that impeded those functions. Barely left active enough to keep the body alive, most telepaths were left half aware, sick and weak without them. Exactly the way the Enforcers wanted them. A telepath without use of their talent, barely aware of the world around them, didn't pose much of a threat. And it was all legal, in the name of equality and the common good.

Tanya carefully suppressed the rage she felt building in her, and tried to think rationally. There wasn't really any way out of here. Her telekinetic talents would have made short work of the heavy reinforced door, had she had them available, but she would have no hope of getting through without them. Her escape would have to come through deception and subterfuge. Her captors would eventually have to let down their guard, if even for a moment, and it was then that she would make her escape. She must be patient. Even as she resolved this, she heard the footfalls.

Tanya had keen hearing which was marginally enhanced by her gift, and she listened carefully. Four pairs of booted feet. No, she quickly corrected herself, five pairs. They were walking at an unhurried pace down the corridor, drawing close to her cell. She had no doubt it was her they were coming to see. Unless, of course, they had also caught Marlin. She frowned in the dark, bare room. She could still feel his presence in close proximity, but direct communication or pinpointing him was impossible, thanks to her inhibitor. Sighing, she hoped the best for Marlin and waited for the door to her cell to swing open.

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Marlin was indeed still free, but not for much longer if things didn't change. The large, burly officer before him was still scrutinizing him closely, trying to figure out precisely what was wrong about him. Marlin, on the other hand, was in a rather unique position. This man's mind was unusually resistant to psychic effects. He had obviously started down the evolutionary road to being a telepath before birth, but the process halted before any real ability had appeared. It was uncommon, but not unheard of. Unfortunately, it meant Marlin's usual subtle deceptions did not work. He looked

surreptitiously again at the cargo bay they were in, swarming with workers. It was too public to use one of his more powerful tricks, as well. Marlin Kilbury was up a certain creek without a paddle.

His commanding officer spoke, bringing Marlin's attention back. "Take off your helmet, soldier." When he saw Marlin hesitate, he barked loudly. "You got a problem hearing, son? I said take off that damned helmet!" Slowly, obeying, Marlin reached up, and raised the visor obscuring his face, revealing his telltale large eyes and long hair. The man's own eyes grew, as well, and his mouth opened to speak as he reached for his gun.

Instead of words, blood dribbled out, staining the front of his uniform. Marlin's teeth ground together as wisps of smoke rose from the barrel of his gun. Echoes of the report died away, and all eyes were turned towards the two figures facing each other, one a high-ranking officer of much importance, and the other seeming to be one of his soldiers.

And even before the local alarms sounded, before the unfortunate man's body had even fallen to the floor, Marlin was running, his boots making a loud clanking sound against the decking. He ran through the door at the far end, he ran through the adjoining corridor, ran left, ran right. And still more he ran. Marlin ran until he had no breath left in him, then slumped against the wall inside a small alcove with a public computer terminal, and shut the door.

Tears of remorse clouded his eyes. He had taken a life in cold blood. Even though he hadn't used his talents, Marlin still was wrenched morally inside. Killing an enemy in combat was one thing, but this man had never had a chance. And Marlin had put a bullet through his heart. He hadn't thought, he chided himself. He had simply reacted. Marlin was reminded painfully of why Rogue telepaths refused to use guns unless it was unavoidable. He felt no better than the Enforcers. The gun dropped from his hands and landed with a dull thud on the floor, where Marlin left it.

After several moments his emotions quieted with the assistance of some meditative techniques, and he took several deep, calming breaths. He had done what he had to do. Let it not be in vain. He had to reach the central computer core and find an administrative terminal.

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He was dashingy handsome. Tanya hadn't expected that, but she still saw through it at once. They'd done it on purpose to make her more willing to talk to him. The man standing before her in his trim, pressed uniform hated telepaths. She could sense it very clearly. A shame, really. If he'd been someone else, she might have been more willing to talk. But they should have known that you can't completely hide your thoughts, even from an inhibited telepath. She looked into his blue eyes, showing him she was not afraid of him, wordlessly defying him.

He chose to ignore that, instead smiling warmly. "How are we doing today, eh?" he asked, bending down to check the dressing on her leg wound. She let him, but did not reply. After a few moments, he straightened up again, nodding.

"Seems to be healing just fine. We'll have a new dressing put on that soon, though." She continued to stare at him wordlessly. His smile faded. After a long moment, he nodded abruptly.

"All right."

At a gesture over his shoulder, the four Enforcers who had accompanied him reluctantly left the room, closing and securing the door behind them. He was alone with her. Even though she wore an inhibitor, he placed himself in great personal danger by

doing so.

Like all Rogue telepaths, Tanya had been trained early on in unarmed combat. Most who learned it wound up leaning to a particular style, but everyone learned the morals behind it's use. It was an alternative to using one's gift, recognition of the fact that they had to fight back. But most Rogues still disdained using guns, though it wasn't expressly prohibited. Killing with weapons was for the cruelty of the Enforcers. By harmonizing mind and body, telepaths ensured that they would only take a life if it were absolutely necessary. They were in control of themselves.

For a group of rebellious terrorists they sure had strong morals, thought Tanya wryly.

The man was squatting down now, so that his face was level with hers. Probably hoping that by showing a display of trust, he would somehow get her to open up to him. To her, this wasn't so much a display of trust as it was foolhardiness. In one fluid motion, she could cross the three feet between them and snap his neck as if it were a twig. But doing so would get her nowhere. The guards would come in after very long, and upon seeing their commander dead, she would likely be shot on the spot. Instead, she just continued to stare at him, biding her time.

After several minutes, he finally spoke. "Look, I know you don't like me. I know you know I don't like *you*. I don't want to have you killed. There's enough bloodshed in this war already." He paused. Tanya felt no need to interject anything. After a moment, he continued.

"But I need you to tell me something. The longer you're uncooperative, the more antsy the officials will be to have you executed." Again, he paused. Tanya simply continued to stare at him.

He sighed, exasperated. "Look. I could get you on a ship and out of this place. And minus that inhibitor. I don't like the idea, but if it'll get me what I want, you can go free." Tanya blinked. She wasn't expecting this. She tilted her head slightly, as if looking at him from a different angle. Then, cautiously, she spoke.

"What is it you want?"

The man smiled.

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Marlin had ditched his elite battle armor, and opted instead for the lighter standard soldier garb. He supposed they would find the man it belonged to unconscious in a storage locker, in his undergarments. At least he hadn't had to harm the man to get the uniform. Unfortunately, the helmet didn't have a visor, so anyone who gave him a passing glance could spot his telltale eyes. There wasn't any way around that, that Marlin could find. He would just have to be careful. As always. Glancing about, he shrouded himself with an aura to seem nondescript, and strode down a busy corridor. Hopefully his aura would keep people from seeing him as anything but another Enforcer. He had considered using the Jet Shade, a procedure that would make him effectively invisible, but it was too taxing on him for what he had in mind. He was already getting tired. Besides, he knew he would need his energy for later.

For when he rescued Tanya.

He'd heard that she was captured, of course. Word spread like wildfire across the station that they'd caught one of the loose telepath terrorists, the female. Some said she was already dead, but Marlin knew better. Tanya was alive, but she was almost certainly fitted with an inhibitor. The fact that she didn't respond to his calls, and that he couldn't

touch her mind, was simply proof. He would have gone after her immediately, but procedure required him to fulfill their mission objectives first in this situation. He was less than four sections from the computer core, but all the administrative labs were two levels down. Tanya was probably being held on the other side of the station. Too much time would be wasted in rescuing her, then attempting to return here.

Marlin slid into a lift with several other people, and waited patiently for the doors to close and the lift to take him down where he needed to go. Glancing at the people around him, he noticed one of them, a cargo worker, was watching him closely. When Marlin turned his head to look at the man, fear clouded his features, and Marlin knew that he had been recognized. Before the worker could say a word though, Marlin expertly slid over his mind like water, and made the man believe he had seen nothing. The fear was replaced by confusion, and the worker shook his head as if to clear it. The doors slid open, and Marlin left him.

He stepped into a sea of confusion. Technicians were running about all over the place, apparently trying to get some particular system back online. There had been several powerful impacts from weapons fire over the past several minutes; apparently the space-borne battle was heating up. Making sure his aura was still in place, Marlin stepped into the fray, and quickly made his way through. Several distracted Enforcer guards nodded absently in his direction, their eyes elsewhere as he passed. He was drawing close to his goal, but with the place as busy as it was, he would have to think up an alternative plan to get inside the lab. Enforcers would have no business in there, and nobody could see him when he had to do his job.

Glancing at the door markings as he passed, he looked for someplace where he could rest a moment. Keeping up the aura constantly was starting to become tiresome, and he needed a brief respite. On his left, he saw the blue pattern indicating an office. Keying the door open, he peeked in. It was dark and empty. He entered the room and closed the door, activating the lock as he did. Falling into a chair, he exhaled heavily and let his aura dissolve. Closing his eyes, he ran through a brief meditative technique to clear his mind, and he felt the beginnings of his weariness melt away. He was still quite tired and aching physically, but his mind was clear and refreshed, and that was more important for a telepath.

He relaxed for several minutes, not allowing himself to fall asleep as he did so. He'd been on the run for hours, and it just felt good to be able to slouch in a big executive chair that wasn't his, and relax. Occasionally, running footfalls would patter down the corridor past the door, but Marlin didn't worry. If anyone tried to get inside, they would be delayed long enough by the door lock that he would have sufficient time to hide. In a minute or so, he'd be refreshed enough that he could make the rest of the journey.

* * *

From the start, Tanya knew his terms would be unacceptable. She would simply have refused him, had his offer not sparked her curiosity. Most who hated telepaths as deeply as he would never dream of setting one free. She wondered what sort of price could buy her freedom in this man's mind. As she suspected, it was far beyond the value of her personal freedom, and beyond her ability to deliver. He wanted names, some of which she knew, some she didn't. Strategic locations of ships and bases. Access codes to the Rebellion's central computer, and that computer's location. The sort of unreasonable demands that she couldn't have answered even if she'd wanted to. After half an hour of him making demands and her silently shaking her head at every one, he stood, pursing his lips.

"Well. It seems you're not as cooperative as I'd hoped for after all. I'll come back

later and see if you change your mind." He turned and rapped sharply on the door several times. The door cracked open, and he exited. Three Enforcers entered, and the door was closed behind them. Tanya cringed away as they approached her, rifle butts raised high above their heads.

When he returned, she was asleep, curled up on the hard cot that passed for a bed. He wasn't very surprised at the condition of the room. The girl was covered in scrapes and bruises that had not been present when he had left, and if asked he knew nothing about them. Two of his men were slumped in a corner, their limbs in awkward and unnatural positions, one breathing, the other not. The third lay under the simple metal table, his head at a ninety degree angle to his shoulders, and his face an unrecognizable mess. It was doubtful that he was still breathing. Their weapons lay scattered about the room. He switched on the lights, and glanced about again, nodding thoughtfully. It was cleaner than he'd expected it to be.

It was a waste of good soldiers, of course, but he'd had to set an example. She had disposed of the men quite efficiently, and she seemed relatively undamaged. It was obvious she'd had a hell of a fight. Let her consider that next time, their weapons might be loaded and that they would not hesitate to use them.

She had awakened the instant he'd switched on the lights, and now she sat on the bed, staring at him as he looked about the room. She hadn't tried to make a break for the door, though he'd left it open, and she hadn't tried to assault him or acquire one of the weapons lying on the floor. She just sat. And stared. Watching him with those big eyes of hers. Damn, those eyes gave him the creeps. It was like she was looking right through him, into his soul. *And in a way*, he reminded himself, *she is*.

"We're moving you to a new cell." The words were as sudden and spontaneous as his decision. "As soon as you walk through that door, there will be five guards, and this time their weapons will be loaded. Their entire purpose for coming with us is to watch you, and shoot you if you try anything. I'd advise that you don't."

She said nothing in acknowledgment, just stared at him. After a moment, she rose and stood before him, waiting to be led out.

* * *

3.

Marlin muttered various profanities to himself as he stood, posing as a guard, and pondered what he was going to do now. He was quickly running out of options.

The computer core and Computer Science labs were cordoned off and protected by groups of Enforcers and I-EMPs. They knew he was trying to reach the core, although they still had no idea where he was, his only advantage. Ordinarily, he'd be able to get past the Enforcers without a problem, but the I-EMPs were the pain in the ass.

I-EMP stood for Inhibition Emplacement. It functioned on the same principle as a normal inhibitor, but projected the interference field in a 10-foot bubble around the device. The projector, mounted on a tripod, looked like a cluster of tiny radar dishes. The devices were incredibly useful as protection, since telepathic powers wouldn't function inside the field. Anyone inside it was completely protected from any telepathic influence.

In practice, though, it wasn't that easy. The I-EMPs weren't self-contained. Projecting the field required so much power that it wasn't possible for them to use a self-

contained power source for more than a few minutes. Instead, they had to draw from the power system of whatever building they were in. Their mobility was therefore quite limited, but they were still a very real hazard to telepaths.

Marlin had a hell of a time avoiding the things. Were he to so much as graze the edge of the field, his aura would falter, leaving him exposed and recognizable. He wouldn't last long if that were to happen. He found himself suddenly wishing he hadn't ditched his Elite Enforcer armor, with its clouded visor that covered his face. The Elites were out patrolling by now, though; maybe he could nab another suit. He would need it soon enough, to be able to walk through the I-EMP fields. The way things were shaping up, he didn't have much choice.

As his mind raced, his eyes continued to scan, darting left and right tensely. His luck held. A pair of Elites walked past him, down the corridor, followed closely by several engineers, lugging an I-EMP. Stopping several yards from Marlin, they placed the tripod frame near a power outlet, and began to configure it. Marlin decided that it was time to take his leave. He turned to the guard next to him, keeping his voice as casual as possible.

"Hey, keep an eye out, will ya? I gotta use the ladies' room."

The man nodded noncommittally, obviously bored. Marlin turned and hurried after the pair of Elites. He wasn't worried about taking them out, of course. He would be more than a match for them, especially if they had no prior knowledge of who he was. Harsh lights passed him by as he moved at a trot down the cold metal trail. Rounding a bend in the corridor, he saw his quarry standing at a junction, talking in low tones. One turned around to face him at his approach, the other merely glanced over his shoulder, then went back to keeping watch.

Marlin slowed, bringing himself before the man facing him, and spoke with urgency in his voice, using a subtle trick to persuade the man there was an emergency.

"Sir, you...you had better come see. He attacked one of our groups. Killed everyone. We need backup fast, before he can get into the core." Marlin pointed down the corridor, back the way he came, and the man's gaze instinctively followed. And in that moment of weakness, Marlin Kilbury struck.

The shoulder stock of his gun collided with the man's exposed throat, shattering his larynx with a dull, mushy crunch. He staggered, his gun dropping, forgotten, to the cold steel floor. His breathing came in wheezing, strangled gasps, accompanied by dribbles of blood as he coughed uncontrollably.

The second man immediately spun around, aiming his weapon, but Marlin already had a grip on the barrel, and swiftly launched himself over the helmeted head. The leverage prized the weapon from its owner's fingers, and Marlin quickly reversed it as he landed behind the man, already squeezing the trigger. The man's surprise at such an unexpected move cost him his life, as a bullet forced its way through the back of his skull. He fell to the floor, landing beside his choking comrade. Marlin grabbed the first man's arms, then shoved his foot into the small of his back, pushing until he heard a crack. The body shuddered once, then went still. Marlin looked over his handiwork.

He shook his head sadly. He'd been forced to kill again, but at least this time the men had had a chance to fight back. Too slow. Far too slow. Enforcers were supposed to be specialists at hunting telepaths, but when in actual close combat with one they were woefully unprepared for what awaited them. Of course, Marlin was a very exceptional telepath, but it was still saddening how poor their training was. Taking a deep breath, he looked at things from a more practical stance.

He'd lost his aura when he had lost concentration during the attack, and now he wrapped himself in it again. He needed to change into an Elite uniform, to cover his face

and long hair. Changing again was a good idea anyway, since the word had finally gotten around that he was dressed in standard Enforcer garb. The man he'd shot had a bullet hole in his helmet, but the rest of his armor was in pristine shape. The other man had an intact helmet, but his body armor was somewhat damaged from Marlin's back-breaking. He would mix and match to get a full set of armor.

Glancing about, he saw a large office door nearby. It was unlocked. Returning to the bodies, Marlin dragged them both into the office in turn, closing the door behind him. He guessed this room had been recently evacuated, as papers still lay on the table, and several computer terminals were still on and logged in. Marlin froze, halfway through changing, and looked back at the table.

Still logged in.

Hurriedly, he finished putting his new set of armor on, then anxiously moved over to one of the terminals. After a few seconds at it, he shook his head and moved on to the next one. Didn't have the privileges he needed. He moved along in this way until he reached the head of the table. After a few seconds, his face lit up. Here was his way into the mainframe, through this simple little meeting room. One of the executives had left his machine logged in and connected to the computer network. Marlin sat in the chair, and began to type furiously.

* * *

Seven pairs of rubber-soled boots thudded dully in rhythm on the cold metal as Tanya was led by her captor and five Enforcers through the hallways that crisscrossed the bowels of this station. On the upper levels, the corridors were much more open, larger, with frequent roomy plazas with benches and potted plants at their intersections. The lighting was softer and brighter, as well. Down here in the prison levels, the halls were tight constricting dark tunnels that were obviously not cleaned often. She had wondered where they were going, and had asked as much. To a new cell, her captor had replied. She was discouraged from asking further questions by the barrel of a gun poking her in her ribs. It took all her self-control not to grab the weapon and kill the man who wielded it.

They walked for what seemed like hours, twice pausing for her captor to converse quietly with other officers before passing through heavy blast doors. Each time, Tanya glanced up at the imposing doors, two feet thick, twelve feet high, and powered by powerful hydraulics, and thought wryly that if she had her powers, the doors would be little more than scrap metal. Tanya was extraordinarily gifted as a telekinetic. Telekinetic abilities at all were rare, usually surfacing only when one's life was in danger, and even then only weakly. A few hundred telepaths were gifted with telekinetic talents they could call upon and control, one of which was Marlin, but only one in a million were as powerful as Tanya.

And yet, a simple inhibitor made it all for naught.

She shook her head, and brought her attention back to the present. The corridor they now walked down was a luminous white, a welcome difference from the previous tunnels. The hall was shaped like an oval, with no edges or corners running its length. She found it strangely discomfiting, for reasons she could not explain. Something about it nagged the back of her mind, so much so that she didn't notice the round door opening out of the wall, until she was once again jabbed by the barrel of a gun. She was getting tired of that.

Through the door was a room that reflected the same style as the hallway she had just passed through. The room was egg-shaped, instantly disorienting, the walls emitting an even, soft white light so that no specific light sources could be pinpointed. There was

nothing in the room. She was led in at gunpoint. Once she was inside, the Enforcers withdrew and her captor stood just inside the door. He smiled at her oddly, as he might at a curious lab experiment. She glared back at him with unbridled hatred, hoping to unnerve him. His condescending gaze wavered slightly, but he did not seem to be very intimidated. After a moment, he spoke to her.

"This is a special cell that we call a 'white room'. We use it mainly to break uncooperative telepaths. No doubt you're feeling rather uncomfortable right now. It happens to normals, too. No walls, no floor, no ceiling. No shadows. Nothing but what could easily be an endless sea of white. Makes you feel lost and helpless, doesn't it?" His words served only to make her feel more ill at ease, but she did not let it show.

After it was apparent that she wasn't planning to reply, he nodded and informed her, "You'll stay here for awhile. Until you're ready to talk. And don't worry, you will be." With that, he stepped out and shut the door. The seams instantly seemed to melt and vanish, leaving Tanya in a sea of soft white light. Alone. Lost. And very afraid.

She sat down on the floor, pulled her knees up under her chin, and, wrapping her arms around them, wept silently into the unending light.

* * *

All the Enforcer guards knew that they should stand a bit straighter when an Elite passed by them, for these were men who deserved their respect. Men who had hunted teeps with unwavering conviction, and had gotten away to live to tell about it. There was no jealousy between Elites and regulars, no animosity, just a sense that these were what all men should aspire to be. The hunters of those murderous teeps. The men who did their job, and did it well. The best of the best of the best. Marlin grinned under his smoked visor, nodding in response to the obvious respect the guards showed. If only they knew.

Then he would be a dead man, of course. But the shock on their face would almost be worth it. Almost.

Marlin's aura now exuded a sense of purpose, a sense of intent. Most people were kept at bay by it, not wishing to interrupt an Elite on the hunt. He strode forward strongly, making it look as though he knew what he was doing. And he did know what he was doing. Now that he had what they'd come for, he was going to free Tanya. And then they were going to get the hell out of this place.

Once he was at the computer, already logged into the station network, he'd had little trouble getting to the files he needed, and downloading them onto a disc. He'd then deleted the files. They contained sensitive information about locations of known Rogue havens, names of some of their key leaders, and the names of operatives posing as Rogues within their havens. Other files contained similar information about Enforcer movements. Other Enforcer bases had this information, of course, but it was worthless now that it was in the Rogues' hands. Or would be, once he got off this cursed station.

He had a long walk ahead of him, especially if he didn't want to attract undue attention. After he'd downloaded the files he needed, he'd stretched out with his senses, looking for Tanya. She was across the station, down in the prison section. Because of her inhibitor, Marlin couldn't read her mind or contact her to make sure she was all right, but he assumed she'd be treated with a modicum of respect if they wanted to get any information out of her. He had to keep an unhurried pace if he wished to avoid attracting attention. He would stop by one of the medical facilities on the way, to pick up the tool required to remove the inhibitor from Tanya.

Looking up, Marlin noticed that the way ahead was blocked by an I-EMP. Thus far he'd been able to go around them without the loss of his senses, but his luck was not

holding. Bracing himself, he kept his pace, and walked into the field. It felt like being blind and deaf. The effect was so swift, so sudden, that he almost faltered, but he forced himself to keep his pace. A few glanced at him oddly, thinking he had changed somehow, but they weren't quite sure why. The loss of his aura was subtly noticeable, but Marlin thought he could get by with it. As he crossed the invisible line that was the boundary of the I-EMP's area of effect, the sensations came flooding back again. He would have to get used to that. Looking ahead, he saw another I-EMP with several guards clustered nearby, and beyond, the elevator doors. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself against the loss of his sensations, and strode ahead.

* * *

She stands on the cliff again, an ill wind whipping at her hair, her clothes, her very being, threatening to sway her from her perch, and send her tumbling into the paradise forest below. The sky is no longer the foul, darkened expanse it once was, but a soft, milky white that stretches on, endless and uniform. She shudders involuntarily, seeking to escape it. The trail she saw earlier is no longer present, and she casts about helplessly for a moment for an alternative way down. She spies a rickety hanging bridge, which leads to a castle perched upon a pinnacle of stone. Eying the bridge dubiously, she starts across.

She clings tightly to the ancient, fraying ropes, trying not to put too much weight upon the boards, as they are rotting, damp, and easily broken. Several snap beneath her feet and tumble soundlessly away into the endless white mist below. The mist is as uncomfortable as the sky. Trying not to look downwards, she carefully makes her way across the bridge, eyes set on the castle.

She steps quickly off the bridge onto solid ground, rocky as it is, and is grateful. She starts towards the castle, but proceeds no more than a dozen steps before being compelled to look back. Before her eyes, the bridge is set alight, flames licking hungrily at the dry rope and the boards sizzling as the fire removes the damp from the old rotten wood. Within moments, the whole contraption breaks free, and falls flaming into the endless depths of the mist below. Taking a deep breath, she turns back to the castle.

It is a simple structure, built of stone and mortar, a large central tower and two smaller ones flanking it, protected by an outer wall and heavy oak doors, which hang listlessly from their hinges. The place is beginning to crumble in the inexorable passage of time, and will soon be little more than ruins. She slips silently between the doors and enters the castle. To the left and right, small staircases lead to the two smaller towers, and ahead of her a large grand staircase leads up the main one to the top. Her curiosity is piqued by the two smaller ones, but something draws her towards the main staircase. It spirals around the inside of the tower, windowless, and as she climbs, she reflects that it could be endless. She can see no bottom nor top.

Then she emerges out onto the top of the tower, a large battlement overlooking the great green valley. She walks to the edge and leans on the low wall that acts as a guard against falling off, and gazes longingly down at the forest. She can feel it, as a part of her being, and is drawn towards it, but she can never seem to find her way. Suddenly knowing that someone stands behind her, she turns to give them her attention.

It is him, or rather it, again. Cloaked in it's usual dark robes, face invisible, it stands before her, silently appraising her. She does not move from where she stands, does not approach it, but she becomes visibly angry. She begins talking to it, then screaming at it, then pleading to it, Let me go there, let me down into the valley, please, I need this, let me go! What do you want from me! Say something! Anything!

But it does not move, only watches her, as if sizing her up carefully for some

unknown task. She cannot take any more of it's chilling gaze, it's ambiguous presence. She snarls and moves to assault it, but the ill wind suddenly gusts as she leaps, and carries her over the battlement, over the low wall, and out over the void, where she begins to tumble down into the endless mist. She screams, a long continuous sound, and she vanishes into the white, unbroken void...

With a gasp, Tanya started awake, although she might have still been dreaming for all she could see. The uniform lighting allowed no shadows to fall within the room, hiding the curve of the walls and making it appear endless. The only object within the room on which to fix one's gaze was the small tray that had contained food and water when they brought it to her. She had been grateful for even a small glimpse of something through the round door, for the presence of another human being, even if only an Enforcer, however briefly.

She breathed in the dead, stale air, calming herself marginally. The White Room was quite effective. Nothing to focus on, Inhibitor making sure that the telepaths placed in here were well and truly alone. The recalcitrant telepaths that had been in here before her must have been begging to give themselves up in the end. But she must keep her head.

"Marlin will come for me," she whispered to herself. "He won't abandon me. He knows I'm alive."

Breathing deeply, she cleared her mind, stood up, and began to practice her combat training. She slid gracefully through each move, instinctual executing it perfectly. Her movements were fluid, her body perfectly in tune with her mind. Her leg still pained her, but she ignored it, focusing instead on the power and swiftness of her movements. It was like a dance. A deadly dance. But it helped calm her.

Without warning, she lunged, a blur of motion, kicking the tray into the air. During its short flight, her fists pounded into the piece of mass-produced metal, three consecutive hits. When it clattered to the floor, the tray was no longer recognizable for what it was. Three enormous dents covered its surface, each one several inches deep. Tanya shook out her hands. There had been a slight pain, of course, but she had struck so swiftly that her hands had not been injured. She looked down at the twisted, disfigured tray, and imagined it as the skull of her captor.

The door opened silently, admitting the man himself, and two Enforcer guards. He paused a moment, and looked appraisingly at the warped tray on the floor, then at her.

"Been practicing, have we?"

She so very badly longed to practice on him. He smiled that smug smile of his.

"Must stay in shape, I suppose. No matter. We're taking you to see the administrator of this facility, whom I believe you have already met. He wishes to speak with you again. I think his impression of you has changed since the first time you met him yesterday."

Tanya thought for a moment, uncertain, then remembered the short, bald man with a powerful, authoritative presence. The last time he'd seen her, she had been disguised as an Enslaved. Glancing down briefly, she realized she still wore the grey jumpsuit. Had it really been only a day? It seemed to her as if years had passed. She had no idea how long she'd spent here, asleep in the White Room. But almost any excuse to get out seemed a good one. She nodded perfunctorily, not speaking to him as usual, and stepped forward to be admitted out of the room.

* * *

Marlin strode confidently into the medical bay, and glanced about at the injured

people being treated. Most looked like they had been hurt from explosions or flying debris, probably from the constant weapons fire of the battle taking place outside. He glanced about. The layout was unfamiliar to him, and he was unsure of where to find what he needed. A medic, obviously irritated at being bothered with such trivialities, came up to him and asked if he could help Marlin in a tone of voice that suggested that even if he could, he wasn't particularly interested in doing so. Marlin slid over the medic's mind, suggesting unconditional cooperation, and asked where he might find the Inhibitor tools.

The medic blinked, then beckoned. "Follow me."

He led Marlin through two doors, then gestured to an array of devices hanging on the wall. Marlin selected one that would be able to remove Tanya's Inhibitor. Nodding his thanks to the man, he exited the medical bay, leaving the effect to wear off. This was how he preferred to work. He got what he wanted, and nobody got hurt.

His trek thus far had proven to be more successful than he dared hope. Nobody seemed to question his presence, not even the higher-ranking officers. He shuddered involuntarily whenever passing through an I-EMP field, but the reaction was invisible beneath the layers of armor. He'd had to divert several patrols to ensure they didn't get close enough to be suspicious of him, but such things were expected. He was making good time. Soon enough Tanya would be free.

He tucked the tool into his belt, and moved onwards down the hall. The disc containing the crucial files was nestled comfortably under his jumpsuit, near his waist. He had to return the information to his home haven at Inala Outpost. A quick scan of the names of undercover operatives revealed several who belonged to his haven. Marlin didn't know any of them very well; mostly they were recently liberated. He imagined that a few could perhaps be turned to their cause, but more than likely some would need to be captured. Perhaps killed, if they proved to be highly uncooperative. Most people who were found in a haven where they didn't belong decided not to put up a struggle. Fighting telepaths on their home turf was foolhardy at best, but some still tried.

Several years ago he had uncovered evidence of an undercover operative in their midst, who was sending intelligence back to the Outpost's command center. After some investigation, they had discovered it to be a young man, barely twenty years old, who had joined up several months before. He'd claimed no family, and passed the usual tests. He was a recluse. Nobody knew him very well. Late one night, Marlin and several of his closest friends had paid the young man a visit. He crouched in a corner of the room, like a wild animal, hurling various psychic assaults upon them. Several of his friends had gone down, though they were later found to be not permanently damaged. Three of them still stood, though, and gradually broke down his defenses until the young man descended into madness. When he was too incoherent to attack them further, they had moved in to take him prisoner. He was already dead. The force that had been necessary to break through his psychic barriers had been too much for his undisciplined mind, which had simply shut down, taking his body with it. Marlin shook his head, chagrined. They fought amongst their own kind where they should be fighting for their freedom.

Marlin shook off the memory, and returned his focus to the task ahead. A patrol group was heading towards him. He reached out and gently nudged their minds, and they turned off down a side corridor. He walked on, unhindered. Reaching out, he located Tanya. She was on the move. He increased his pace, hurrying to catch her.

* * *

She rode the elevator with her guardians, going up for what seemed like ages. Nobody spoke. As Tanya listened to the quiet hum of the machinery, she thought she felt

the touch of someone. Marlin. He must be nearby. Her heart leapt in hope. If he could get the Inhibitor off her neck, they would be able to escape. If she had her talent back, they could fight their way out if they had to. Nothing could get in their way. She reached back idly, and scratched at the skin around the inhibitor. Damn, that thing itched. She'd always felt uncomfortable with the thought of something poking into her brain stem, and had often wondered darkly how one of the Enforcers would like the feeling. Or the man standing next to her. She glanced at his handsome features sidelong, wishing him dead, hoping he would simply drop beside her and breathe no more.

The doors opened. She continued glaring at the man as he started forward, then felt the familiar poke of a rifle muzzle in her back.

"Get moving, teep."

Without thinking she gave in to her anger and turned to face the man. All the guards raised their weapons in a cacophony of clicks and snaps, as they prepared to shoot. She glared at the guard before her. He was the same one who had been poking her with his gun the whole time. Apparently he enjoyed it very much. Her words came out an animalistic snarl.

"Stick me with that thing again, I'll make sure you eat it for breakfast." Fear clouded his eyes, but he held steady, as he was trained to do. For a tense moment, they watched each other, with five weapons trained on her. If she so much as moved towards the man, they would not hesitate to open fire

Then the moment was over, as she turned away, and stalked out of the elevator car. Her captor was standing, waiting calmly for her. He watched her approach, said nothing of the moment he had just observed. Instead he simply said "This way," and walked off. She followed, her guards falling into formation around her.

She was so stewing in her own fury that she didn't notice the man walk up to them until they halted. She looked up then, annoyed at yet another distraction. She saw the Enforcer. But she also FELT him. And that feeling was unmistakable.

Marlin.

* * *

Marlin was trying with all his will to gain Tanya's attention, and from the way she looked at him, it seemed to have worked. He talked absently with the officer that was leading her pack, something along the lines of hunting the other Rogue, and had he seen a man that looked like so-and-so, making time for Tanya to realize what he was about to do. He nodded to her, imperceptibly, and she returned the gesture. He closed his conversation with the officer.

"Well if you see him, could you call me personally, sir?"

The man nodded. "Yes, yes. I'll be sure to ask for you in particular." Marlin smiled in appreciation.

"Thank you."

Then he turned, and shot the guard next to him. In moments, the intersection was thrown into chaos. The guards pointed their weapons everywhere, trying to cover Marlin and Tanya, and not to aim at their comrades. Bullet holes peppered the walls and ceiling. Marlin shot two more guards before discarding the empty weapon and kicking the nearest one in the face. Tanya stepped forward, grabbed the officer's head, and twisted it around. He stared at her in shock as his neck snapped and he fell to his knees. With a burst of speed, Tanya lunged at the final guard, ducking below the fire from his gun, and tackled him bodily around the legs. With a cry of surprise, he fell to the ground. Tanya pulled herself over him, intent on finishing him off rather unpleasantly. She felt the familiar gun muzzle poking her in the ribs, and belatedly realized exactly which of the guards he was.

And then three shots rang out.

She shuddered involuntarily, then grabbed his wrist and snapped it. He screamed in pain. The sound annoyed her. She stopped it by shoving the stock of his gun in his mouth, hard. Then her strength left her, and she slumped against the wall in a pool of her own blood.

* * *

Marlin was occupying himself with the last guard when he heard the shots, and looked over in disbelief. He watched as Tanya, even with three bullets in her, finished off the last Enforcer, then collapsed like a battered, bloody rag doll. In an instant he was beside her, somehow remembering to remove her Inhibitor, looking down at her body. The bullets had missed her heart, but her lungs and probably several other important organs were injured. She was beyond medical help, at least in the amount of time she had left. Her eyes opened, and she looked up at him.

"Marlin."

"Yes, I'm here. You're gonna be ok. Try not to talk."

She laughed quietly, giving way to coughing. She was coughing up blood. Her lungs were already starting to fill. He heard her speak in his mind.

No, Marlin. I'm dying. You can't save me. You have to let me go.

She placed her hand on his cheek. It left a smear of blood, but Marlin didn't care. Tears streamed down his face as he shook his head, willing it to not be so. He opened his mouth, but couldn't think of anything to say. Instead, he just wept. Tanya's hand felt warm against his face, unusually warm. Her eyes were getting more distant even as he watched.

"Don't leave me, Tanya," he begged softly to her. An odd smile touched her lips.

"Don't worry Marlin. I'll always be with you." She began to cough again.

"I love you, Tanya." The words were out of his mouth before he even thought about it. She looked up at him then, and her lips curved in a smile.

I know, Marlin. I love you, too. Then her brown eyes fixed, and she saw no more.

Gently, Marlin pulled her hand away from his cheek, tears streaming down his face. His face burned where her hand had rested. She had been the first woman he was ever really in love with, and now she was gone. His feelings for her burned deep inside him, and his chest felt tight. He sobbed openly, no longer caring if he was captured, or killed, or if he never made it back alive. Everything suddenly seemed so very pointless without her.

He wasn't sure how much time passed, but when he finally pulled himself together, he was aware of a quiet scraping sound. Looking over, he noticed that one of the Enforcers, still alive, was dragging himself towards a fallen weapon. With a cold fury building inside him, Marlin stalked over, grabbed the man by the front of his uniform, and hauled him up so their faces were inches apart. His words were a menacing whisper.

"Listen carefully. I have a message for your administrator."

* * *

The engines of the small spacecraft rumbled as they propelled the vessel away from Starbase 510. The space-borne battle between Enforcer and Rebellion craft raged on, but was winding down as Rebel ships began to turn away, leaving the system. The occasional stray shot would pass near the little ship, but it would always change course in plenty of time to avoid it. The pilot was able to anticipate them easily, and avoid them.

Marlin Kilbury drove the ship to a safe distance from Kitara's gravity well, then pulled back a control, and sat back in the seat as the fabric of space rent around him, and the little ship entered slipspace. He was finally free of the station, exhausted, battered, and in pain, and minus a part of himself. He reached up, and placed his hand where Tanya's had been as she lay dying. The skin still burned fiercely, feverish and hot. He slumped down, suddenly weary, and fell asleep.

* * *

From his large, spacious office, the administrator of Starbase 510 watched the tiny ship leave, and enter slipspace. Behind him, the lone survivor of the encounter in the hallway had just finished his report. The man had been beaten up badly, with several broken ribs, a concussion, and his left arm fractured in multiple places. But medical attention could wait. He insisted on seeing the administrator immediately.

"So you killed one of them?" he asked the man, without turning around.

"Yes, the woman. She was dead when I came around. The first thing I thought to do was to finish off the other one."

He nodded. "Good thinking. So what stopped you?"

"He saw me. Came over and said..." There was a long pause. The administrator turned to face him.

"He said what?"

The soldier had a strange, vacant look in his eyes. "He said...he had a message for you." His good arm raised, and pointed a sidearm at his superior. His eyes still distant, as if looking through everything to some other place, he gently squeezed the trigger.

* * *

Epilogue.

The forest is alive around her. Sunlight streams through openings in the canopy, warming the soft earth with it's rays. Small creatures and insects scurry to and from, paying her no heed, busy with whatever task they feel the need to occupy themselves with. Birds perch in the trees, unafraid of her presence, and sing to each other. She can feel every one of them, and is at peace with them. Time slips by. Or does it? The forest seems timeless, a moment of perfection frozen for her enjoyment alone, and she lives in the moment as well, closing her eyes and allowing the sun to wash her face.

Tanya Hawker lies stretched out in the sun on a large rock next to the river. The quiet swish of the water passing her by relaxes her, allows her to feel free. She plays with the creatures of the forest, plays in the river, all without rising from her stony bed, all with her mind. She follows the river as it meanders lazily on it's way, and she stirs up a cloud of mud from the soft riverbed. It is only when she hears the approaching footsteps that she drifts back into herself, and opens her eyes. She does not make the effort to rise, instead simply turning her head towards the noise, to appraise the new visitor. The black cloak is familiar to her, but the feeling about it no longer chills her to her bones. She smiles at it, as if at an old friend. I am here, she says. I am here, and I am so very happy to be here. I had to die, was that it? To free myself from the confines of my flesh and blood?

The thing within the robes says nothing, as usual. She smiles at it again. Ah well, no matter, she tells it. But I would like you to do one thing for me. Draw back your hood. Let me look upon you as you really are, not this cryptic guise. You have no further

purpose with it.

For the first time, the figure finally speaks, and the voice is that of a man. This cryptic guise is who I really am. I may appear to be any number of things, but all of them are illusions. Perhaps you like this guise?

After a moment's hesitation, the hood is drawn back, and Marlin's smiling face looks back at her. She does leap up then, races to him, but he has already vanished before her eyes. Wait, she calls into the forest. Come back Marlin! I want to speak with you, about so very many things! There is laughter behind the response. You know how, Tanya Hawker. You know how to speak with him.

* * *

Warren Fenly, the man in charge of the Inala haven, broke into a grin as he tapped the keys on his computer terminal. The information that they had tried for months to get was all there. Marlin had pulled through, like always. They had risked their lives to acquire this information.

And lost one, Warren reminded himself. His grin faded a few notches. He glanced across the desk at Marlin, seated in the large, comfortable chair. The man had returned to Inala looking in bad shape, but now he'd showered and cleaned up and gotten a change of clothes. His dark blonde hair flowed back over his shoulders, now brushed and even. They'd removed the Elite Enforcer body armor from him when he landed, and he now wore a mix of clothes that might once have been military uniforms of some sort. The dirt and blood on his face and hands was gone, washed away. One of his cheeks still looked rather flushed, but Medical said he checked out fine. Most of the damage done to him was of the emotional sort.

Rather than broach the subject, Warren decided to try a different tack. "It's all here, Marlin. Everything we need. This information will save hundreds of lives, on both sides. You've done an outstanding job, as usual."

"Have I?" Marlin smiled without humor. "Well. I just hope that information you have is worth the price we paid." Bitterly, he rose and moved for the door.

"Marlin, we all feel her loss. She was one of us, and she was something very special. We're like a big family, Marlin. None of us will ever be the same." Marlin watched him for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Some of us feel her loss more sharply than others. To some of us she was special in a very different way than to others. Nobody misses her like I do. None of you." Warren nodded, and decided not to push the matter further.

"Why don't you go get some sleep? You look like you could use it." Marlin smiled at that, looking at his friend, and wearily agreed, "Yes. And I feel more tired than I look. Good night, Warren."

He made his way to his room almost in a sleep-induced haze, barely able to acknowledge greetings from his fellow haven-mates as he passed them by. Stumbling into his room, he closed the door, and flopped down on the bed without bothering to undress. In moments he was asleep.

He wasn't sure how long he slept for, but sometime during the night he awoke in the darkness and lay half awake, staring at the ceiling. When he heard her voice, he was too tired to be surprised.

Marlin?

Yes, I'm here.

Her presence seemed to be everywhere all at once, filling his mind up gently, easily.

Marlin! I'm so glad I can hear you.

I am, too. Where are you? I thought you were dead.

I suppose I am. In a way. Her voice had a funny sound to it. When I was lying there, in the corridor, and I knew I was going to die, I just...couldn't let go of you. I had to stay with you somehow. So I tried something. Remember how I put my hand on your cheek?

Marlin reached up, placing his hand against his face. The spot still felt hot and feverish.

You didn't. How?

He could almost see her nodding. *I did. We've merged, Marlin. I'm part of you now. We both share your mind, thoughts and feelings. Together, we've become something more. I love you, Marlin, and I don't ever want to leave you.*

He was shaking his head, in a combination of disbelief and astonishment. What she was saying wasn't possible. It just wasn't. Was it?

It is. He could feel her smile, a tickle in his mind. Remember, I'm part of you now. Everything you, see, feel and think, I'm part of it.

He wanted so badly to see her, to be able to touch her again, to speak with her face to face. He felt her smile again.

Go to sleep, Marlin. You need your rest. We'll talk more later.

He closed his eyes again, beset by an incredible weariness, and he dropped off to sleep. And as he slept, he dreamed. Dreamed he was walking in a great forest, following a river. And as he traveled ahead, he saw a figure sitting crosslegged on a large rock. Smiling, he started forward to greet her.

* * *