

PATH TO VENGEANCE

The Guardians Book One



The Guardians

Book One

Path to Vengeance

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Prologue

Mabraant, Mabra System, Fazaal Sector, Gaashox Quadrant
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Grogaan was standing by one of the large viewing windows at the main space port in Herloan City, staring up into the sky feeling happier than he could ever remember. He was waiting excitedly for the arrival of his fiancée Miranda who was returning from a visit to Breolis Primar in the nearby star system.

He was well respected at Mabraant Engineering where he worked and had excelled in his abilities as an engineer, had recently passed his advanced flying course, and it was the first anniversary of his engagement to Miranda. In another year he would be reapplying to join the Mabra Defence Academy, and hopefully start his fighter training following in his father's, his grandfather's, and his great grandfather's footsteps.

The ship was overdue by an hour. His excitement diminished slowly as time passed, and he became anxious for her safe arrival. Most ships arriving in the Mabra System were late these days because their arrival had to be timed with that of a fighter escort, but that did not prevent him from worrying. The escort ships were the new Manta Class Interceptors, a fast and beautiful starfighter that Grogaan hoped to start flying once he was enrolled into the Academy. He recalled a time when it was not necessary for ship escorts, but that was before the Krelathan raiders began attacking ships in the systems that bordered that of Krela, the raiders' home system.

Out on the edge of the system the transport arrived. "Mabra Defence, this is transport beta-gamma-seven-four-three; we are under attack. I repeat, we are under attack," said the communications officer calmly.

Fifteen Krelathan fighters appeared from behind the nearby moon and several of them opened fire. Blue laser bolts streaked across space and hit the transport on the port side knocking out all the electronic systems, rendering the ship dead in space. Five of the larger attacking ships closed in, not to destroy the ship but to dock and board her. Moments later, five interceptors from the Mabra Defence Force arrived and immediately opened fire.

"Alpha Squadron, let's go do our job," said Commander Learman. "Watch your backs and do your best."

"Yes Sir!" responded the four other pilots.

The Mabra Defence pilots were outnumbered three to one, but that did not stop them fighting with skill and tenacity despite four of them being fairly inexperienced in combat. Commander Ruebern Learman was a veteran fighter, highly respected and one of the best pilots in the force. He was also one of the last of those that had more than five years experience in combat. The four younger pilots remained in pairs as they fought, but one by one they were killed by the Krelathans. Ruebern broke off formation and chased one of the larger ships heading for the transport; a few seconds later it exploded. Without hesitation he targeted another, and another, calm and focussed on the task ahead. With three ships destroyed, he veered off to avoid an oncoming pair.

On board the transport, Miranda Talashon was standing beside her father watching the fight, fearing for their lives knowing the reputation of the Krelathan raiders. She desperately wanted to get home to be with her fiancé Grogaan, to feel safe again, but wondered what was going to happen now.

"Damn those Krelathan scum," said Alandra angrily, his wife staring at him in shock never having heard him curse before. "The Senate will hear about this, and I will make sure they do something about it. It's time they put the lives of their people above their damn bickering and financial prudence. It's time we took the fight to these scum and put an end to their villainy."

Unfortunately, he never got to voice his opinions or arguments to the Senate.

"Watch your back Sir! You've got three on your tail," said flight officer Andrews anxiously.

"Roger Andrews, and thanks." Ruebern tried to shake them off, but they were good, very good, and as soon as he managed to lose one, either another took up the pursuit or the one he lost managed to fall back on his tail. Despite his skills in evading the pursuers, several laser bolts hit his fighter at the stern;

his ship lost power, and he knew his time was up. He was on his own now, one against eight, and they were odds even he could not survive against.

He looked at the small holophoto of his wife he had fixed on the side panel of his ship. "Forgive me Kareana. Goodbye my love," he said as he run two fingers across the woman's face and sighed. His one regret was that he was unable to say goodbye to his family. For the first time since his second son Grogaan was born, a tear trickled down his cheek. Then he was gone. His ship exploded and vanished from existence.

The less experience Krelathan who killed Ruebern was overzealous in his desire to take his first kill, and fired more shots than was required. One single laser bolt that missed the fighter hit the stern of the transport destroying a small access panel and the power coupling behind: a one in a million shot. The failure of the coupling caused a chain reaction that travelled along the power conduits within the ships structure. A few moments later the transport exploded in a massive fireball taking out two of the Krelathan fighters.

Grogaan was in a state of panic. He knew something was wrong, very wrong. He did not know how, but there was no doubt in his mind. Gazing skywards he clearly sensed death; four sudden stabs of pain in his mind and spirit one after the other. Then he felt a much stronger sensation and knew that his father was dead. He sensed the cry of anguish, a moment of intense pain, and then nothing. The sensation made his whole body tingle. The loss of his father cut him deeply. He felt nauseous and weak. It was not over: worse was to come.

He had not even had time to accept his father's death, when moments later the sense of death that hit him was overwhelming. It felt as if hundreds of lives had been lost simultaneously, all crying out as one. Amongst the multitude of deaths he felt, he sensed one particular death as clear as someone plunging a knife into his heart; his fiancée Miranda had died. He knew it. He felt it. He sensed the pain and the sadness. For a moment he swore he heard his name being called out. Then there was nothing. She too was gone from his life.

The loss cut him to the very core of his being. It felt as if his soul was being torn from his body. Grogaan went into complete shock; his gaze fixed blankly towards space. His knees felt weak. His heart thumped painfully in his chest. Everything began to swirl around in front of him. He wanted to scream in grief, to lash out at anything nearby, to hurt someone, to hurt himself. Intense anger rose up within hiding his grief, but his strong self-discipline built up over the years prevented him from acting foolishly, or from making a scene in public. Hatred and contempt followed. His mind became filled with thoughts of extracting vengeance upon the perpetrators.

Grogaan, filled with grief, anger and hatred, walked idly back to his ship and then flew away from the spaceport. He knew he was in no fit state to fly, but did not care: Nothing mattered anymore. His mind became numb from shock, was unaware of everything going on around him, and did not even know where he was flying. As if fate directed him, Grogaan ended up at the one place that meant something to him; Lake Mabreese where he had first met Miranda. It was also where he had proposed to her and where she had filled him with happiness.

He landed without causing any damage considering it was a hard landing and the worst he had ever done. He walked to the spot where on that day one year ago he asked Miranda to marry him. Sitting on the dry grass beside the stream he thought of the two memories that meant most to him, his happiest memories.

The first was on the occasion of his sixteenth birthday. He arrived home from the Junior Education Faculty excited about what his father had bought him. Grogaan was disappointed because he saw nothing that resembled a present, and then his father spoke to him: Well, if you go through life with such little patience and lacking in curiosity, you won't get far. He had then taken him into the garage where his first spaceship was parked. It was the happiest day of his life, and what made it even better was that his father had secured him a place at Mabraant Engineering as an apprentice engineer.

Six years later and as a direct result of his flying, he met Miranda. Grogaan was completely smitten and within a year their relationship having developed profoundly, he proposed to her. She accepted without hesitation, making that day an even better day than when his father gave him his first ship. He remembered the day perfectly.

Miranda loved swimming and had gone for a swim in the lake. When she came out in her white bikini Grogaan was unable to take his eyes from her. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, had a lovely figure, and he savoured the sight of her wet skin glistening in the sunlight. She stopped beside him and

slipped on her white dress. Kneeling before her he asked her to marry him, and the joy he felt when she accepted was indescribable. The image of her standing towards the lake holding her hand high and gazing admiringly at her ring was permanently etched into his mind.

For a few moments the memory brought happiness to his soul, but then reality snapped back and took that happiness away. His brother Ben had been killed in action while fighting against the Krelathans only a week before. Now today his father had been killed and his fiancée too. His father, Ruebern Learman, was Grogaan's hero and the one he looked up to. He wanted to grow up to be like him, a good husband, father, and most of all a fighter pilot. Miranda was his one true love and the one he hoped to spend the rest of his life with; his soul mate, his everything. Words could not describe how he truly felt about her.

The fresh realisation that he had lost her hit Grogaan even harder this time. It was like a laser bolt striking his chest. It cut him so deeply and profoundly he simply lost the will to live. As far as he was concerned there was nothing to live for now Miranda was gone. The pain of his loss was intense. Every part of him hurt. His heart felt as if it was about to rupture. His mind was reeling from grief, anger and hatred. The grief was choking him, the anger and hatred towards the Krelathans eating away at his soul. The strength of those emotions was too much for him to cope with: He blacked out.

Fate had dealt an unfair hand to Grogaan, or so it appeared. He went from a joyous young man who had everything to live for to one who had lost all he cared for, even the will to live. He awoke as dusk was falling feeling very bad. Never had he felt so thoroughly wretched and worthless. He managed to stand up, but remained where he was. He pictured Miranda standing with her hand raised and gazing admiringly at her ring, the diamonds sparkling in the sun. "Miranda my sweet rose, I love you, will always love you." After choking back the grief threatening to overwhelm him again, he wiped fresh tears from his face and looked skyward. "I vow to avenge your death, that of your parents, my brother and my father. I swear I will make those damn Krelathan scum pay dearly for their atrocities. I swear I'll not rest until they are vanquished or I am dead."

The losses Grogaan experienced would turn this young man into a deadly force, the one who would act above and beyond his calling, the light within the darkness, the storm that leaves havoc in its wake, the lightning bolt that strikes with devastating results.

Chapter One

Mabraant, Mabra System, Gaashox Quadrant

Grogaan awoke abruptly in a cold sweat. He sat upright too quickly making him feel light headed and disorientated. His head throbbed. His heart beat wildly. His breathing was fast and shallow. The sheets were damp and his head and chest soaked with sweat. Grogaan fell back onto his pillow staring at the ceiling trying to steady his breathing and relax. It felt as if he had drunk so much it had given him the most intense and painful hangover possible. He was unable to think straight for a while, and his head hurt so much he had to close his eyes. Every breath seemed to cause pain in his lungs. Grogaan had never experienced such discomfort after waking after one of his disturbing dreams. To make matters worse, they always brought back memories of that terrible day, the day he lost his loved ones.

He finally managed to sit up but his head hurt, and the room seemed to swirl around before him making him feel nauseous. The sun shone brightly through his window, Grogaan having forgotten to close the curtains before he fell asleep. The brightness was hurting his already tired and aching eyes, which did nothing to alleviate the discomfort he was already feeling. Rubbing his hands across his brow and then over his black crew-cut hair, he felt droplets of sweat running down his neck and back making him shiver. He lay back on the bed and tried to relax, longing for an end to the grief, to be free of the pain and heartache, and most of all for the dreams to end. The last thing he wanted right now was to get up for work, so he closed his eyes for a while, and images of the dream began racing through his mind.

Grogaan tried to make sense of them, but everything was clouded and blurred obscuring the detail, made worse by the thumping in his head. When he finally managed to relax, he went to the refresher unit to indulge in a long hot shower. Standing motionless and allowing the hot water to rinse away all the tension that had built up in his body, his muscles slowly began to loosen, easing the stiffness. When adequately refreshed, Grogaan turned on the warm air blower, which quickly dried his body. Once dried, he turned the temperature down allowing the cooler air to reawaken his senses. It made him shiver a few times, but served to stimulate his body into life, and yet did nothing to ease the pain in his head; a pain like nothing he had ever experienced before. The only time Grogaan recalled having felt as bad as he did now was the night his fiancée and father were killed, and was a feeling he had never wanted to experience again. It was shortly after this time that the dreams began.

At first the dreams were light and infrequent, but now they had become more regular, intense and disturbing, and were beginning to make him tense and deeply troubled, often causing him to lose his concentration. This in turn made him irritable and touchy, resulting in him occasionally snapping at those who annoyed him, even his friends. Many did not understand his troubles or wanted to understand, and made snide comments about him to others, or criticised him thinking him a troublemaker. There were however, those who knew why he acted the way he did, especially his three close friends; Zaack, Doraant, and Eldaan.

Despite his snapping at them, they never rebuked him or took offence. They were the ones who had given him so much encouragement and support over the past years, who helped him through his most difficult times of depression, and were always there when he needed them the most, often putting aside their own interests for the good of their troubled friend. Grogaan knew he had three really good friends, true friends, and was extremely grateful to them. He owed them so much and tried to repay that kindness anyway he could. The one main and beneficial act he managed to do, was securing a transfer for them from the domestic appliance division to the spacecraft division at Mabraant Engineering, where he himself had worked since leaving the Junior Education Faculty.

Grogaan was a jovial easy going young man, friendly, kind and generous. He had a surprisingly adept ability of hiding his problems from others, or if in a bad mood while in the company of other people, maintaining an air of composure and calm. Unfortunately, this self control began waning as his dreams became more frequent and grew in intensity, resulting in him becoming withdrawn and melancholy if left on his own for long periods of time.

The solitude and quietness of those times added to his troubles because he was usually unable to take his mind off the dreams, the deaths of his fiancée, his father, and his brother. On particularly bad days his depression became so acute he simply lost the will to live, but then his vow of vengeance always came back to haunt him, and so he would persevere and press on.

Knowing what a problem being alone was for Grogan, his three friends tried to make sure one of them was with him as often as possible, even if it meant putting themselves out, but even that was becoming too hard to achieve.

Feeling relaxed and refreshed after his shower, Grogan got dressed slowly. Before going down stairs for breakfast he gazed out of his bedroom window admiring the view of the mountains. It was a lovely sunny morning, much too nice to be going to work. Instead, Grogan wanted to fly to the mountains and race his ship through the canyons as fast as he could, getting the adrenalin flowing and excitement in his heart pretending he was fighting the cursed Krelathans. It was one of the few ways he successfully kept the depression at bay.

With a heavy sigh he left his room, walking slowly down the stairs to the kitchen. He thought of the work he had planned for him and his few friends who worked with him, trying to keep his mind off the night's troubles, but his headache was a constant reminder. He cursed silently, wishing he could get a good night sleep for once.

"You're up early again this morning son. Those dreams still bothering you are they?" his mother asked sympathetically. She knew what he was going through, even though she did not fully understand why. It made her feel helpless and this caused her much anguish, more than she could sometimes cope with.

He nodded slowly. "They are," he sighed. "They're becoming more frequent and disturbing, but there's no need to worry. I'm sure they'll pass sooner or later," he said trying to convince himself as well as his mother. "They can't last for much longer."

Kareana could see he was deeply troubled. "Have you no idea what may be causing them? You've never had such bad dreams before," she said setting his breakfast plate before him.

He shrugged his shoulders. "No, I haven't, only that they started after Miranda and father died."

Kareana knew her son still felt the pain and heartache at the loss of Miranda, his fiancée, his father and his brother, and how much it had affected almost every aspect of his life since then. She hoped that time would heal the wounds, and when she thought he was finally coming to terms over their loss, the dreams started undoing any progress made. She wished she could do or say something to help, even if it only eased the distress a little, but knew there was nothing anyone could do. She only now realised just how much their loss affected him, and decided not to press the issue any further. Adding to her son's troubles was the last thing she wanted to do.

Kareana was still coming to terms with her own loss. Living without her husband Ruebern, and Ben her eldest son was proving very hard for her. The pain of that loss was still raw, and at times she felt as if her whole life was falling apart. Oftentimes, the memory of her husband brought Kareana so much happiness, especially when she remembered some of the special times they had together, when they went off-world to visit Breolis Primar. She remembered their second trip when they spent fourteen really enjoyable days exploring and staying in local hotels; the first trip after their marriage.

While there, Ruebern bought her a beautiful silver leaf shaped pendant with a large pale yellow gem at the centre, and hanging on a long fine silver necklace. It was supposedly a rare and precious stone found in the arid mountainous region of the planet, the home of many dangerous creatures where few people travelled. Ruebern knew the gem was valuable, but did not believe the stories of where they came from. The colour and chemical composition of the gem matched that of Kopaz, another rare and precious stone. Kopaz however, was usually green in colour, ranging from pale green the most common, to very dark green.

Where they came from was not important to Kareana. It was the fact that Ruebern was willing to spend such a large sum on a gift for her was all that mattered, making it more precious than anything, and made her feel very special. She still had the necklace, kept it safe in her jewellery box, but now only wore it on the anniversary of their wedding and deaths of Ruebern and Ben.

It was usually after these memories that Kareana found the pain of her loss too much to bear, and had it not been for her only surviving son Grogan, would have broken down completely. It was because of Grogan that she worked hard to

cope with daily life without her soul-mate. She recalled what her son told her when he returned home after proposing to Miranda; the memory bringing a joyous smile to her face: 'You know what mother, you and father are soul-mates, you know that don't you? If me and Miranda are like you two after we're married, I'll be the happiest man in the universe.' He used to call Miranda his soul-mate, and only now did she truly understand why he did, which was why not being able to help him overcome or resolve his problems hurt her emotionally, feeling that she was failing as a mother. Kareana knew all she could do was to be there for her son.

When she saw him in his happier more jovial mood, the way she always remembered him before he lost Miranda, it always lifted her spirits and gave her just cause to be thankful that at least she had him to care for. She was not alone in her situation. Several of her friends and people she knew had lost husbands or sons in the various engagements, and they often comforted one another, but it was not always enough.

Grogaan picked absently at his food while thinking about the dreams. The one he had suffered the most over the past two years was of a space battle where he saw starfighters darting between capital ships, laser bolts flying everywhere, hitting both fighters and capital ships. The cost in lives and equipment was far beyond his comprehension: the true reality of war. Then he was no longer flying a starfighter. He was still involved in the battle, but was on board one of the large strangely designed capital ships.

This puzzled him because he could not understand why he would be watching the battle from inside a capital ship, especially when it was obvious he was a fighter pilot. Suddenly, the interior of the ship seemed to darken and enclose around him, suffocating him. Then there was a massive explosion that tore the ship apart. Everything suddenly went black, at which point Grogaan always awoke suddenly and in a cold sweat.

The other dream, which was the more recent one he started experiencing and caused him the most distress, was that of a woman trapped inside the ruins of a building. It troubled him greatly, but was unable to understand why. Grogaan knew few women, and the only one whose loss could cause any distress for him now would be his mother. However, for some reason beyond his comprehension, he knew that she was not the woman in his dream, and assumed that it might be someone he would meet in the future. Shaking his head gently he took a bite of his food. The food tasted bitter in his mouth, which increased his discomfort and he soon lost his appetite.

His mother watched him with sadness in her heart as he picked absently at his food, not having seen him so depressed for a long time. It caused her much grief to see him like this, making her cry inside. He dropped his fork onto the plate, put his elbows on the table, and rested his chin in his cupped hands; his appetite gone. Kareana could see that he was sinking into one of his depressive moods and thought it wise to divert his attention from the dreams. She looked at him inquisitively for a moment, thinking what to say. "Oh by the way, you're friends have been looking for you over the past few days, which surprised me because I thought you were with them."

Not wanting to reveal much about where he went, and knowing it would only cause her upset if he did, he simply explained that he went to Herloan City on some personal errands. He poured some fruit juice into a glass and swirled it around a little before taking a mouthful. The sweetness eased the bitter taste in his mouth, but failed to improve how he was feeling. He sighed heavily.

"Care to elaborate?" she asked inquisitively.

"Not really in the mood right now, but maybe some other time if you don't mind." Finishing his drink in a few gulps, he got up and left for work without saying another word, leaving his mother more worried than she had been. Resisting the urge to cry, Kareana watched him disappear through the back door. She had cried far too much over the past three years and now needed to remain strong, something she had found easier until her son began having the dreams, but now it was becoming increasingly more difficult.

Mabraant Engineering was just over half an hour's walk from his home, both of which were situated near the edge of Herloan, principle city of the Wosfere District. It was the primary maintenance and repair depot in the Fazaal sector, and had a specially constructed land-based docking facility for repairing craft that were too large for the internal repair site. There was however, no space

dock for the major capital cruisers that often passed through the sector. The internal repair site catered for everything else, from domestic appliances to medium sized transports. Grogan and his team were responsible for all work on spacecraft, primarily starfighters. He had been working there for ten years; his three friends for about seven.

Having left home earlier than usual, he ambled slowly kicking some of the stones that littered the roadway. It took almost fifteen minutes longer to reach work, not that he was in a hurry to get there. With each step he took his depressed mood slowly deepened. There had been no rainfall for almost two weeks, so the road was dry and dusty. On either side of the road there were green fields that stretched into the distance: to his left the Potrodand Mountains, and to his right the lowland farmsteads. He always preferred to walk to work, gazing at the fields and mountains as he wandered along, the sights and sounds of nature always cheering him up.

On this particular morning, Grogan was so depressed he neither looked, nor even thought of the fields and mountains as he walked. By the time he reached the entrance to the maintenance depot he was feeling so miserable he wanted to turn right around and return home to his bed. His shoulders were hunched, his head hung low, but they were not as low as his spirits.

When he entered the building he found that he was one of the first to arrive. This pleased him as he would not have to face any of the others straight away, giving him a little time to perk up, which he usually did once in work. Only the supervisors had arrived before him, and most of them rarely entered the hangar so early unless they were checking on the work programmes. Grogan went into the engineers' crew room to change into his coveralls. After taking them from his locker he noticed that there was a green microdisk in the disk slot of the door. After slowly donning his coveralls, he took the microdisk and picked up the datareader from the table. He sat down in the chair near the window placing the reader on his lap with the disk held in his right hand.

On one side of the microdisk there was an emblem; that of the Mabra Defence Academy. The Academy was the third largest complex on Mabraant, situated on the outskirts of Stellant City in the Arlrent District. Grogan knew it would be the answer to his application for entry into the Academy, something he had been longing to do since he was a young boy. Having had his three previous applications turned down was bad enough, but it was made much worse because the recruiting board at the Academy had given him no reasons for the rejection.

His brother, father, grandfather and great grandfather had all been pilots in the Defence Force, and he was adamant that he would follow in their footsteps. He knew there was nothing wrong with him physically or mentally, and was unable to understand why they continually refused his application. His engineering and flying skills were already highly advanced for one of his age, proving that he had the necessary abilities to become a pilot in the Mabra Defence Force, but that seemed to be insufficient merit, at least in his case.

Grogan had submitted his first application the day after his twentieth birthday. Six long years have passed since that day, and he still remembered the joy he felt, although it had not lasted very long. The first refusal was disappointing, and even though he had not been informed why his application was refused, he assumed it was because there was an abundance of applicants that year. Grogan later found out that the Academy did not take on the full quota of entrants that year, and so he became angry and disillusioned. Every two years after that he resubmitted his application only to be refused each time, without reason. Now he had the fourth reply in his hand, it felt much longer than two years since his last application.

The young man sat quietly contemplating for a while, wondering what the answer could be. There was a longing that it would be the answer he most desired. His melancholy mood lightened a little, being replaced with a sudden feeling of anxiety as he slid the microdisk into the datareader. He paused a while before switching it on; his trepidation increasing by the second. The screen flickered and when the menu appeared, he selected option one, and held his breath in anticipation. Moments later a message appeared on the small screen. His heart sank when he saw the words scroll across the screen, and without surprise he read:

We regret to inform you that you have been unsuccessful in your application to join the Mabra Defence Academy. You may reapply for the next intake in two years time.

General Lantine, recruit enlistment.
By the authority of the Mabra Defence Academy.

He so longed to join the Academy and for years he had tried with no success. 'I wish I had never come back from Breolis Seven,' he spat with frustration. Had he not come back, he would not have been able to return Trindall's personal yacht, something he could not do. He owed his friend much for his support over the years, and the opportunities Trindall had given him at work, so did not want to damage that friendship in an act of selfishness. Grogan was plunged into a depressive mood that was almost suffocating, and was compounded further by the anger he was feeling towards the Krelathans who were responsible for the deaths of his loved ones and so many other Mabraantans, both military and civilian. His mood was not made any better when three young men burst into the crew room, laughing, joking and pushing each other around, disturbing his angry thoughts.

When they saw Grogan they stopped suddenly. "What! You here early again?" asked Zaack with a touch of friendly sarcasm. "Damn, you're far too keen for us. Don't you think it's about time you eased off a bit?"

"Hi," responded Grogan despondently. "You're happy this morning aren't you?"

"Of course we are. What's there to be miserable about?" said Eldaan, his good mood grating on Grogan's bad mood.

Zaack noticed their friend was looking very miserable. "Hey, what's up Grogan?" he asked. He then saw his friend was holding a datareader in his hand and realised he had received his reply from the Academy. "Oh no, they haven't turned you down again, have they?"

The others went silent, and knowing the bad luck that he had had in the past, feared the worst.

"Need you ask? Dammit Zaack, what does it take to get into that blasted place?" replied Grogan, his eyes revealing his anguish. He just could not understand why they kept rejecting his applications. With all the pilots they were losing in the Krelathan attacks, he was sure the MDF must be getting desperately short of men.

"Damn those bureaucratic fools. Don't they realise who they're turning down. What flaming right do they have to turn you down without telling you why," said Zaack loyally.

Eldaan always believed his friend thoroughly enjoyed working on starfighters at the engineering facility, and would continue to do so. He therefore could not understand why Grogan was so eager to join the Academy. With so many pilots being killed, the last thing he wanted was to lose a friend, especially Grogan. Although Eldaan was willing to join up along with his friends, he really wanted them to remain engineers for a good while longer. Eldaan considered himself a good pilot, not as skilled as Grogan said he was, and as far as he was concerned, doubted he would last long as a fighter pilot against the Krelathans.

Doraant nudged his way past Eldaan as the three friends went to sit in the other chairs. He knew it was Grogan's greatest ambition to become a fighter pilot, even before he had known him as a friend. Grogan was such a talented pilot and it seemed as if he was born to fly. Doraant felt bad at the news but could not think of anything to say, not that he would be able to do much to ease Grogan's mood, not at the moment anyway.

Zaack had other opinions about Grogan's eagerness to join the Academy. There was more to it than just the sheer exhilaration of flying; it was partly about making the Krelathan raiders pay for the people of Mabraant they had killed, but more so for the family and friends he had lost at the hands of those murdering scum, especially Miranda, his fiancée. Zaack knew the Krelathans would pay dearly if Grogan ever got into a starfighter. There was something about Grogan's flying ability that made Zaack believe it was a path that had been laid out for him by forces unknown, almost as if something or someone depended on him. Zaack knew Grogan's superior ability would make him the best pilot the MDF ever had, but then that ability made him believe there was more to it than just a natural gift.

"Hey Grogan, we're all really sorry to hear this," said Doraant. The others mumbled their agreement. As their jovial attitude diminished rapidly, an uncomfortable silence descended on them. None of them knew what else to say.

"Have you lot received answers to your applications yet?"

"We had them yesterday while you were off somewhere," replied Zaack. Grogan looked inquisitively at his friends who were not as happy about it as he would have expected. "They accepted our applications, but there's no way we're joining

unless they accept you as well," he said adamantly.

Grogaan was about to protest when Doraant spoke. "After all, if it wasn't for you we wouldn't be here now, let alone having become reasonable engineers and pilots. It's more than likely that we'd still be repairing domestic appliances. We've got a lot to thank you for!"

"It's nice to know that I've such good friends, and I promise I'll make it up to you someday," said Grogaan as he got up.

"There's nothing to make up. It's us that owe you. That's why we stick by each other," said Eldaan. "Don't forget that it was you who got us these jobs and taught us to fly, and that's more than we could have dreamed for."

The others agreed and Grogaan smiled, nodding his appreciation. He was lucky to have such friends.

"Oh, by the way, where did you disappear to for the past few days?" asked Doraant. "We were looking for you everywhere, and all your mother said was that you were out and didn't know where, something you've been doing a lot these past few years."

Grogaan took the microdisk out of the datareader, put it back in the slot on his locker, sighed, and then placed the datareader back on the table. He explained that he was sorting out some personal matters, not wanting to tell them what he had been really doing, not just yet. Doraant was a little suspicious of his friend knowing there was more to it than that, and wanted to pursue the issue because he was concerned for his friend. He was about to speak when Zaack scowled at him, so Doraant slouched back in his chair rebuked.

Zaack had the deepest understanding of their friend compared to Doraant and Eldaan having known him much longer, was closer to him, and respected his desire for privacy. He knew that Grogaan would tell them what he wanted them to know when the time was right, and not before. As a result, the tension between the three of Grogaan's friends began to increase as it often did in these circumstances, but it was never damaging and was short lived.

"Hey, ease up you three. It's not worth getting all stressed up about," said Grogaan agitatedly as he walking over to the crew room door. "I appreciate your concern about me, honestly, but please don't start falling out between yourselves."

They nodded and agreed, all smiling.

"Look guys, there are things I need to tell you, but it'll have to wait. Now isn't the time. Anyway, don't you think it's about time we pressed on with finishing those interceptors?"

"Haven't we got anything else planned today?" asked Doraant as the group left the crew room heading towards the hangar bays.

"Not today," replied Grogaan. "Trindall said we can continue with our own projects until some new maintenance jobs arrive."

"That's great. At this rate we'll soon have them finished," said Zaack excitedly.

They were currently upgrading, modifying and overhauling four Manta Class Interceptors Grogaan had purchased relatively cheaply from Mabraant Engineering. Trindall, the Chief Engineer and designer of the starship division had arranged with the owner of the engineering company to allow them to pay for the craft gradually. His argument being that the interceptors were designed by him and built at the facility, and would be free advertising and hence, good for business. However, after two months Grogaan had paid off the whole debt.

Trindall was very curious to know where Grogaan acquired enough funding to pay not only the debt, but also the costs that were incurred by the upgrading work on their ships. He was not being nosy, just concerned for the young man's welfare because he was a friend of the family and was concerned about their reputation. The authorities were very suspicious of people who come into large sums of money, and were often quick to start an investigation that could be detrimental to those involved.

The engineer knew the Learmans were not a wealthy family, and that Grogaan's wages were not high enough to account for being able to repay the debt so quickly. The amount of funding required for one ship would be at least fifteen years wages for the standard employee, and a few of the supervisors had asked questions regarding the purchases. Grogaan had been very secretive about where he obtained the money, but assured Trindall that it was legal and honest, and that there was no need to be concerned.

The Manta Class Interceptor, designated MCI, was one of the fastest craft available in the Gaashox Quadrant, with moderate plate armour and weapons. It was

an improved version of the older Manta Class Fighter, designated MCF, was faster and had heavier armour plating. It was based on the Fadaran TS5, an earlier fighter that was rapidly becoming obsolete. The TS5 had been the Defence Force's primary starfighter until the arrival of the MCF, and now the MCI was gradually replacing the MCF's and TS5's that were beyond economical repair or destroyed in combat against the Krelathans.

The ship was armed with two large laser cannons, one on each wing tip, and two proton torpedo launchers. It had a standard beta class-two lightspeed drive unit rated point zero, which Grogan had replaced with a standard beta class one unit that had a rating of point five, giving it a speed of one point five times the speed of light. It also had an onboard Fadaran Alpha-Two Navicomputer that could calculate up to ten sets of multiple co-ordinates. Most starfighters were built with only standard navicomputers capable of calculating only five sets of co-ordinates, forcing a ship to decelerate from lightspeed after the fifth change before being able to continue its journey. At its current specifications, the MCI was slightly larger than, although comparable to the Delta XB1 in performance, except for its firepower. The Delta XB1 was the primary starfighter used by the military in the Ladorran Quadrant, and had played an important role in the defeat of the Belocian Empire.

The models Grogan had purchased were second-generation interceptors with improved electronics and efficiency on all systems. However, that and the overall specifications of the ships had not been good enough for Grogan. He and his friends spent the last year working on them as often as time would allow. So far, they had fitted two additional proton torpedo launchers, along with the associated modifications required allowing a magazine capacity of five torpedoes per launcher. The wing tips had been modified allowing for the attachment of two additional laser cannons; one above and one below the wing. They had also made considerable modifications to the nose of the craft allowing the instalment of four smaller but still powerful laser cannons. This was only possible due to the interceptors' fuselage depth being greater than most other starfighters.

The fuselage attachment fittings for power generators and other major items of equipment had also been remodelled. The single power generator was replaced with two that were slightly smaller, but the overall power output was about thirty-five per cent greater. The independent generators enabled the laser cannons and shields to be powered separately from the engines and remain on full recharge without any power drain on the engines. This in turn allowed faster recharge rates during combat situations, which could mean the difference between life and death. It also increased the power available to the engines, compensating for the extra weight of heavier armour plating that was added during the modifications.

One particular item that had substantially increased the overall cost of the interceptor's upgrade was a Fasardan Mark Seven Sensor Array. This particular array could detect any object greater than one kilogram in mass at speeds of up to two point five times the speed of light. Coupled with the newest Fadaran alpha-six navicomputer, a ship could maintain lightspeed travel almost indefinitely. Due to their cost, each unit costing over twenty five thousand credits, very few ships had them fitted. Most of those that did were owned by extremely wealthy merchants or smugglers. Grogan had not been able to source the new Fadaran alpha-six navicomputer yet, but intended to do so in the near future.

Doraant was deep in thought as they walked across the hangar. "I thought there was an abundance of jobs waiting?" he asked suddenly.

"There's been a shortage of work for several months now. That's why they've had to cut the working hours and wages for many of the employees. If things don't improve the management will have to start cutting down the number of workers as well."

"I thought that with all the ships being lost against the Krelathans, there'd be plenty of work coming in," said Eldaan.

"There is, but not all of it comes here, and it's affected the demand for other maintenance work. People are holding back on the domestic side of the business. That's the area most affected here."

The others looked surprised, and were becoming very worried about their futures at Mabraant Engineering. Grogan explained that Trindall promised him their positions were safe due to their experience and abilities on starfighters. The only engineers in the region possessing as much experience as the four young men were already working for Mabraant Engineering or in the Defence Force, which made them very valuable workers. There was another reason why their jobs were secure: the vast amount of money Grogan had spent purchasing the four

interceptors and the equipment needed to upgrade them.

There was a big sigh of relief from his friends.

"We must be just about finished now, shouldn't we?" asked Zaack.

"Near enough. Most of the main electrical components still require connecting, and then there's the refitting of the sensor array and the targeting computer system. Once that's done we can run the functional tests. After that, there's just the uploading of the astrogation data, system charts, and starship ID's into the computer systems."

"That's all?" said Doraant. "I thought there was far more than that!"

"Well, we have been working extremely hard these past few weeks," said Zaack.

"So how long will that lot take?" asked Doraant.

"For you, twice as long as the rest of us," said Eldaan teasingly.

Doraant glared at him. "Oh yeah?"

"Alright you two, that's enough. We should be finished by the end of the day."

"That soon? Damn and blast! I thought we'd be working on them for days yet, even weeks," said Eldaan exasperated.

"Yeah well, there were some tricky and intense jobs I completed myself after working hours." The others glared at him. "I was feeling pretty low, and thought if I did some work it would take my mind off my troubles. The tasks needed a lot of concentration, and it was easier to do them after everyone went home. Anyway, the sooner we get started the sooner we finish. Zaack, you work with Eldaan, Doraant, you with me." Grogaan had spent a considerable amount of time working on their ships in the evenings, and even at weekends without the others knowing about it. He enjoyed the work, and found concentrating on the modifications prevented him from focussing on the dreams, and as a result, reduced the periods and intensity of his depression.

Chapter Two

Mabraant, Mabra System, Fazaal Sector, Gaashox Quadrant

The four strolled casually across the hangar toward the bays in which their ships were parked. The last few components that required fitting, and those that had been replaced by upgraded or new models, were placed on the nearby racks. The ships were looking as if they had just been brought out of the finishing shop. The paintwork shone like polished metal and the silver components glistened under the hangar lights. They gazed lovingly at them admiring their work, and longed to take them out into space and fly like the birds, free and fast.

On the tail fins, he had painted a dark blue shield with the head of the Grederant eagle in green at the centre. In its open beak, was a large dark green Kopaz gem, and beneath the eagle's head a number preceded by the letter K; one on Grogan's ship, two on Zaack's, three on Doraant's, and four on Eldaan's. Below the shield, he had painted the word Kopaz.

"Hey Grogan, when did those markings appear on the tail fins?" asked Zaack pleasantly surprised.

"Last week. I thought we needed a personal identity and as we all admire the eagle for its majestic beauty and skill as a predator, I considered it quite appropriate for our small squadron."

"Damn good choice Grogan," said Doraant. "It's perfect, but why Kopaz?"

"That's a personal choice I felt you'd not object to. The Kopaz gem was Miranda's favourite, so I did it in her memory."

The others nodded their approval. "We like it," they said in chorus.

"It gives us unique identity. What happens if we do eventually get into the Academy? Surely they'll not like it?" said Zaack.

"We'll be providing our own ships don't forget, so even if they don't like, they'll have to live with it. They can call us by another squadron name once we graduate, but they won't be able to force us to remove the emblems," said Grogan.

Accepting his argument, and at his prompting they started connecting up the components that had been fitted several days before where the cables had to remain undone until other tasks had been completed.

The sensor array had to be fitted before the targeting computer; a tricky task that Doraant was not looking forward to. It was not really heavy, but the awkward position he had to stand holding it made his arms shake after only a few minutes. Doraant's quivering arms made the sensor array move around slightly, and was causing problems for Grogan who was trying to fit the unit retaining bolts. "Hurry up Grogan. My arms are beginning to give way," said Doraant shakily, the strain showing in his voice.

"What already? You need to do some physical training," said Grogan mockingly.

"Very funny," he replied indignantly, but then laughed along with his friend when he saw the funny side of it.

When the array was finally bolted in place, Doraant was at last able to relax, and then insisted that Grogan hold the targeting computer while he did the easy part and bolted it in place. Grogan made a sarcastic remark humorously insinuating that his friend preferred the easy tasks. Doraant scowled back at his friend, but when he saw Grogan's expression, he realised that he was only joking. The two of them laughed loudly.

When the sensor array and targeting computer were connected securely, the two engineers checked over the whole ship. They looked in every compartment for loose connectors, and that all components were in place and fitted correctly. Once that was done they could connect the tester units and proceed with system checks. Grogan called out to check if everything was okay. There was a positive reply from his working partner. They were half way through when Eldaan's voice sounded from across the bay asking if he had finished with the testing units. Grogan said that he would require a few more minutes to complete the last few tests, but then the indicator light for the undercarriage sensor flashed red on the test.

"Hey Doraant, is the landing gear sensor connector okay? I'm getting a fail light on over here." Grogan switched the test unit off while his friend inspected the connector.

"Ah! There's the problem," he muttered as he checked the cables in the landing

gear bay. He shouted loud enough for his colleague to hear his muffled voice telling him a wire was damaged. Grogaan thought Doraant had already checked those cables, and when he queried his friend about it, he was convinced he had done so. Doraant was quick to apologise for the oversight, informing him that it would soon be repaired with a crimp.

It was a simple task that only took a few moments once he had selected the appropriate tool and correct size crimp. Signalling to Grogaan that the task was done, he replaced his tools while Grogaan recommenced the tests. All the lights on the test set flickered on one by one. To his relief they were all green. After the tests were finished the two young engineers disconnected all the cables; Doraant starting at the nose of the ship, and Grogaan working from the rear. It took several minutes to disconnect all the leads, coil them up and replace them in the correct slots on the trolley. It was a job Doraant was pleased to have finished.

He then shouted over to Eldaan informing him that he could collect the test sets as soon as he wanted. Eldaan strolled over to Grogaan's ship asking if the tests were successful, feeling slightly jealous that his friend was more competent than he was. Grogaan answered in the affirmative. There were a few other mechanical checks to do, but they would not take long. Then all that was required was for the astrogation data to be uploaded into the ship's computer systems, and then hopefully, the ship was ready for the flight test. They had reached this stage far quicker than even Grogaan had expected, and it was a testament to their skills and determination, as well as the considerable number of additional hours Grogaan spent in the evenings and weekends. He stood admiring the interceptor and smiled, pleased with their achievement. He then yawned deeply.

"Tired?" asked Eldaan raising his eyebrows.

"Just a bit: I had a restless night."

Zaack called out from under the starfighter, telling Eldaan to stop talking and return to the ship with the tester unit.

"Do you know he hasn't stopped moaning all flipping morning, and it's beginning to drive me nuts," said Eldaan shaking his head and sighing. He wished that he could have paired off with one of the others so that he wouldn't have to suffer Zaack's constant moaning.

Grogaan looked concerned. "That's unusual for Zaack." His friend didn't respond. 'I wonder what's bothering him,' he thought.

Eldaan pushed the trolley over to his ship telling Zaack to stop his whingeing, and the two of them then began preparing for the system checks. They were good friends even if they did argue, but their arguments were always light hearted. Grogaan, amused by Eldaan's outburst watched them for a few moments before going to find Doraant. He was sitting near the desk looking over the engineering drawings of the latest modifications they had performed.

"These last modifications you designed are pretty complicated," he said scratching his head. "Bet they took some time to do?"

Grogaan smiled. "Yes they did. It took a few evenings work to get the dimensions right, but it was well worth it."

"You amaze me Grogaan. How do you know so much about engineering and design?"

"I've had plenty of time to learn, with some good teachers, especially Trindall. Besides, I learnt a lot in preparing the work for you and the others."

Doraant looked at his friend. "And where would we be without you?"

"It's been a pleasure helping you. Anyway, what are friends for?"

Doraant smiled.

As it was approaching lunchtime, Grogaan decided they would make a start on Doraant's ship after eating. The two wandered over to see how the others were progressing and to hurry them up. While Zaack and Eldaan were fitting the last few components, Grogaan and Doraant checked over the rest of the ship in preparation for the testing. Grogaan was quite surprised when he found a faulty connector. 'Definitely unlike Zaack to miss something important like this, it must be serious to affect him in this way,' he thought. He told his friend quietly.

"What! You must be joking?" he responded, not believing it himself, and immediately went to look at the faulty connector the other had found.

He was shown what the problem was: The soldering at the connector joints was deteriorating allowing the cables to slip loose. Eldaan scratched his nose, rather surprised and annoyed that he too had overlooked the fault, but didn't prevent Grogaan from carrying out the repair for him. It took about five minutes

to change the connector and then the ship was ready for testing. A short while later with all of the tests passed, the ship was prepared for uploading all the necessary computer data.

Grogaan's stomach rumbled. He was feeling a lot hungrier than he had realised, and asked the others if they too were hungry. His friends were surprised at the question because they were always hungry by lunchtime, especially Doraant. There was a unanimous decision to dine at the Daspin Cantina where they were guaranteed a big juicy Monkrat steak; one of their favourite meals. After the other tests were completed, the young engineers left the facility still wearing their coveralls going straight to the Daspin. Once there, they ordered a Monkrat steak each and a large jug of chilled Mabraleen ale to wash it all down. They spoke little during the meal, but what they did talk about was how the work had progressed, and anticipating the thrills they would experience when they finally took the ships for their test flight.

"Now that was delicious, and just enough to fill the gap," said Grogaan.

"Just enough! Are you kidding?" queried Doraant.

"Of course I am, but then you should know. You're the one who usually eats the most." Doraant glared at his friend. "Only teasing pal," he said.

"Why you!" replied Doraant laughing, the others joining in.

The four young men debated whether or not they had enough time for another drink, eventually deciding they had. After all, there was no rush for them to return to work; they only had the other two ships to finishing connecting up and testing. Much to Zaack's displeasure it was also decided that it was his turn to buy the drinks. The second round of Mabraleen ale left the four friends quite jovial and ready for the afternoon's work. As the sun was shining, they strolled casually back to work enjoying the warmth and the break from being indoors.

By the end of the afternoon the two remaining ships were finished with all tests completed satisfactorily. With a final check over the ships done, only the uploading of the astrogational, navigational, and other data onto the ship's computers was left to do. Grogaan had already set up the data onto the computer console in the bay a few days ago, so it was a simple task of connecting the computer to the navigation system and starting the upload process.

He stored certain information in his ship's systems but not his friends'. These included the star charts for the Ladorran Quadrant, and an area of the galaxy that Collatin had referred to as the Galactic Extreme or Outer Rim, an area that bordered the Ladorran Quadrant and the Gaashox Quadrant, and also contained the Mantoa asteroid belts. He was disconnecting the cable from the last interceptor just as the others came into the bay, looking for him.

"You finished loading all that data stuff yet?" asked Zaack. "It's time we were going."

"Just finished the last ship," responded Grogaan as he switched off the computer, retrieved the microdisk from the slot and slipped it back into his top pocket. All that was left now was the functional checks to make sure the navigational computer was reading the astrogation data and processing flight data correctly. "We need to do the final checks, but that can wait until morning."

"Good. I don't think I'd be able to take 'em out now, I'm shattered."

"It's hardly surprising Zaack. I suggest we all get a good night's sleep."

"You not going to the Klaret tonight?" asked Doraant as they headed towards the exit.

"Not tonight Doraant," said Grogaan then yawned. "Anyway, I'm a bit short of money at the moment. Spent nearly all I had on those last few parts the other day. I'll see you all in the morning." He had been working very hard recently, packing equipment, loading and unloading the ship, and organising his stores at his base on Breolis Seven, after which followed a week of hard graft on their interceptors. Now it was catching up on him, made worse by the disturbed nights' sleep he was experiencing.

The young engineer started to walk off in the direction of his home, realising he had forgotten to pick up some of his hidden money from Breolis Seven while he had been there the previous day. He was annoyed and silently cursed himself for being so lax. Strolling along slowly he noticed the direction of the wind had changed since lunchtime. It was now coming in from the south bringing the hotter equatorial temperatures into the area. Summer was on its way and the extra long days where he could spend more time in the mountains and at the lake, if he could manage to remain there without becoming too depressed. Now however, he possessed a fully functional interceptor to take his mind off his depression.

"See you tomorrow Grogaan," shouted Doraant, deciding that he would go for one

drink before going home. Eldaan shouted after Doraant to wait for him, as he was in desperate need of a good drink after all their hard work. "You coming, Zaack?"

Zaack declined claiming to be too tired, which was unlike him. He rarely turned down an invite for a drink. Turning to see Grogan heading off down the road, he ran after him.

"Wait a moment Grogan, there's something I need to talk about with you, that's if you don't mind."

Grogan stopped until Zaack caught up with him. They walked slowly side by side; the one, who had known his parents but had lost a father and a brother; the other never having known his parents who were killed when he was only two years old, and was cared for by his grandparents. They had known each other for about ten years, and Zaack regarded Grogan as the brother he never had. Grogan was surprised when his friend told him he was the only person he could trust, and who may be able to help with a serious problem he had.

"I thought you'd speak with Trewern. He's been a good friend to you, and much longer than I have."

"I thought I could trust Trewern too, the devious lying creep," said Zaack. "Damn Trewern," he spat out his name in disgust, "he is the problem."

Grogan was rather astonished. He believed Trewern was a trustworthy type of guy, especially considering he was Zaack's cousin. 'How wrong one can be?' he mused.

"He used to be until he decided that money was more important than loyalty." Zaack paled. A tear appeared at the corner of one of his eyes.

It was the first time Grogan had ever seen him so upset. Zaack had always been the tough one, the positive type, very similar to Grogan in many aspects. Nothing ever seemed to ruffle his feathers, or cause him to worry. 'I knew there was something troubling him. This must be serious,' he thought. All through the day Grogan had felt inclined to ask, but it had never seemed to be the right time. "So Zaack, what's the problem?"

Zaack's shoulders dropped a little. "Last week Trewern went over to the Gretanchen district and got involved in some sort of finance scam that backfired. He's now up to his armpits in serious trouble with the authorities. The bad side is that somehow my name was dragged into it, and now I'm in trouble with the authorities too."

Grogan detected the concern in his friend's voice. "What sort of trouble?"

Zaack dropped his head in embarrassment, but knew that his friend would understand his situation and not make fun of him. "This afternoon I was contacted by the finance authorities," he said swallowing hard, "and they informed me that I owed them ten thousand credits."

"Wow! That's some trouble. He really landed you in it, didn't he?"

"That ain't the half of it. They also informed me that if I don't discharge the debt within seven days, they're going to prosecute me. I don't have to tell you what that means. What am I going to do?" Zaack was panic-stricken.

Grogan could see this was really causing him grief. "Try not to worry about it Zaack. I'll do all that I can to help. My mother knows some influential senators, and come to think of it, Trindall does as well. I'm sure I could get them to intervene on your behalf."

"Thanks. You really are a good friend, the best." Zaack felt deeply grateful to his friend, and even managed to offer a smile. Zaack found that Grogan was always there to offer his help and support to him when he needed it, just as he and the others were there for Grogan.

"And if they can't, well damn it, I'll sort it out myself. You just wait and see."

Zaack looked at his friend through sad, but appreciative eyes. "Hey Grogan, now you mustn't go doing anything foolish."

"Foolish? Who said anything about that? Of course I won't, but you know me better than that. You're friendship is more important than my ambitions and needs."

Zaack interrupted him. "Hey, now wait a minute. No way are you going to sell anything, especially your ship."

Grogan smiled. "Not the interceptor, no, but I do have other things." Zaack went to interrupt him, but Grogan spoke first. "Now I don't want to hear anything more about it now, alright?"

Zaack nodded although he was feeling really bad, and overwhelmed at his friend's determination to help him out of trouble.

The two stopped at a junction in the road, and Grogan placed his hands on his

friends' shoulders. "Zaack, go home now and get some rest okay? I don't want you worrying about it anymore. You leave this to me."

Zaack nodded. He had cheered a little, but remained concerned about what might come to pass despite his friend's assurances that everything would turn out well. He looked at Grogan. "Friends like you are hard to come by. I'll see you tomorrow, and thanks. I mean it. I really do."

"Yeah, I know. I'll see you in the morning."

As Zaack walked away from Grogan, he wondered how his friend would sort this mess out, especially if it meant him finding the funds himself. He began to realise that maybe his friend was far better off than anyone ever believed, considering he had already purchased four ships and all of the parts to upgrade them. 'Maybe he's got the money stashed wherever he's been disappearing to these past months,' thought Zaack. The thought of his friend helping him out, which he knew he would somehow, helped him relax considerably, but he also knew he would never be able to repay his friend.

Grogan watched his friend for a few moments as he walked off in the opposite direction. There was a definite slouch to his shoulders, although he was sure he saw the slouch reduce after a while. It was at times like these that he wished he and his friends could just get into their ships and fly off and explore the galaxy, leaving all their troubles behind, but he knew that would not really solve anything, and most probably cause more problems. 'Damn that cousin of his,' he cursed silently. 'If I get my hands on him I'll teach him a thing or two. By Asaph's beard I'll get him out of trouble, even if I've got to fly all the way back to Breolis Seven to get my money.' He kicked a large stone sending it careering off the road and then continued walking home.

As he walked he recalled some of the stories Collatin had told him, especially those about the Uprising and how the 'Confederation of Star Systems' succeeded in defeating the Belocian Empire against overwhelming odds. He fantasised about being included in the fighter squadrons of the Confederation, flying alongside Sorann, David and the others but that was all a dream. Little did Grogan know that events were unfolding that would again change his life forever! His longing to take the starfighter into space for his first battle became even more intense, but now he wondered if he ever would get the chance after the MDA had turned him down a fourth time.

By the time Grogan arrived home he felt very tired. 'Must be the weather,' he uttered quietly to himself. 'It's definitely a great deal hotter than usual for this time of year.' Throwing his leather jacket onto the table in the hallway as he entered, he called to his mother to see if she had returned home. His mother answered saying that she was in the kitchen, her voice muffled by the closed doors. He went into the kitchen and sat near to where his mother was preparing his favourite pastries for dinner. Looking intently at her with his elbows on the table, his chin resting in his hands, he asked whether she knew any senators. She stopped what she was doing, walked over to sit near her son and as she wiped a smudge from her face, asked why.

"One of my friends, you know, Zaack?" His mother nodded. "Well, someone he knows very well, actually a cousin of his, ended up in serious trouble after a failed finance scam. The problem is he brought Zaack into it even though he was not involved."

His mother frowned. "That was an appalling thing to do."

"My sentiments exactly. The worst thing is that the authorities have informed him that if he doesn't pay the debt in one week he'll be prosecuted as well, and then there will be no chance of his ever getting enrolled into the Academy."

His mother asked how much the debt was and gasped in shock when Grogan told her it was at least ten thousand credits. She now understood what he was leading to. "So I presume you would like me to have a word with one of those senators, see if I can persuade him to realise that your friend had nothing to do with the scam, and get the debt cancelled."

"If it's not asking too much," he asked optimistically. Grogan knew the chances were low, but he wanted to clear his friend's name through the proper channels if possible. If not, then he would fly to Breolis Seven and sort it out himself. He was not going to let his friend suffer for something he had not done, regardless of the cost to himself.

His mother was unsure if she could do anything to help, not knowing Zaack all that well. After her son had told her how much he trusted Zaack, how important their friendship was, and that he was drinking in the Klaret Diner with his

friends at that particular time, she believed her son's defence of his friend. The main problem she faced was convincing the authorities of the young man's innocence. She rubbed her chin, depositing more flour on her face while she considered the situation. "Let me see. Oh yes! Senator Larront owes me a big favour," she said smiling. "I'll speak to him in the morning. I'm sure he will be able to arrange something now we have something definite to clear Zaack's name."

Grogaan thanked his mother giving her a big hug and a kiss on her cheek, getting some of the flour onto his own face in the process. He told her that Zaack would be ever so grateful, and was pleased that he had such a considerate mother. Helping himself to a piece of fruit from the bowl on the table he took a big bite, while his mother returned to preparing the evening meal.

"So how was your day at work? After that dream of yours last night, I was very worried when you left for work this morning."

He wiped the trickle of juice from his chin, and saw the concern etched into her features. "The day was just great. We finished all the work on the ships and provided Trindall doesn't change our work schedule, will be taking them for a flight test tomorrow morning."

"Now that is good news. You've all been working so hard on them for what," she paused as she tried to remember how long it had really been.

"About a year," said Grogaan finishing her sentence. "A long hard year, but well worth it," he added, smiling, something Kareana saw little of these days.

His mother was pleased that everything was going well, but couldn't believe that it had been so long since he first purchased their ships. It suddenly came to her that it must have cost a small fortune to buy and modify four ships. She tilted her head sideways in thought facing her son, and asked how he had managed to raise enough credits to do what he had done.

He knew she would begin to wonder sooner or later. He told her they had purchased a lot of the components, including the starfighters from Mabraant Engineering at prices much lower than usual.

Kareana looked questioningly at her son.

He knew that did not explain much, and wondered how best to tell his mother where he really obtained the money. He took another bite from the apple in his hand, his mother waiting patiently.

"Over three years ago, after I met that merchant from Shaqua in the Ladorran Quadrant, he showed me his temporary base on a nearby planet."

Kareana's eyes opened wide in surprise. "You mean you've been off planet?" Grogaan nodded sheepishly, knowing that his mother would have done anything to stop him. "And which planet would that be, if you don't mind me asking," she asked rather sternly.

He did not really mind, but knew his mother would have pressed him until he told her if he refused. "Breolis Seven," he said coyly.

His mother almost fainted. "Nearby you said, that must be, well, I don't know how far, but it's in another system!"

"It's also the closet inhabitable planet outside our system," he said. He then explained that it took about four hours to reach the planet at standard lightspeed travel, which was actually one point two-five times the speed of light, making the planet about five billion kilometres away when Mabraant and Breolis Seven were at their closest.

The distance her son quoted was far beyond her comprehension. She just glared at him, eyes wide with astonishment.

"Collatin has allowed me to use his base because he doesn't utilise it anymore, except for emergencies. I did some exploring when I was over there a couple of years back. The planet is uninhabited, except for the usual animals, birds, and reptiles. There are however, several species of large wild creatures, including something called a Zogal dragon."

His mother did not like the sound of that, and it showed in her expression.

"They can grow as big as a two storey building and are very ferocious, but they live out in the isolated desert regions. The base is carved into the rock face of a mountain, utilising an old cave system, which is far from the dragon's territories. The Zogal dragon produces pearls to help protect the primary and secondary gut from the grit and stones it ingests, and the secondary gut usually contains the smallest pearls. They are beautifully coloured and priceless; usually about two centimetres in diameter, but occasionally three, and they are the rarest and the most valuable." He took another bite from his apple before continuing.

"I obtained quite a few of the stones after killing a dragon with the ship's

laser cannons. The meat is regarded as a delicacy on some worlds, takes a little getting used to though. It's not as nice as Monkrat but I like it, especially when spit roasted over an open fire," he said. His mother gave a look of distaste at the thought of eating a lizard. "Anyway, Collatin purchased a good few of the stones from me when he last came to the system, and that is how I obtained enough money for the ships and all the components required, plus a little extra for other things."

"So that's where you've been disappearing to all this time?"

Grogaan nodded, assuring her that it was quite safe and that there was no need to worry. He had been using one of the MCF's Trindall kept at his home, which had been extensively modified thanks to Grogaan.

"No need to worry! With you so far on your own," she said exasperatedly. "You know I always worry, and with those raiders, it's just not safe!"

"Well, it's a known fact that a single fighter doesn't draw the attention of the raiders. There's no profit in it."

Kareana was not convinced, but had to learn to trust him. "Anyway, thank you for telling me. It makes me feel a lot happier knowing everything." She got up and then paused, turning her head back towards him and looking curious. "Just how much are those pearls worth?"

Grogaan smiled again. It was a smile his mother had not seen for some time, and it gave her a little hope for the future. "The largest ones can be worth around half a million credits if you can find the right sort of buyer, the smaller ones, about a hundred thousand depending on the colour."

His mother couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Half a million or one hundred thousand credits?" she said, astonished.

Her son nodded, smiling, feeling rather smug about it all.

She shook her head slowly, breathing out heavily. "Goodness me," she exclaimed. "I don't suppose you," she paused as it suddenly dawned upon her. "All those extra credits that I haven't been able to account for are from the sale of those pearls, aren't they?"

He didn't have to say anything in response to his mother's question, because his beaming smile said it all. Kareana laughed quietly and thanked her son, hugging him tightly. Such was her gratitude that tears flowed from her eyes. Life had been much easier for them both since the extra money had come in. She had been concerned about using it, wondering whether someone would later inform her that there had been a mistake at the bank, and she would be required to repay it all. Grogaan knew that his mother enjoyed her work, and so never told her where the credits came from, but now realised he should have done so.

"Have you checked you're credit deposit at the central bank?" he asked her when she had finally released him.

"No. Why?"

"Do it when you're next passing. You may have a little surprise."

She looked at her son, who resisted elaborating on the subject. She had a vague idea of what he was telling her, but not of just how much he had actually deposited. It was enough for her to never have to work again. "Now then, how would you like some Pargaran stew for tea?" she asked a little croakily, tears still trickling down her cheeks leaving tell tale marks in the flour.

He didn't need to consider an answer as it was one of his favourite meals, especially the way his mother made it. "Yes please, and thanks. Call me when it's ready. I'll be in my room."

Chapter Three

Mabraant, Mabra System, Fazaal Sector, Gaashox Quadrant

It was another bright and sunny warm morning on Mabraant; the promise of a good summer ahead. A large predatory bird was circling above the lower plains not far from Grogan's home, calling loudly to its mate, its high-pitched call awakening him. Jumping out of bed, he stood in front of his window and stretched while soaking up the warmth of the morning sun. Then looking skywards, he searched for the bird. Fortunately for him, the window in his room was facing magnetic north giving him a beautiful panoramic view of the lowlands, plains and in the distance, the Potrodand Mountains.

On Mabraant, the sun rose in the north, shining directly into his bedroom. The sky was a brilliant blue, but as Grogan looked into the sky he had a strange feeling: a vague premonition that the future would hold some unpleasant surprises that he should be wary of, and that he should take care of what choices he might make in the future. He shook his head as if to shake the thoughts and feelings from his mind, turning his attention back to the birds. There were many species soaring high above the northern plains, and although common for this time in the morning, many of the birds were flying much lower than normal; a strange occurrence that intrigued Grogan.

Then he noticed the bird that was making the unusual call. Grasping the microbinoculars he scanned the skyline until he caught sight of it again. He was pleased when he recognised it, having taking great interest in all the species that lived on Mabraant. It was a Grederant Eagle, and he saw not just one, but ten. 'This is extremely unusual,' he thought, as he watched the eagles with great interest. They were soaring gracefully, swooping occasionally when the males neared their mates, flying close, and then soaring higher on the hot air currents. It was a delight to behold, and could explain why the other birds were flying lower than usual.

The Grederant Eagle was a predator, making its nests high in the Potrodand Mountains, and to see them this far south was very rare indeed. In fact, only three had been spotted so far south in the last twenty-one years. Its primary food was a furry six-legged mammal called the Tordal, a small hog-like creature found only in the high northern mountains. These particular mammals were a highly sought after speciality among some of Mabraant's wealthy personage. It was an acquired taste and only a few could appreciate the distinct flavour, and because of its preferred habitat, proved to be very expensive as well: fortunately for both the eagle and the Tordal.

The last time the eagles were seen above the lower plains severe storms followed within days of the sighting; storms that occur only once every few decades and often had catastrophic effects upon nature in both the mountain ranges and the plains to the south. The omens were bad. Grogan sensed that something terrible was going to happen and soon.

The young man loved living here on the southern edge of the northern plains. The view from his window was made more special because the part of Herloan city where he lived was situated on a small hill. He loved gazing at the mountains and vast open plains, especially first thing in the morning when the sun was rising, and last thing at night when the sun was setting. The plains were full of rich pastures and forests, whereas the mountain areas had numerous spectacular waterfalls and rapids took your breath away.

His favourite location was a large lake in a valley between the two highest mountains, Lake Mabreese. There were several rivers that flowed into it, one of which ended in a spectacular waterfall with about a forty-metre drop. He spent much of his free time there since Miranda died. It was her favourite place, where they spent so much time together and where she had made him so happy. Now when he spent time there, past images of loved ones no longer with him flashed through his mind, especially Miranda.

At times he would just sit and dream of his days spent with her, and of the love they shared. These times not only filled him with joy, but also grief and pain. It felt as if he had lost an arm, such was his sense of loss and loneliness. Other times he would plan the way he would make the Krelathans pay for what they had done, and some days he would simply sit and think about leaving

the Fazaal sector all together.

Beyond this valley there was an extremely long winding canyon with many gorges and outcrops. This was where Grogan had practised and honed his flying skills ever since he had received his first ship at sixteen. Collatin had told him many stories about Sorann Taggash's exploits and how he developed his skills by flying through canyons and other dangerous areas, so Grogan decided to do the same. His friends thought he was crazy at first, but gradually saw the benefit as their skills also improved considerably.

These canyons channelled the occasional winter storm waters into a devastating river that flooded the upper reaches of the plains. There were also many caves in the higher areas of the canyons, some of which once contained precious jewels that had been over-mined centuries ago. He had often explored them and found a few stones of value hidden in small crevices or difficult to reach ledges, but mostly all he found were Marandiote gems that were of no real commercial value at all. He still collected them though, not for himself but for a young woman he knew who loved them, and who rarely visited now.

As he sat gazing through the window he remembered the first flying lesson his father had given him. It was in the standard Manta Class twin seat starship, designated an MCT, and the one that his father had bought him for his sixteenth birthday. It was a small atmospheric ship designed originally for training new recruits at the academy, but became freely available as an ideal form of transport for civilians. His abilities developed exceptionally well and in a very short time, surprising even his father. After having passed his preliminary and standard stage flying tests, Grogan taught his few friends to fly, and together they explored all the canyons they could find.

His three friends often accompanied him on his flying trips, and even after many flights, he still proved to be far too fast for them. It was here that they would be testing the modified MCI's after they had been well tested at altitude, just in case of a systems failure. He still had the MCT in his garage, which he was determined to hang on to just for nostalgic reasons, even though he now had a Manta Class Interceptor, the latest and most advanced starfighter available in the Gaashox Quadrant.

Grogan watched the eagle soaring on the thermals. It was free and unrestricted, knowing it could fly wherever it wanted, and wished he could do the same. He realised that his life was being lived as if he were incarcerated. The grief over his loss, the traumatic dreams, the stress and depression were all restricting his life. He wanted to be free from it all; to be free to go wherever he wanted without having to justify it to anyone, to do what he wanted and when he wanted. He felt as if something was calling out to him, a voice in his head telling him it was time to do something about it, to do whatever it took regardless of the cost; to make that change in his life that would make a difference, not only in his life but in the lives of others.

'Damn, I'm late,' he said as he noted the time on the chronometer. He quickly washed and then donned his new dark green flight suit; the one his mother made specially. After a little persuasion, his mother had agreed to make three more flight suits for his friends, although obtaining the correct sizes without letting his friends know why had been a challenge for him. Now they were completed and just in time for their first test flight, he knew his friends would be pleasantly surprised.

He checked to make sure they were in his holdall, grabbed it, and then headed off down stairs. He dropped his holdall by the coat stand in the hallway and walked briskly into the kitchen. He saw that his mother had already prepared his breakfast, and was already putting on her coat for work. 'That's the good thing about living at home,' he thought, although until Miranda's death he had really desired a place of his own. Since her death however, he had found it almost unbearable spending long periods of time alone, and if he did, he became very depressed, so was no longer in a hurry to find a home of his own.

"In a bit of a rush today are you son?" said his mother.

"I am actually," he said sitting on the chair.

"Nothing bothering you is there?"

"Not this morning," he said positively. "As a matter of fact I had an exceptionally good night's sleep. I was just thinking about the flight test, and whether or not the ship will perform as well as we expect them to."

His mother told him she was convinced everything would be just fine. After hearing from Trindall what excellent engineers her son and his friends were, she knew there would be no problems, or at least nothing that could not be resolved,

something she seemed to be more convinced of than her son. Grogan nodded, sure that his mother was right. If only he could be as confident and sure.

"Anyway son, I had better be off, can't be late now can I? Especially with that important matter you asked me to try and resolve. I'll see you tonight and good luck for today."

"Thanks, we'll need it more than you, but I'm sure you'll be able to persuade that Senator without too much difficulty."

Kareana kissed him on the cheek and left by the back door.

Grogan smiled at her when she turned to close the door behind her. She returned the gesture with a short wave. 'I sure do hope you can convince the Senator, otherwise I will have a long trip to make before the end of the week.' He would not mind flying to Breolis Seven even if it meant sleeping on route, but at the moment there were many other things he needed to take care of, although getting Zaack out of trouble would become far more important than his own needs.

He then tucked into his breakfast and then washed it down with a glass of fresh milk. Picking up his kit and the holdall from in the passageway, he opened the front door and walked briskly to work. 'It's going to be a great day,' he said quietly. Grogan walked upright and confidently, which was in complete contrast to the previous day when he was miserable and depressed, shoulders slouched and no desire to work. He arrived at the complex and as he entered the outer workshop, he saw several engineers already milling around. They were in a good mood despite the shortage of work, and that pleased Grogan.

Walking across the main hangar a few others shouted a greeting, which he reciprocated. He was in a great mood, and he swore nothing was going to dampen his spirits today, not even if they experienced problems with their ships. Although his expectations were high, he refused to become overconfident about his abilities as an engineer; no one was perfect and Grogan knew he was far from it. He also knew that regardless of how experienced and clever he and his friends were, they were dealing with electronics and mechanical components, which were susceptible to failure.

As he approached the crew room, he heard the sound of his three friends laughing and joking. It was nothing unusual for them, and whereas on the previous day it had grated on him, this particular morning it immediately lifted his spirits. He had a good feeling about today. It was the day that would start a chain reaction altering his life and that of his friends forever.

He grabbed the door handle and swung the door open. The noise stopped suddenly as he entered the crew room. At first his friends were concerned because he was late, which was usually very uncommon for him except when he had had a bad night and was suffering from one of his severe depressive moods. However, when they saw the smile on his face, they were relieved to see him so happy and in good spirits.

"You're late this morning!" a chorus of voices sounded, tinged with sarcasm.

"Very funny," he responded and dropped the two holdalls onto the table. "You all ready for the big one?"

"Of course we are!" His friends replied unanimously.

"Hey, now that's what I call a smart flight suit," said Doraant, impressed with the flight suit that Grogan was wearing.

Grogan pushed the holdall nearer to his friends, and told them to open it. Zaack grabbed it and unzipped it with confident expectation. He slowly parted the sides revealing some dark green items of clothing. Taking one of the items out, his face lit up with delight. The others drew in closer to get a better look.

"Flight suits! Wow! These are great! Where did you get them?" asked Zaack as he held one up to get a good look at it.

"My mother made them specially," said Grogan proudly.

"These are excellent! Far better than the ones used by the MDF. She's a gem that mother of yours, you know that," said Zaack excitedly.

Doraant and Elaan took hold of the other two flight suits and were equally astounded, even more so when they saw the name badges on the right breast pocket. Grogan told his friends to get suited up so that they could get on with the flight tests. They needed no more encouragement.

The four young men climbed into their ships, strapped in, and performed the pre-flight checks thoroughly. All systems checked out ready and functioning. With a little trepidation Grogan activated the thruster coils. They started whining and after a few moments, the ship slowly lifted off the ground. Applying more power, it rose higher until it had cleared the bay doors, and then three other

ships appeared above the docking bays alongside. 'So far so good,' he thought.

They held position above the bays to ensure that all thruster coils remained operating correctly and could hold the ships steady. When satisfied, they selected the sublight engine start-up sequence. A soft vibration ran through the ship's structure, and then a low constant whine from the engines. It was a sound that Grogan would come to love hearing, and the steady vibration would become a soothing comfort from which he would be able to discern any deviation from operational parameters.

Engaging the drive to the engines, the starship inched forward at its slowest speed. He gently eased the throttle forward and the ship moved slowly away from the complex, then increased the pressure so the ship gradually began to accelerate more quickly. The whine of the engines was sending a buzz through his veins, and for the first time in years he felt free and alive.

Zaack sounded elated as he relayed his feelings to the others, who were also getting a buzz from the experience. Their own ships, modified and upgraded by their own hands, were working perfectly so far.

"Before we go any faster," said Grogan, hoping not to dampen their enthusiasm too much, "I feel it would be wise to perform some thorough checks of all flight systems first."

His friends agreed wholeheartedly, not wanting to tempt fate and so increase the possibilities of crashing to their deaths on their first flight-test. After checking that all systems operated correctly when switched on at the same time or in cycles, it was time to put the ships through their paces.

"Okay then, let's climb to about thirty thousand for the full flight performance checks. That should give us plenty of height in case any of us experience any problems."

"All I hope is that the ejection systems work," said Doraant laughing.

"Let's just hope it doesn't come to that, otherwise we'll be short of a ship or more," said Elaan.

"I suggest we don't concern ourselves about that and trust in Grogan's skills," said Zaack.

"That's of little consequence if components fail Zaack, but they have been thoroughly tested so we'll be fine," said Grogan.

The four pilots climbed higher and then started to engage their ships through every manoeuvre they could think of. They even indulged in some mock dogfights, which meant the three friends attempted to take on Grogan. All four relished the experience and the challenge.

Grogan could feel the adrenaline flow through his body making him feel free again. The control column seemed as though it was an extension of his arm, the hand control having been remoulded to fit his grip perfectly. For the first time in years, he almost forgot the anger he felt about the deaths of his loved ones. Flying always had a calming influence upon him, except when he imagined he was fighting the Krelathan raiders. Now, he was simply feeling the pure exhilaration of flying at high speed with nothing to restrict him.

He began to think of leaving the system with his friends and exploring some distant system or sector, seeing what was beyond the Mabra System, but resisted the urge; there was much for him to do before he indulged himself. When Grogan was finally satisfied that all systems were operating correctly, he broke off from performing manoeuvres and went into straight flight, waiting for the others to form up alongside.

"Wow! These are far better than those MCT's," yelled Zaack with delight.

"You bet, Zaack. What do you think Grogan?" asked Doraant.

"Exceptional! Now, what about seeing how fast these lovely ladies can really fly?" But before his friends had a chance to answer, Grogan slammed the throttle full forward. "Catch me if you can?" he howled.

"Oh no you don't!" replied Zaack as he saw Grogan's ship accelerate away.

The other three pilots opened their throttles to full and gave chase. The starfighters raced through the atmosphere like shooting stars. It was sheer exhilaration. Zaack glanced at the velocity gauge, and couldn't believe his eyes. They were travelling at a speed of 3,523 Km/h, far better than expected, making it the fastest fighter they knew of. Grogan said that it would suffice for the time being, but what was more important to him was the starfighter's speed in space.

The original design of interceptor could manage 3,016 Km/h, and the only ship that outperformed the standard interceptor was unknown to most in the Gaashox Quadrant: The Imperial Zilon interceptor, which could reach speeds of 3,308 Km/h

under atmospheric conditions, and was even faster than the Delta XB1 of the Ladorran Republic Forces which could manage only 3,109 Kmph.

Doraant was astounded by his friend's declaration, wondering why he would need such a fast ship, but refrained from asking. After an hour of flying, they felt it was about time they stopped for a little rest and refreshments. Zaack suggested the small pasture next to the southern edge of Lake Mabreese, where there was ample space to land more than four starships safely. Grogan owned a small hut on the edge of the pasture near the lake.

Swooping down towards the lake, the young pilots eased the ships down on the thrusters to a nice soft landing, and then powered down all systems.

The hut was sealed by a computer controlled lock system that could only be activated from Grogan's remote control pad. Grogan always ensured there were plenty of supplies left inside, which came in very handy if he decided he wanted to spend some time alone. After selecting some containers of food and drink, they made their way to the flat area near the stream and set everything down. The four young men stretched and breathed in deeply, savouring the fresh scented air, and the freedom of movement after being strapped in their ships for over an hour.

Grogan gazed at the clear lake and remembered how Miranda loved swimming in the cool water. He pictured her slender but curvaceous body moving gracefully as she swam slowly. He closed his eyes and the picture was replaced by another, one of her standing by the stream near where it flowed into the lake. Her long white dress clinging to her damp body revealing the contours of her curvaceous, alluring body, her hair still pinned in a knot. The image of her stirred deep feelings of desire and a longing to hold her close, to feel her body pressing against his, her firm breasts pressing against his chest. The face in the image turned and smiled. Tears stung his eyes. Grogan was scarcely able to bear the pain his memories caused.

It was at times like these Grogan realised just how much he missed her, the warmth of her embrace, the joy of her smile, and the softness of her lips pressed against his. He sighed as his feelings for her continued to rise, intensifying the pain he felt. The feeling of outrage he felt toward the enlistment officer at the Academy for turning down his application yet again, added to his anguish. If his first application to join the Academy had been accepted, he knew he would have been able to stop the raiders from killing Miranda, and they would still be together.

As he considered the unfairness of the events, he felt a deep anger rising within his soul, but there was something else underlying that anger that he had not felt before: it was a strange tingling sensation within his mind, which made him shiver. Then the visions of Miranda became painfully clearer.

He recalled the day that he had believed was going to change his life even more profoundly than when he had first met her.

Borrowing his father's two-person hovercraft, he left very early on the fourth day of his break from work heading for the precinct in the heart of Herloan City. He went with one single intention; to call in at the jewellers to buy a special ring. It was the most expensive item he had ever purchased, and it took him some time to choose the one that he thought suited her the most. As he pointed it out to the jeweller, Grogan knew without doubt Miranda would love it. He left the shop excited and headed directly for her home, feeling very nervous and filled with trepidation at how she was going to react.

Grogan had contacted Miranda earlier that day and told her there was something important he needed to talk to her about. The young woman was filled with curiosity and excitement, and was waiting anxiously for him to arrive, unable to sit down for more than a few minutes before getting up to look out of the window that faced the roadway in front of her home.

When Miranda saw him stop outside her home her heart skipped a beat in anticipation. She ran to the door, paused a moment to catch her breath, and then opened it calmly. She stood motionless, her heart thumping wildly and wondering what he wanted to talk to her about. The thought that it might be about taking their relationship a step further even crossed her mind, but she did not want to raise her hopes too high knowing how devastated she would be if he did not ask the question. Just seeing and being with him was enough to make her intensely happy, although the extra little things he did for her made all the difference; the small gifts, the evenings out, the trips to the lake, and for the quiet nights in front of the fire with a hot cup of tea or Lokarsh, a drink Grogan had recently introduced her to.

Grogan got out of the hovercraft and his eyes went wide with delight when he

saw her. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and that beauty never failed to make him weak at the knees. "Shall we?" he asked, taking her hand in his. He found it difficult to keep his voice steady and his hands from shaking; such was his excitement at the prospect of what he was about to do. Never had he felt so apprehensive about anything he had done previously.

"I'd love to," she replied, the slight trembling in her voice revealing her excitement, her smile captivating. She leant forward and kissed him gently.

It was almost too much for him to bear: the softness of her lips against his, the warmth of her breath on his face, and soft gentle voice sounding in his ears. He wanted to ask her right away without taking her to the lake, but knew that would spoil the surprise, although he was under the suspicion that Miranda had already guessed what he was planning.

Grogan took her to Lake Mabreee where they walked for a while, talking and enjoying each other's company. Returning to where they had left their things, they sat down and talked some more, both of them anxious about what was to come, but Grogan wanted to wait a little longer. It was getting rather hot so he removed his shirt and lay back on the grass. Miranda smiled and stroked his chest.

"I love you," said Grogan gazing admirably at her, running his hand gently across her cheek.

"I love you too," replied Miranda tenderly.

They kissed and he crushed her to him, embracing her tightly. He could feel her heart beating and feel her breasts pressing against his chest, which stirred his passion further. His hand moved seductively down her back sending a tingling sensation up her spine, but she broke away suggesting they go swimming. He consented reluctantly, and would have asked her that one question before he lost his nerve, but bit his lip and waited.

They removed their clothes and walked into the lake. It was cold but refreshing and invigorating. The two swam for a while but Grogan, who was not so keen on the activity returned to the bank, sat quietly, and enjoyed watching Miranda swimming gracefully through the clear crystal water. He smiled, feeling very proud to be in love with such a beautiful woman. As far as he was concerned she was perfect in every way.

After a while Miranda returned to the bank, stood up and walked gracefully through the shallow water towards him. He admired every inch of her and knew in his heart that there was no way he would back out of asking her now. His heart was beating wildly, but still he waited.

"That was one of the most refreshing swims I've had for a long time Grogan," she said smiling at him, knowing that his eyes were feasting on her. She loved the way he looked at her, respected her, and how he felt so passionately about her; it filled her with delight. Miranda sat beside him and shivered as the warmth of the sun began drying her body. They could hear bird song, the scurrying of small animals through the undergrowth, and yet it was so peaceful time seemed to stand still. Goose bumps appeared all over Miranda's body as she shivered again, so she stood up and slipped her dress back on.

Grogan also stood, put on his trousers and faced her, a broad smile on his face. "Miranda, there's something I want to ask you," he said croakily.

She looked at him expectantly, her eyes sparkling with desire. Deep in her heart Miranda knew what was coming by the way he acted, and felt her heart begin to beat faster as his hand went to his pocket. He took a small felt covered box from his jacket, held it out in front of her, and opened it slowly while keeping his gaze fixed upon her. Her eyes widened in delight at the sight of the ring. She took a sharp intake of breath.

Her reaction said it all, so he looked into her eyes and went down on one knee. "Miranda, you are the most precious thing in my life. Will you marry me?"

"Yes, of course I will," she said excitedly, tears running down her cheeks as the intensity of her delight struck home.

He stood up and she threw her arms around him then kissed him passionately.

Grogan broke free from her tight embrace, took the ring from the box and taking hold of her hand, slipped the ring onto her finger. Then they kissed again.

"This is the happiest day of my life Grogan. I do so love you," she said, trying to blink back the tears. The two lovers sat close together with arms around each other, kissing frequently. Then Miranda stood, walked to the edge of the stream, her dress still clinging to her damp body, and lifted her hand so the sun would glisten off the diamond of her ring. She admired the ring, the joy

evident in her eyes, her smile lightening up her face.

Grogaan watched her avidly, hardly daring to believe it was happening. He could not remember ever being so happy, and now, all he needed to make his life complete was to be accepted into the Mabra Defence Academy.

The memory of that day seared his heart and soul afresh. It was four years ago, a distant event in time, but he remembered it as if it happened only yesterday. His anger rose even more, and the tingling sensations spread from his head to his hands, which began to shake as he felt power radiating from his fingertips. Shaking his head, he tried to shake the memories from his mind. As quickly as the feelings appeared, they disappeared leaving him feeling drained mentally, and his fingers felt strangely numb.

"Hey Grogaan, what are you thinking about?" asked Doraant seeing his friend was looking a little odd.

Doraant's voice shocked him from his thoughts, and he tried hard to avoid revealing his emotions. "Nothing really," he answered as calmly as possible, and discretely blinked back the tears from his eye before his friends noticed.

Despite his response, the other three knew exactly what he was thinking. They always knew when he was feeling distracted and why, but never mentioned it, or asked if he was alright. They had too much respect for their friend, knowing how much heartache he was still experiencing, even though three years had passed since that fateful day. Doraant handed him a glass of cool orange juice, then they sat enjoying the refreshments and the weather. After finishing the food, they spent time relaxing near the lake telling stories of their younger days, their hopes for the future, of what they knew about the Ladorran Republic, and of course of how well the interceptors had performed.

All the while, Grogaan found it difficult to shake away the earlier feelings. The numbness in his fingers had gone but the tingling sensation remained. He had to get his mind off what had occurred. "Alright lads, it's about time we found out who's the fastest through the canyon," he said tauntingly.

"Who are you kidding Grogaan? We all know you're the fastest," retorted Doraant.

"Don't give me that! The three of you are excellent pilots. Each of you has the capabilities to match my times. All you need is a little more confidence."

"Come off it Grogaan," said Zaack. "Who has the same ability to sense exactly which direction a canyon or gorge turns, and what obstructions are in the way like you can? Your timing is so precise and your flying is so effortless. I still reckon you've got to be receptive to magical powers."

Grogaan frowned at his friend and shook his head gently. "That's just a natural gift, nothing to do with magic. You think I'm good, what about my father? He was pure genius in a fighter. Anyway, there haven't been any wizards in this system for over two centuries."

"None recorded yes, but that doesn't mean there hasn't been any, does it?" said Zaack.

"Maybe, but what about the histories of Mabraant, that there's some naturally occurring phenomenon here that inhibits a Guardian's magical power. That would surely prove that I am not what you believe I am," answered Grogaan.

"Good point," conceded Zaack. "But then again, if those abilities are because you are able to draw on the magical powers, it would mean that outside the system they would be even stronger."

"I reckon that so-called phenomenon is just a myth, and who knows, we may have a future Guardian among us!" teased Eldaan. Little did he know how prophetic his comment was!

"Give it a rest will you. Even if I am able to tap into the so called magical powers, who's going to give me the training I would need to control it? There's not much chance of Sorann Taggash coming out here just to train me, and besides, he probably doesn't even know this quadrant exists let alone this system. Enough of this idle chat, haven't we got some flying to do?"

"Let's go to it then!" They all replied.

Grogaan pondered on what Zaack said as they climbed back into their ships. He knew there was something strange about his abilities, especially now he had experienced the strange tingling sensation, which resulted in very faint sparks emanating from his fingertips. The thought of sparks coming from his fingertips made him uneasy and worried, and wondered what it could mean. None of the stories he had heard or read about Guardians told of sparks or such like emanating from their fingertips. He had also noticed that he was becoming more restless in his

thoughts and in his hopes for the future.

Dismissing the thoughts of magical powers, he led the group to the canyons they would be flying through. When they neared the entrance, they selected full sensors and full power to forward shields. He set the wingtip laser cannons to twenty percent power, using twin link firing configuration, top two and bottom two.

"Here we go!" he cried with glee.

Dropping his velocity to what he had achieved on previous runs in his MCT, Grogaan entered the canyon and set the timer as he passed the first outcrop they used as the start marker. Calming his mind as he sped along the initial long straight section, he began to visualise the layout of the canyon. Although he had flown through this canyon many times before, the mental picture he had of it was far too clear for just simple memory. Despite his continual self-denial of any magical influence in his life, he was now beginning to feel sure there was something enhancing his ability.

Sensing the left corner approaching, he let his ship drift slightly to the right, banked it, and pulled back on the control column, taking him around the corner smoothly and accurately. Straight ahead and to the right there was a small outcrop, and a few seconds later, four laser blasts hit it breaking off several small chunks of rock that cascaded down to the canyon floor.

As each bend was navigated, Grogaan's friends began to drop further and further behind. Although the three had a slight advantage in following Grogaan as they could see the way he flew, it wasn't enough of an advantage to enable them to keep up with him. The hardest part of the flight through the canyon was closing in rapidly, four successive bends. Two of them so close and narrow, there was little time to think between them. Hesitate too long and the starfighter would hit the side at the third bend. It was at this point Grogaan's friends lost most of their time.

At the second bend Grogaan rolled right, pulled back hard on the control column to negotiate the right-hand bend. Immediately having to level out, roll to the left and pull back hard again to take the left-hand bend. On the second run, Grogaan felt a strange sensation running through his body. Suddenly, the picture of the canyon, which he had thought was far too clear for normal memory, became even clearer. He felt as if some outside force controlled his actions, and so each successive run through the canyon resulted in his times being improved dramatically.

He had pushed his ability to the limit on the fourth run and heard a crunching sound and a slight jolt to his ship, making him have to compensate and adjust his flight path to avoid heading for the fast approaching outcrop. He knew he was a fraction too high and hit the outcrop on that third bend smashing the secondary subspace communication array, which protruded about four centimetres above the top edge of the starboard rear fin. His heart skipped a beat as he felt the jolt. 'Damn, that was too close,' he breathed, trying to maintain his focus for the fourth bend.

By the end of their fifth run through the canyon, most of the outcrops they had chosen as targets were destroyed, now just piles of rubble on the canyon floor. Grogaan still proved to be the fastest, more competent pilot of the four, although he always remained hesitant about admitting it. He couldn't believe the timer readout, although he was confident that it was operating accurately.

"Zaack!" called Grogaan over the ships' comm.

"Yeah, what is it, nothing wrong I hope?"

"No there's nothing wrong. I need to know how many hits the shields can take before draining to 25% power, and I need you to take some shots at me."

"You what?" Zaack was shocked at the request. "There's no way I'm firing on you Grogaan," he said adamantly. After everything his friend had done for him, he couldn't take the chance, wouldn't take the chance, just in case something went terribly wrong.

"Come on Zaack, nothing can go wrong. It isn't as if you'll be firing continuously. Let's climb a bit higher and then do the tests."

"I'm sorry friend, I won't do it," he insisted.

Grogaan relented and asked Eldaan if he would oblige. He was not keen on the idea either, but after Grogaan explained that it would be better to find out now whether the shields were operating correctly, and how much they could withstand, rather than in the middle of a hostile combat situation.

Eldaan reluctantly agreed to do it, but only because his friend had so much trust in his ability. Dropping back, he lined up behind his friend's ship and

noticed something missing from the starboard rear fin of his starfighter. "Hey Grogan, where's your standby fin communications array?"

Grogan felt a little embarrassed at being found out. "Ah! I was hoping you wouldn't notice that. I'm afraid it's in tiny pieces at the third bend of the Snake Curves."

"What! You mean you hit the canyon wall?" said Eldaan aghast.

"Not really. If I'd hit the canyon wall do you really think I'd be here in one piece?"

"So, that's how you managed to beat your previous record is it, taking too much of a risk. You know how dangerous that section is," said Zaack, not hiding his annoyance at his friend's recklessness. Zaack was unaware of the true times that his friend had recorded, and would not find out as long as Grogan could keep it to himself. Now after breaking his fastest time by a considerable margin, he was no longer able to accept the fact that his abilities were a natural gift; not any more.

"You have to push your abilities to the limits sometimes you know," said Grogan trying to convince Zaack that that was what he had done, and not that he could have gone faster if he had really wanted to. "Knowing one's limit can be a great benefit sometimes, maybe even an advantage in certain circumstances."

Zaack never answered, his silence saying more than words could possibly do.

Meanwhile, Eldaan selected independent firing on his wingtip laser cannons, and fired shots to the upper surface of the rear fuselage. He took one shot at a time with a short pause between each, and then at Grogan's request, fired two shots at a time with a similar pause. After having taken ten shots multiple, gradually reducing the time between each, Grogan called an end to the test satisfied that the shields were operating far above expectations.

The upgraded shield generators were recharging exceptionally well. Grogan reckoned that the shields would be able to recharge adequately under normal combat conditions, due to the shields and lasers being powered by a separate power generator to the engines.

"What the heck do you think we will be facing if we ever go into combat?" asked Doraant.

"Apart from the usual TS5's, MCF's, and MCI's, there's always Kraylons, Zilon Fighters and Gunships, and who knows what else. Well I always say one should be prepared for the unexpected."

Satisfied that there was nothing else they needed to test, the excited pilots opened the throttles and raced back to Mabraant Engineering. Flying low over the plains gave them the thrill of extreme speed, a feeling they would not get in space, so they made the most of it.

"Where are we eating this time?" asked Doraant.

"Well, there's either the Daspin or the Klaret. Personally, I'd prefer the Klaret, but the choice is yours," said Grogan.

"The Klaret sounds good enough for me especially if you're buying," said Zaack jokingly.

"That's fine by me Zaack. Foods on me, but the last one down will buy the first round of drinks." None of the pilots hesitated in accelerating away but Grogan's skill got him down into the docking bay first. However hard they tried, they just couldn't match Grogan's flying skills, and were not surprised at him being first down. It was as if the ship was an extension of his body. Doraant hesitated in his landing cycle long enough making sure he was the last one to land. He felt it was his turn to buy the drinks, grateful to his friend for his trust, but most of all, for all he had done for him and the others.

On the edge of the forest to the west of the Potrodand Mountains, a lone starfighter was parked on the hard ground of a small clearing. It had parked there often during the day, its pilot just sitting in the cockpit watching the plains and mountains, waiting and hoping. On this particular day, the pilot was lucky, her patience rewarded. Flight Lieutenant Joeen Parond smiled as she watched the four MCI's being put through their paces first at altitude and then lower, before entering the mountain range. From her position, she was able to see the ships exiting from the canyon after their flight through, and still marvelled at how fast the flight leader was, even though her estimation was more than it actually was.

Joeen longed to be able to fly as good and as fast as Grogan, but knew there was something special about him, after all, his father had taught him all he knew about flying being a top ace fighter pilot. His brother had also been a skilful

pilot, and even his grandfather, and great grandfather. Grogan was fortunate; he had good friends who shared his interests in flying and engineering, but Joeen did not. She was unable to call those she flew with as true friends, unlike the three of Grogan's.

It was hard for her to watch Grogan who appeared to be so free despite his pain and grief. She marvelled at how he dealt with it, how his friends were always there for him, but she was not aware the problems he was suffering, the depression and the dreams. Joeen was suffering too, and the only one who truly cared was her cousin Julienna, whom she loved dearly.

Although Julienna was very caring and supportive over Joeen's loss, her fiancé Ben having been killed, she was not a pilot and therefore failed to understand why and how Joeen felt the way she did about flying. As a result, her cousin's support was insufficient to help Joeen snap out of her emotional turmoil.

When Joeen saw the four heading back towards home, she sighed and a single tear appeared in the corner of her eye. She had a dilemma and she was afraid to do something about it in fear of the consequences. She had been emotionally hurt once since her fiancé's death, and felt incapable of enduring another rejection. With resignation, she powered up her ship's engines and returned to squadron headquarters, feeling a little more depressed than on arrival at the clearing.