

The family reunion went forward anyway. The Helmstaedt's weren't going to let Peter and Margot's separation spoil their annual gathering. AnnMarie was thrilled that her father came, although her mother didn't seem as happy to be there. AnnMarie blamed herself for that. There were many who still hoped Peter and Margot would reconcile. AnnMarie was at the head of that list.

Most family member were still confused by their breakup. They'd seemed so happy last summer. Most assumed it had something to do with the family secret, especially now that rumors had been floating around about the so-called Omegans. Even that Senator's interview before he died. But the rift between Peter and Margot had occurred months prior.

The Helmstaedt's had their own secrets, and the fact AnnMarie was some kind of Special Agent at the age of sixteen. Since her abduction and then her recruitment into the FBI, the entire family had learned the truth about Margot and her. They'd heard she'd recently been injured in some fight, but she looked fine now. Regardless, there were few cataclysms in the universe great enough to stop a Helmstaedt annual reunion, and Margot and AnnMarie's shadowy involvement in whatever was going on didn't qualify.

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Half the family stood at a safe distance and watched as a small sun appeared in the middle of AnnMarie's chest and her eyes flashed

dangerously. AnnMarie floated off the wooden deck as the waves of excruciating pain faded into the usual tingling warmth of empowerment.

Grandpa Jarod Helmstaedt smiled as AnnMarie flew across the yard to dive into the inviting coolness of the pool. A dozen kids jumped in after her. He turned to wink at Margot.

"She's become quite the Protector, hasn't she?"

"You don't know the half of it. She's decided to join the FBI. To fight our own people."

"Unlike her mother, the confirmed pacifist."

"She'll wind up facing more trained warriors, Jarod. Her next encounter won't be a surprise to them. She will either kill them or they will kill her."

"And either way, she will no longer be your little girl."

"This isn't one of your damn games, Jarod. Many of the Shaadar are highly trained in combat. AnnMarie knows nothing of fighting."

"Are you so sure? She's been in the hands of the FBI for months now. You said yourself that you saw her looking bruised and battered. I presume that would take some doing, given her gifts."

"They nearly killed her down in the lab in New Mexico. I think they would have if I hadn't intervened."

"And then she went back to them. Doesn't that say something."

"It just means she's trying to prove something."

"She's trying to prove that she's your daughter. You were the one who chose this course in life. You abandoned the rest of your family when you came to Earth to live. Including your husband. I presume he still thinks you're dead."

"This is different. I chose not to fight. Not to kill. And everything in Kalek's life was about the Mission."

"A mission that has now come to Earth. We're being invaded by your people. AnnMarie is living up to the highest aspirations of American culture. She's chosen sides and she's fighting for freedom."

"You make it sound no noble. There is nothing noble about killing."

"You don't have to tell me that, Margot," Jarod replied, his voice growing sharper. "Americans have long given up our sons whenever freedom is threatened. I fought in two Iraq wars. Early 90's and also in 2003. I was nearly as young as AnnMarie when I joined the Army."

"But this isn't her war."

"No? And whose is it then?"

Margot said nothing for a long moment. "I came here to avoid all this, Jarod."

"But you can't run away for ever, Margot. You were part of a survey mission in the sixties. It should be no surprise that other Shaadar have returned. You said just the other day that they're preparing the Earth for someone or something else."

"Should I join her, Jarod? Should I give up all my beliefs? Should I make my whole life into a lie?"

Jarod reached out to take his daughter-in-law's hand in his. "Only you can decide your fate, Margot. Just as AnnMarie has to decide hers."

Margot nodded and held Jarod's hand tightly. "I just don't want to lose her."

"You must let her go to keep her. Otherwise you become something she has to overcome, someone she has to prove something to. It's the paradox of raising a child."

"And watch her die in the process?" Margot said bitterly.

"She always thought of herself as human, Margot. Let her act in defense of her adopted world."

Jarod looked out at the swimming pool games. From a distance, they looked more like a one-sided bar brawl. Everyone was piling on top of AnnMarie, trying to hold her under water. They weren't having much luck. "Besides, she's tough and resourceful, Margo. She has your genetics. And her own friends in the FBI. They'll help keep her safe. She's their most valuable asset."

Neither of them said anything for a long moment.

"But it wouldn't hurt if you kept an eye on her, Margot. In ways only you can. She's still a girl. She doesn't think she needs you, but she does."

Margot nodded as she watched the guys join the typically rough Helmstaedt pool game. It was twenty to one. AnnMarie was in her Aur'a. They didn't have a chance.

The family gathering proceeded like so many others in large and athletic families. The first of several football games, various forms of competitive events in the pool, and a great deal of drinking and drinking and swapping of lies. The Helmstaedt's were a sports-oriented family, and their discussions rotated mostly around that subject. Two uncles were professional coaches, and Peter was a sportscaster at a local TV station. Andy playing in the NFL. A Center.

Peter and Margot were civil to each other, falling back into the simple happiness of being part of boisterous family life. Their marital difficulties were briefly forgotten as they proudly watched Andy set up this year's Challenge. Since the family had learned about AnnMarie's talents, it had been obvious that she'd be the target of this year's contest.

Andy banged the huge Chinese gong in the middle of the yard; the symbol for the start of the main event of the day. The tradition was to challenge someone in the family to some feat of skill or athletics. If the challenged person succeeded, they got to name the next challenge. If they failed, the challenger was given another turn.

Grandpa Jarod climbed slowly up onto the crude platform and declared the event open for the first Challenge.

"I challenge AnnMarie," Andy shouted.

Whistles and claps greeted his long-anticipated challenge. The female cousins quickly gathered protectively around AnnMarie. Andy's challenges usually bordered on the bizarre. His idea of fun was throwing himself into the opposing defensive line, pitting his brute strength against the defensive line every NFL Sunday. A bit of American mayhem, but played to rules everyone understood.

He tossed a package of clothing to AnnMarie. "We took up a collection and decided to dress you in the style which you should be accustomed. Not those boring rags."

All eyes turned to look at AnnMarie as she stood in the shallow end of the pool. She slowly spun around to model her current outfit. She was dressed in a pair of blue shorts and an unbuttoned long-sleeved blouse that was tied off to reveal a bare midriff. Her blonde hair was tied back and she wore a simple Indian bead necklace. The kind of things the Helmstaedt girls often wore. AnnMarie tore open the package and blushed.

"Oh, come on, you've got to be kidding," she called toward the platform.

Andy lifted his arms like a preacher at a salvation prayer meeting. "Since we've learned that our little AnnMarie is really a slimy alien cyborg from beyond the pale, the girl Grandpa Jarod calls his young Protector, I figured we'd find out if she can live up to her over inflated reputation."

AnnMarie unfolded a red and blue Lycra costume and waved it in front of her. It looked like something out of a comic book.

A chorus of boos and cheers rose from the crowd as those who had bet for and against AnnMarie joined in to heckle each other. The bets were for beers and for the right to name next year's challenge. Andy was briefly discouraged when the bets seemed to be weighted in AnnMarie's favor.

"Before I name your challenge, AnnMarie, you must dress for the part." He waved toward the pool house. "And it would be good if you'd also slip into that Aur'a thingy of yours. Might come in handy when you come back."

AnnMarie and her contingent of cousins disappeared into the pool house. Jarod leaned on his cane as he walked slowly over to put his hand on Andy's shoulder. "Don't embarrass her too much, Andy. She's been having a rough time lately."

"Embarrass AnnMarie? She's always been like the golden girl of the family, even before we knew about she and Margot. What could be bothering her?"

"There is more going on than meets the eye," Jarod said darkly. "But trust me. It's a big deal."

"Don't worry, Grandpa. She'll probably enjoy this. I know everyone else will."

The cousins returned to stand giggling in front of the platform, smiling at each other conspiratorially.

Andy looked around. "And exactly where is our little AnnMarie?"

A gasp traveled through the crowd and everyone started to look up. Andy craned his neck, only to find AnnMarie floating weightlessly a few feet over his head. His heart leaped as he realized that the bottom of the leotard was just a thong. Her red skirt was very short.

He quickly recovered to look back at the crowd. "And some say blondes are all air-heads. I guess this proves it. She's so light-headed she can float on air."

The Insult. A key part of the Challenge. More boos from the crowd. Every eye was staring over his head.

AnnMarie stuck her tongue out at him as she floated down to land beside him. "Just shows that you aren't paying attention, Cousin Andy. Everybody knows that I'm a goddess. You know, as in, divine?"

Cousin Andy laughed, his eyes growing animated as he made a scene out of bowing before her. "And so, very, very humble for a goddess."

"But you aren't on your knees."

"I thought that was a girl's job."

More boos, louder now.

"O.K. That was in bad taste." He made a spectacle of slowly walking around AnnMarie to study her scantily clad form. "Still as skinny as ever. Your mom has to feed you more."

"I'm the Goddess of Power," AnnMarie said as she turned to puff out her chest with mock seriousness. "You should worship me." Cousin Andy wasn't the only one who saw the twinkle in her eye and the hint of a smile as she stepped closer to him, revealing a stunning profile.

"The Goddess of the Tightest Buns on Earth," someone in the crowd taunted her. AnnMarie turned her head to look down at herself, wiggling her behind as she did.

"AnnMarie..." Margot said, a warning note in her voice. "Be nice now." AnnMarie sometimes got carried away at family events. Once the roughhousing started, especially in the pool, she wasn't very good at keeping her top on. Not that it seemed to slow down or bother AnnMarie. She was naturally competitive, and the game was far more important than a few threads of clothing.

Andy struggled to look unimpressed. AnnMarie had definitely grown up these last years. She had a body that could match those cheerleaders who decorated the sidelines of NFL games. It scared him a little to realize that Fred might be right. They'd talked last week, and he'd blushed while admitting that he thought AnnMarie could be descended from those goddesses of ancient mythology. Aphrodite might be in her bloodline.

Andy pushed that outrageous thought away as he continued his taunt. "Still don't have much muscle on that skinny frame, AnnMarie."

AnnMarie said nothing as she proudly raised her arm and tightened it, revealing a shockingly large biceps. It was far too large for such a slender arm. "No muscles, huh? I'm a Helmstaedt. Muscles are our thing."

More cheers. Standing up for the Helmstaedt name and the family's athletic prowess was a crowd pleaser, even if her blood line was from the opposite side of the galaxy.

"Well, as I hear it, we should call you Witch AnnMarie and her Flying Broom," he added, struggling to remember his long rehearsed insult. "A little witch who's probably blonde-headed enough to turn handsome men into toads."

Several whistles of enthusiasm and even more boos came from the hundred family members. Cousin Andy was doing a really good job of holding up his end of "The Insult". As always, the more outrageous and silly it was, the better.

"Too blonde, huh? Men to toads?" She reached out to gently grab cousin Andy's shirt to lift him high over her head, shaking him like he was a child's rag doll. "Hey, anybody out there want to play catch with a flying cousin?"

"You put him down right now, AnnMarie Helmstaedt," Margot called out, laughing. "You forget your strength." AnnMarie winked at her mother before sending a reassuring smile winging toward cousin Andy's new wife. She was a former model who clearly wasn't used to the rough and tumble of a family like the Helmstaedt's. She looked

shocked and a bit worried. AnnMarie definitely wasn't what she'd been told to expect.

"Forget my strength, huh?" AnnMarie boasted as she swung the huge three-hundred pound man around her head faster and faster, finally throwing him a hundred feet into the air. He descended like a lead blimp. Margot floated off the ground to catch him twenty feet from the ground, saving him from what had looked like certain death. She set Andy down to walk back to the stage on rubbery legs. AnnMarie's toss wasn't part of the program.

"So, what else you got in mind, Cousin Andy?"

He quickly recovered his equilibrium as he realized he hadn't truly been in danger. Margot had obviously been prepared for something like this. He looked up in the sky to point at the hawks who were circling in the afternoon thermals like they did every day. "See those little birds. I want you to bring one back here."

AnnMarie glanced up. The hawks were two thousand feet overhead and climbing fast on the hot air. She smiled back at Andy. "That's not much of a challenge for a Shaadarian. Just a couple of birds."

"Then you don't know anything about hawks." Andy spent his off-season doing wildlife photography, and he'd traveled far and wide photographing animals in their natural habitats. He'd recently done an article on hawks, and he'd learned how territorial and aggressive they could become.

"Just make sure you don't hurt them."

AnnMarie bent down and then leaped into the air. She climbed until she felt the warm rising air of the thermal. Her cape fluttered distractingly around her. She quickly undid it and let it fall to the ground. It was a ridiculous thing to wear anyway. The skintight Lycra of the rest of her costume made sense. Except for that tiny skirt. One everyone could see up if she flew.

Overhead, the hawks were kreened to each other. Their high-pitched cries grew louder the closer AnnMarie came. They stopped soaring and began to flap their wings to climb faster. AnnMarie kept closing the distance. When she was fifty feet below the smaller of the hawks, the larger male suddenly tucked in its wings and snap rolled onto its back. He rocketed directly toward AnnMarie's face, talons slashing out at her.

She scissored her body to duck under the hawk, only to feel his talons rake down her back. The male landed on her bare leg, digging his talons into her calf. She twisted around, momentarily disoriented, struggling to control her Aer'ie. He let go of her leg just as the female slammed into her back, its talons tearing into the blue Lycra. AnnMarie twisted her shoulders and the hawk released her. The male was back, tangling its talons in her hair as it slashed at her face with its sharp beak. It grabbed her nose and bit hard. The sank her talons into the fabric over AnnMarie's chest as she beat her with her powerful wings.

AnnMarie suddenly felt like a character in the Hitchcock movie *The Birds*. And while the talons weren't tearing her skin, they were tearing huge holes in her costume. She reached out to wrap her arms around the female that was clinging to her front, only to have her mate slash at her eyes with its talons. She closed them and lost control of her Aer'ie to plummet toward the ground. The hawks fell with her, tearing at her with talon and beak as they beat her silly with their wings.

The hawks deserted AnnMarie just before she crashed through the roof of the pool house at a hundred miles per hour. Broken tiles and shattered glass flew everywhere. When she staggered out the door a moment later, her costume was torn in a dozen places. "What did I tell you?" Andy gloated. "Our mighty goddess, beaten up by a couple of chicken hawks."

AnnMarie gritted her teeth and leaped back into the air. The hawks didn't wait for her to get close this time before splitting off to attack her from both sides. The ultimate fighter pilots, they flew circles around her as they slashed at her with talons. She was too slow and clumsy to avoid them. AnnMarie resorted to other tactics. She began spinning herself around so fast that the hawks couldn't focus on her face. They flew closer, moving tentatively now, searching for the right moment to slash out. Which gave AnnMarie her moment. She reached out to grab the male's legs in her hands. The big bird cried frantically as it bit frantically at her, the female resuming her attack on

her head and face. AnnMarie ignored the bites and the talons as she dropped rapidly down toward the family gathering.

The hawk attacking her face gave up just above the ground. It rose upward on the beat of powerful wings, calling to her mate. AnnMarie held the struggling male as she landed in front of Andy. There was very little left of the top her costume. One breast was completely revealed.

Andy blushed and tried not to stare. "O.K, you win. I concede."

A riot of whistles and clapping erupted, as much to acknowledge AnnMarie's state of undress as her successful completion of her Challenge. She tossed the hawk back into the air. He flew off to join his mate, his pride clearly wounded. Aimee climbed up on the podium to wrap a beach towel around AnnMarie to salvage her dignity. Her skin felt as if a dozen crazed maniacs had attacked her with needles.

"So, just a couple of birds, huh?" Andy said proudly.

"Those bad boys can really fly," AnnMarie admitted.

"They're the finest fliers on Earth, and pound for pound, the most fearsome fighters. Personally, I had my money on the hawks."

AnnMarie stuck her tongue out at him. "But I now have the right to name the next challenge."

"You do."

"Then I challenge the Texas side of the clan to football. We Angelinos are going to kick your butts!"

The cheers rose the loudest now. The annual football game between the Texas and the California sides of the Helmstaedts was the other long-awaited event of the day.

"But first, flying lessons for all kids."

AnnMarie was instantly mobbed by two dozen children from two to ten years old. The older cousins and nephews joined in as they began to dress the kids in the special harnesses that Grandpa Jarod had prepared for today. AnnMarie changed out of her towel and torn top and into one of her Dad's old Led Zeppelin T-shirts.

Jarod strapped the kids in four at a time. AnnMarie soared a half mile straight up to begin flying loops and circles in the blue sky, her young passengers trailing far behind her, suspended by their harnesses only. The excited laughter of the littlest ones floated down from the sky as the children seemed to have no fear of heights when AnnMarie flew them, not even when she swooped low to flash only inches above a nearby lake at more than fifty miles per hour.

When the children were finally exhausted an hour later, AnnMarie performed a very slow somersault to fly across the lawn and land lightly in a lawn chair next to Peter, her father.

"That was fun."

"The birds or the flying lessons," Peter chuckled.

"Both. But damn, those hawks were tough. At least they gave me a chance to get rid of that horrid costume."

"You're growing up very fast, AnnMarie. You damn near gave Grandpa a heart attack when those birds tore those holes in that Lycra. You're hardly a little girl anymore, you know."

"Sorry, Dad... won't happen again."

Dan Helmstaedt chuckled. "Well, you did gain some more admirers among the teenage boys in the family."

"Yeah. I could cut the hormones with a knife," AnnMarie giggled. She'd always been able to talk frankly around her dad.

"I guess we're going to have to come up with a new name for you soon, honey. Something other than Grandpa's Protector."

??? details on Matt Stevens

AnnMarie's smile faded. "But I like, Matt."

"He's nearly ten years older than you."

"Maybe we Shaadarians mature more rapidly."

"Physically, for sure. Emotionally, I'm not sure. Men's motivations for pursuing younger women aren't always the purest. He hasn't pressured you too much, you know, in that way, has he?"

AnnMarie laughed. "Who said he's pressuring me? Maybe I'm the aggressor."

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"Don't count ordinary men out, honey. There are several kinds of mates, and finding a soul-mate is much harder than finding any other kind."

AnnMarie shrugged as he rose back to her feet. "He's a guy and he's healthy so yeah, I guess. But I can handle him. I still remember what you and Mom told me about sex, and with all these Velorian genes of mine and the way they work sometimes. I guess I just need a, you know, a super guy who is a, well, you know, real man of steel with a really big..."

"AnnMarie!" Peter protested loudly.

"...ego. I was going to say ego, dad. He has to be able to handle me and any guy who knows about my strength is going to have a problem with that unless he's very sure of himself."

Peter Helmstaedt rolled his eyes at his beautiful daughter before wagging his finger at her. She did a small curtsy and turned her back to him to pull an old pair of Levi 501's over her costume skirt, her feet floating off the ground as she snapped them up.

AnnMarie had always teased her dad, as he was the one person she could go to and really talk about things. That had included very candid discussions about sex. He and Margot had both advised AnnMarie about what it meant to be Shaadar and Normal. Margot had warned AnnMarie about her Aur'a and her pheromones. Peter had explained his reactions with the same candor he would have if

she'd been his son. He'd suffered two broken ribs shortly after their relationship had become intimate.

Peter sat back in his chair now as he proudly watched his adopted daughter walk across the backyard to join the flag football game that was forming in the neighbor's back lot. Her feet were planted firmly on the ground now that she'd dropped back out of her Aur'a. He wondered for the hundredth time how AnnMarie was going to cope with so many people knowing who, or rather, what she was. She'd always been a little shy and so very gentle.

Except when she played flag football. Or tennis.

He chuckled out loud as he heard the cheer from the LA team as it rose to match the boos of the Texas team. She was the best wide receiver in the family by far and she was infamous for making catches nobody else could. When she tucked the ball in and fearlessly went for a score, she was nearly impossible to tackle. She would dodge and weave down the field with the power of an NFL back and the grace of a ballerina. A leaping dive to tackle her was tantamount to suicide for the tackler, but it was the only way to stop her.

But given the Helmstaedt family penchant for playing very physical football and AnnMarie's obvious abilities, someone always managed to find a way. The flag that was tucked into their waistbands was for sissies, or so the family tradition went, and it was the ultimate badge of honor in the Helmstaedt family to display the bruises that came from an open-field tackle of their very own cyborg.

