

## GUARDIAN ANGEL

### *Prologue*

"Alonzo, you have to let her go," the boy firmly told the older man. Uly looked up; he didn't have to tilt his head back far to catch Alonzo's eyes. He had grown so much in the past few years; the tall pilot only had an inch or two left over him.

"I can't. I love her too much," Alonzo said, a loneliness in his voice that, through the years of isolation, was honed to a razor-edged sharpness. Uly wondered what it'd be like to love someone so much, that even in death it was impossible to let go.

"She's not for you, not anymore," he continued. Bare emotion, a naked sense of loss, washed over the boy, exuded by the man standing before him. Uly was hard-pressed to keep his voice steady.

"I know," Alonzo sighed, his brown eyes almost black with immense grief. He sighed disconsolately and sank to his knees. He shook his head slowly. "I didn't know it'd be so hard, so very hard," he whispered and as he glanced up, Uly saw the tears in his eyes. Not knowing what to say, he knelt next to the man, wanting to put his arms around him, to hug him, yet knowing he couldn't.

"Alonzo, it's better that you leave here," he said quietly when at last the man's sobs subsided. "Sever your ties, find your peace among the stars. For her sake, and yours." Alonzo nodded, reluctantly.

"I'll try," he whispered, "I'll try."

### *New Pacifica settlement, year 8 AL (after landing)*

Julia Heller watched, a tad nervous, while his handsome face came closer and closer, now only bare inches removed from her own. His eyes were dark with desire and she quivered in anticipation of the touch of his lips on hers. The strength of her own ardor frightened her a little. She had never really learned to handle her emotions, her passions; didn't know how to deal with them, even after Alonzo helped her break down the mental walls behind which those feelings were hidden. And now, after all this time, it was even scarier. Yet, she knew she would go through with it. This time she would.

"Julia --" he sighed, his breath a gentle caress on her skin, then his lips finally reached hers.

Kla-beng! With a thunderous crash the large monitor fell from her desk and shattered on

the wood floor. They both spun around and gawked wide-eyed at the wreckage, the tangle of brightly-colored wires amidst ragged-edged shards of glass.

"What the hell --" he began.

"Never mind," Julia said huskily, and she turned back to face him. She knew the moment was lost though, the magic gone. With an apologetic shrug he straightened.

"I better go now," he said. "You've got a long day tomorrow."

"Yes," she sighed and watched him leave.

After she cleared away the debris of the ruined monitor -- she wondered absently how she was going to explain this one to Danziger -- Julia went to stand on the veranda of her small cabin, hoping to regain her equilibrium. She looked up at the dark expanse overhead, counting the stars in the cloudless sky, reiterating their names the way Alonzo had taught her. As it always did, the mental exercise calmed her, and she could almost sense the pilot standing behind her, pointing out the bright sparks as he had done so often in the past.

She leaned backward slightly, half-expecting him to be there -- yet only a cold breeze wafting through the dark night caressed her skin gently. She shivered and with a last glance at the Dancing Pair -- the constellation Alonzo always said reminded him of the two of them -- she went back inside. However, it was a long time before she fell into a restless sleep.

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"Again?" Danziger cried, as she informed him about the wrecked monitor. "Julia, you really have to be more careful with your stuff! It's not as though we can mail-order for another monitor or scanner every time you break one."

"I know," she replied, barely looking chastised. "I'm sorry. I'll be more careful." Deep down Danziger wondered about her recent track record for breaking things. Had she really become that clumsy or careless? He found it hard to believe; yet, this was the third time in as many months she came to him with a ruined piece of precious equipment.

"That's what you always say," he rumbled gruffly, yet not unkindly. He knew this was a difficult time for her, with Mooncross coming up tonight -- and only recently she'd cautiously started dating again. Danziger suspected it made her emotionally very vulnerable.

"Dad?" a young voice said. They both looked up to see a gangly youth standing in the doorway, shuffling his feet a little uncertainly. "Don't be mad at Julia. It's not her fault."

Danziger raised his eyebrows in question at his stepson. "What do you mean, Uly?"

"It's Alonzo. He is --" The boy faltered as Julia blanched and swayed when he uttered the name. Danziger flushed as he noticed the consternation on her face.

"Ulysses!" he scolded the teenager angrily. "Are you out of your mind?" Nobody, *\*ever\**, mentioned Alonzo's name in Julia's presence. They didn't dare. They feared her anger, her cold hatred -- but more than that they feared to see her pain, still raw despite the years that had passed.

Turning back to her, Danziger asked, "Julia, are you okay? I'm sorry --"

She raised her hand and interrupted coldly, "It doesn't matter. Just get me a new monitor." Danziger knew the coldness only served to hide the hurt. He glared at Uly, who was fidgeting in the doorway. Julia looked sharply at the boy; she made as if to speak, then thought better of it and turned away.

Danziger watched her leave, a stiffness in her posture, her back straight like an arrow. And he remembered the fateful day, years ago...

oOo

"Devon, there's not enough of the serum to inject both of them," Yale said, bleak despair hardening his voice. They were in the med-tent at New Pacifica. The Advance group had only recently arrived and not yet had the opportunity to build a more permanent facility. Alonzo lay on a cot to the left, unconscious, his face twisted into a mask of pain. Bess and Danziger were putting Julia on the other cot. She was thrashing wildly, convulsing and they were tying her down to keep her from hurting herself. Alonzo was also tied down but he lay still, already having passed through the turbulent stage of the poisoning.

Devon sighed heavily. It was impossible to imagine that just twenty-four hours ago those two people had been a happy, laughing couple, setting out on a three-day trip to scout out the nearby hills to the northeast of New Pacifica.

They came back early, in the middle of the night. Alonzo was delirious. Julia said a snake-like animal had bitten them both, when they disturbed its lair beneath a blackberry bush. She hadn't been able to suck the poison out in time and it was causing a severe toxic reaction. Alonzo was ahead of her on the curve and the doctor knew she would get sick shortly

Julia's enhanced genes helped her body fight off the effects of the poison long enough that she found an antidote. However, before she'd been able to synthesize more than a mere sample, she'd collapsed herself. The poison attacked the nervous system, causing severe muscle cramps, unbearable pain, convulsions and, finally, death. Yale gathered that much from her Gear log, but Julia had never gotten around to recording the formula for the antidote. And so now, the Edenites were left with an impossible choice -- who to save and who to let die. And they had to make a decision fast, or risk losing both of their crew.

"Yale, I can't make that choice," Devon said, desperately trying to think of an alternative. "Maybe we can inject both of them with half a dose?"

"No!" The voice was so soft they nearly didn't hear it, yet it was determined. Devon spun towards the sound and found Alonzo conscious, his eyes bright with pain.

"Alonzo, how're you feeling?" She crouched near his cot, taking the hand that lay limply at his side.

"Help Julia," he said through gritted teeth, his voice a strangled gasp. "You need her more than you need me. She's your only doctor." His brown eyes pleaded with Devon to do as he said. Then they closed slowly as he sank back into unconsciousness for the last time.

Devon swallowed down her tears and turned to Yale. "He's right," the tutor said quietly as their eyes met. Devon nodded.

"Give Julia the antidote," she said, her voice oddly toneless, her face pale yet resolute.

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Julia never spoke another word to Devon again. Danziger thought that was a bit harsh; he knew how much guilt and doubt Devon still felt over her decision. And he expected the doctor would've made the same decision, had their positions been reversed.

When she finally woke up to find Alonzo gone forever, Julia immersed herself in her work. And when the colony ship landed, six months later, she worked harder than any of the doctors that came with it. She burned herself out, exhausting herself so she'd fall into a near-comatose sleep at night. And she had never stopped, until recently. It was Peter Robson, a colonist whose wife had died in cryo-sleep, who gently helped the doctor break from her seclusion. Danziger imagined that having suffered a similar loss himself helped the colonist reach Julia.

"Make sure she drinks plenty of fluids, when she wakes up. And come see me at the hospital for a final check tomorrow." Julia rose to her feet and stretched, working out a cinch in her back. She felt very tired and was relieved when the last of the parents took their newly healed daughter and left the caves. Through the night, during Mooncross, the Terrians had taken the last of the Syndrome children into the Mooncross spring, to heal them. Since the colony ship landed, the earth-dwellers had healed a selection of the children each year - those children that they deemed old enough for the change. And now, finally, the remaining few, toddlers when they'd arrived on the planet, were cured.

The colonists had wanted to throw a big celebration near the caves that held the spring, until Uly told them the Terrians wouldn't like it. So instead, they were celebrating below, at the foot of the hills, in the Town Square. All through the long night the occasional bout of laughter or snatch of music had drifted up. Only the children, their parents and a few medical personnel were allowed to come near the caves.

Julia had spent the evening and most of the night in the outer cave, with the crisp and efficient nurse Tom, checking the children, confirming their cure and assuring their parents that from now on their offspring could live a normal life. With a grateful nod, she sent the male nurse away. "I'll finish up here, Tom. Go join the party. I'll see you tomorrow."

When he was gone, Julia sighed. She wished Alonzo were here to share this moment with her. She always missed him the most when she had to deal with the silent, alien creatures and their ceremonies. Instead, she was all alone, exhausted. However, she was relieved it was finally over.

"Julia?" Uly appeared in the entrance to the cave, a dark silhouette against the star-studded sky. She glanced up at him, again wondering when he'd gotten so tall. At sixteen, he was on the brink of manhood. Yet at the moment he more resembled an awkward youth, as he tentatively put his hand on her arm. "Please come with me? There's something you need to see."

"Can't it wait, Uly?" she asked. "I'm really tired now and would like to go home and sleep." He shook his head, his eyes as serious and unfathomable as a Terrian's and with a sigh she relented. With a solicitous yet firm grip on her arm he led her through the maze of tunnels, deeper and deeper into the earth.

Finally they reached a chamber, dimly lit by a vein of sunstones crossing the ceiling. She gasped in wonder as they entered. Alongside the walls, in dark niches, stood the Terrians. Their eyes were closed and they stood motionless.

"Are they sleeping?" Julia whispered the question. Uly merely nodded. He clasped her hand and led her closer to one of the aliens. Taken aback, she tried to withdraw, but his eyes pleaded with her and he held her more firmly.

"Please, trust me, Julia," he said quietly. He laid her hand on the Terrians arm and --

The cave was still the same, the Morganite casting its soft glow on her. Yet, something had changed. It took her a few seconds to realize what it was. The Terrians were gone. And so was Uly.

"Hey Doc," a voice whispered behind her, so soft she thought at first that she'd imagined it. She spun around, anxious yet hopeful.

"Sorry I startled you," he smiled.

"Lonzo," she breathed, as it was he standing before her now, his trademark grin twitching at the corners of his mouth. His voice sounded the way she remembered, warm and caring. His softly spoken words caressed her, soothing her pain like a healing balm. Love washed over her, engulfed her, warming her like a hot bath after a cold day.

She moved to go to him, her arms opening wide by their own volition. He gestured her to stay. "Don't," he said sadly, "you can't touch me." His brown eyes looked down at her, filled with a mixture of affection and infinite sorrow.

Her whole being, from every cell in her body to the core of her soul, longed to touch him. Desperately wished to hold him one last time and to be held in his arms again. Those strong yet gentle arms, whose embrace always made her feel safe and protected -- and which she had missed so much.

"Why?" she asked. "Why did you tell them to let you die instead of me?"

Alonzo shrugged. "They needed you more than they needed me," he explained. She glared at him, appraisingly, and he sighed. "No, that's not true," he admitted. "That just helped me convince Devon. Julia, you're so much stronger than me."

He began to pace back and forth in the chamber. "I couldn't bear to live without you -- and I knew you could handle it. It was selfish of me, I know. I sentenced you to years of loneliness..." His voice trailed off and a long silence fell. Julia didn't trust herself to speak, her throat was tight with unspilled tears.

"It is so hard to let you go," Alonzo finally continued. "I watched you, working yourself

to the bone, crying yourself to sleep. And it was all my fault." His voice broke and he took a few deep breaths before he could continue. "I wanted to touch you so desperately, to hold you, to tell you that I love you. I know I never told you that in so many words, but I do. However, it was too late; I had waited too long to tell you. And when that other man, Robson, came into your life, I couldn't stand it. I got so jealous whenever you were together with him that I -- I'm sorry if I got you into trouble with Danziger," he finished weakly.

Julia gasped; an image of Peter Robson's face close to hers, about to kiss her when the monitor fell off the desk, flashed through her mind. "You mean... the scanner, the monitor last night... how --"

"I don't really know," he interrupted her with a shrug. "If I really concentrate, I can still make things move. I don't know how it works. However, I promise you, I won't do it again. I've come to say goodbye."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he held out his hand, his fingers almost, yet not quite, touching her lips. "Julia, you have years ahead of you still. Good years. Years that you should spend with someone special, not mourning over what might've been. And that someone is not me -- not anymore." His voice trailed off for a moment and Julia's vision blurred at the edges as tears welled in her eyes. She shook her head 'no' but couldn't speak. "I'm sorry, Julia. I wish it were different..."

She blinked the tears away and was surprised to see them reflected in his eyes. His voice was low, and husky with emotion. "You should go now and live your life as it was meant to be." She stared at him, not knowing what to say. She felt as if she were losing him all over again, still, she knew he was right. His eyes were pleading with her. "Julia, you must let me go -- as I need to let you go." Wordlessly she nodded and he smiled a sad smile. "I'll watch over you," he promised. "I won't let anything bad happen to you."

And with those words his image faded. She took a step forward, sinking to her knees, sobbing, touching the spot where he just stood. "Lonzo, I love you," she whispered and for a moment a shadow flickered. Then it was gone.

Abruptly Julia found herself back in the chamber lined with Terrians. She was on her knees, slouched against the Terrian's legs. Uly stood motionless to the side of the cave, his eyes calm and unreadable. She looked up at him and nodded her gratitude. "Thank you, Uly," she said. "Thank you." He shrugged uneasily, suddenly a human teenager again. He helped her to her feet and led her back through the maze.

She blinked at the early morning light, the sun a golden disk just over the horizon. Her eyes, still used to the darkness of the caves, took a few moments to adjust.

"Julia, there you are! I was getting worried," Peter Robson's voice reached her, concern ringing clearly in its tone. She turned to him.

"I'm okay," she replied quietly, with a wistful smile. "Just finishing up on some unfinished business." A little uncertain, he put his arms around her shoulders and she let him. As Julia hugged him back, she glimpsed a fleeting shadow rustling through the brush, at the edges of her vision. When she turned to look at it, it was gone.

"Let's go," Julia said and, squaring her shoulders, she walked down the trail, back to the settlement and her life.

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