

Fusion Fire

by Kathy Tyers

CHAPTER 1: NIGHT ATTACK

notturmo minore

night-piece in a minor key

Even rain on wet leaves can sound ominous after midnight.

Firebird stopped walking and listened intently. The dark hours were slipping away, but she'd awakened with both calves bound up in excruciating muscle cramps. Pausing on her third lap around a long, windowless training room, she felt positive she'd heard something—someone—out in the passway.

She would've known if that were Brennen.

Barefoot, she crept across the cushioned mat. Once a storage area, this room bristled with weapons, simulators, and exercise equipment. A home-security master board glimmered behind the flight simulator. She bent toward it.

One of her unborn sons kicked her ribs in protest.

Firebird straightened and pushed red-brown hair back from her face. She'd hoped to command a star cruiser some day ... she never hoped to resemble one. Now, six and a half months pregnant with twins, she suspected she did.

She snugged the belt of her flimsy nightrobe. On the security board, an image of their two-story hillside home gleamed in pale yellow holo. Each entry and window shone red, fully covered by sensors and dispatch circuits. Brennen had invested his Federate severance pay in a lovely, defensible location near Thyrica's primary military base, then installed the best available home sec system. In ten years of intelligence work, he'd made enemies.

The board showed no sign of intrusion.

Firebird glanced over her shoulder. Blame pregnancy hormones, but she wasn't convinced. She despised this maternal jumpiness, this urge to protect herself at all cost. She'd been a military pilot, qualified on advanced fightercraft and small arms.

Still, these days she must protect two other lives. She needed to be jumpy.

Brennen had merely rolled over when she slipped painfully out of bed. She wondered if she ought to go back and wake him now. She'd done that two nights ago, when she thought she heard noises. They found nothing wrong.

Deciding she didn't want her pride stung again, she opened a weapons cupboard. She bypassed several training knives, a broadsword, and two deadly service blazers. A bulky shock pistol—her weapon of choice, a gift from her husband—lay behind the blazers. Hefting it expertly, she thumbed a stud on one side of the grip and quickly checked its charge.

Husband. Unbelievably, she had a husband. Last year, she'd forsaken her home world, with its holy laws and traditions that demanded her death, and married Field General Brennen Caldwell. He'd been her enemy when they met. An expert telepath, he showed her how badly she wanted to live. He won her trust, and introduced her to faith ... and Firebird had never dreamed of love like Brennen gave her, day after night after day. Eight months ago, they had pair bonded in his people's way, linking their lives and their feelings in a marriage only death could end.

She reached for the door control, then hesitated again. She really would rather Brenn didn't find her prowling armed. If she stepped out into that passway quivering with nerves, her worry would wake him. The Ehretan pair bond sensitized each of them to the other's strong emotions, even though she was no trained telepath.

Quiet my heart, Mighty Singer ... and help me, she prayed. Her determination, her jumpiness, and even her fond concern for her twins ebbed away. She touched the door control.

The steel panel silently slid aside. She braced against it until her eyes adjusted. Across the passway, diffuse city light filtered up Trinn Hill into their second bedroom. She peered out its glasteel window-wall.

Rain had softened into thick fog. Two tiny red eyes shone out for a few seconds, then extinguished. Thyrica's planetary developers must've had a sense of humor, she guessed, to create those fist-sized, oozy night-slugs.

She steadied the shock pistol between her hands. Trying to move as serenely as the deep night, she shuffled toward a bend in the passway. She adjusted her grip on the pistol and then peered around the corner.

Her breath caught. Silhouetted by a floor-level luma, a wiry stranger stood facing into the master room. He braced against the doorway with his left arm. She couldn't see his right hand.

She squeezed her pistol's grip.

The stranger whirled, brandishing a black energy blazer in one blackened hand. He thrust his other hand toward her too, palm outward.

Firebird knew that gesture too well. "Brenn!" she shouted. She shot a wild burst—

Then toppled sideways, dropping her pistol with suddenly limp fingers. The intruder had a telepath's power of voice-command. Her right shoulder hit the wall, and she pitched toward the floor. She mustn't fall hard—must not miscarry—but her arms turned to jelly. She couldn't catch herself.

As she flopped on the carpet, barely missing her pistol, she felt Brennen come fully awake. His confusion burst into the back of her mind. Less than a second later, the hall flashed blood-red with blazer fire. The prowler's attention shifted to Brennen. Freed from command, Firebird groped for her pistol.

"Mari!" Brennen shouted. "Stay down!"

She raised her head. A four-armed silhouette danced wildly atop their bed, grappling and kicking. She crawled forward on her elbows and knees. If she could get into the room quickly, she might stun both men with one burst and hit the house alarm.

Too late! Deadly red lightning flashed again. Half the silhouette flew toward the bedroom window-wall, and then—unbelievably—glasteel exploded. "Brenn!" she cried, pushing up on her knees just outside the door, struggling for balance. An alarm klaxon blared. Flood lamps activated outdoors.

“Stay there,” he called again from the bed. His combat focus throbbed in her awareness, but his voice sounded steady. “He’s gone. Don’t come in, though. There’s glasteel everywhere.”

Warm light flooded the master room. Her husband perched on the foot of their bed, dressed in drawstring trousers and aiming a blazer out into the night through a gulf that had been their security window-wall. Middle-sized, muscular without any extra bulk, he stared down the blazer’s sights as if he’d been welded to the weapon.

Firebird lumbered to her bare feet and backed into the extra bedroom to look outdoors. Under the flood lamps, fog dripped from fragrant, evergreen kirka-tree limbs onto soggy undergrowth. The night-slug had left a gleaming slime trail, but she saw no footprints. Damp, resin-scented air drifted into the house. The klaxon’s tritonal wailing shut off.

A warm hand touched her shoulder. Brennen’s concern wrapped around her, warming her much better than her flimsy nightrobe could do. His pale russet hair drooped over one ear, flattened by six hours of sleep, but his cheeks looked flushed, and his intensely blue eyes showed no drowsiness. He still gripped a blazer down at his side. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, catching her breath. “Just a little bounced around. But are you?”

“Yes. Stay out of the bedroom. I’m calling Alert Forces.”

Stepping back, she clenched a fist. Thyrica’s Alert Forces tracked the lawless Shuhr, renegade cousins of Brennen’s telepathic kindred. She had wondered if some day, those enemies might attack Brennen just because he was the strongest Sentinel of his generation. “I’m coming with you,” she declared.

“Well—yes. You could lie down in the study.” He paced up the hall, comforting her with his presence but keeping both hands free, on the chance the intruder might come back.

Firebird followed. She hated feeling vulnerable. At any other time, she might’ve have gone out the window chasing that prowler.

Brennen jabbed the com console near the steel door, then raised one eyebrow. “No contractions?” he murmured. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

Sensing his worry, actually feeling it second-hand on the pair bond, she let him feel her own concern ... and spotted a reddening streak on his right forearm. “He grazed you!”

A male voice blared through room speakers, reverberating off duracrete walls. “General Caldwell, your alert’s lit up. False alarm?”

Brennen turned away, hiding his scorched arm, but now she spotted blood trickling down his left shoulder and side. “Real thing. We’re all right, but we’d appreciate backup.”

“On its way. Your location?”

“Downlevel. Secure room. Intruder’s gone, we think.”

“Stay there.”

Brennen paced back to the half-open steel door, still gripping that blazer. Misty air seeped along the floor.

Shivering, Firebird crossed to the weapons cupboard. She was too full of adrenaline to sit down, and only starting to realize they’d survived a murder attempt. Had the intruder wanted Brennen, or her ... or both? “What happened to your shoulder? Your side?”

He craned his neck. “Oh? Glasteel, probably. Not serious.” He’d taken life-threatening injuries in intelligence work. He’d also saved her life. Twice—no, three times. “I’ll get you to College,” he said. “Master Spieth can watch you for complications.”

“Good idea.” She bent over to seize one of the other blazers and a half-used spool of medical biotape, and was soundly punched again.

All right, then, I don’t resemble a star cruiser. A cruiser-carrier. “I guess our secret’s about to come out,” she complained. She’d gone into hiding as soon as her pregnancy showed, hoping to shock her family with the news just before their twins arrived ... and Netaia’s nobles would be deeply shocked. Brennen, blessed with a knack for avoiding danger, had agreed she should vanish for a while.

“You stayed out of the public eye long enough. Ex-princess,” he said tenderly, raising an eyebrow as he cupped one hand over his forearm.

“I never was a princess,” she insisted through gritted teeth. “Let’s tape that burn.”

He swept her long hair back over her shoulder. “Well...no. It probably needs more than biotape. I’ll let Master Spieth treat it.”

“That was close.”

He nodded.

“Hurting?”

“It’s blocked.” Among other Sentinel skills, he could cancel nerve impulses. “I’m more worried about you.”

“Let me clean your shoulder, Brenn.”

He craned his neck. “Still bleeding?”

“A little.”

“It doesn’t hurt. Just leave it.”

“Did you pick up any clue to who that was?”

“No.” He strolled back to the door—standing guard, she assumed, but wanting not to worry her.

Good try, Brenn.

“What woke you up?” he asked.

“Leg cramps. Again,” she groaned, massaging her left calf.

He peered out. “I never thought I would thank the Holy One for your leg cramps.”

Neither had she. But if she’d been asleep a few minutes ago, they might both be dead.

She shivered again and snatched a high-protein bar off a shelf. Medical Master Spieth supplied these nourishing snacks by the crate.

Two of his Sentinel colleagues arrived four minutes later. “Mistress Firebird,” one exclaimed.

“Hello, Dardy.” She extended a palm to Air Master Damalcon Dardy, whose massive frame belied a boyish face. Hoping he wouldn’t feel her hand shake as he clasped it, she said, “Haven’t talked to you in months.”

“Are you all right?” he asked. Then he took a second look. “Oh, my,” he said softly. “Are you *sure* you’re all right?”

“So far as I know. Thanks for coming.”

Dardy and his partner walked them around the house. Built by a retired star captain who’d spent too much time between Federate systems in a tiny messenger ship, the hillside home had a rambling upper story and a long deck that overlooked central Soldane and distant Kyrren Fjord, and a double rooftop landing port. Dardy’s partner’s instrument scan plainly showed large shoe-prints leading up to—and through—its airlock-type main entry.

Firebird shuddered. So much for advanced security.

As she re-entered her home, Soldane city police arrived. The officers took statements, low-light images of the intruder’s entry and getaway, and more scans. Though they addressed Brennen respectfully, Firebird noticed they never stood close to any of the three Sentinels. It had taken her, too, a long time to trust these hereditary telepaths, Brennen’s kindred.

Standing at the foot of the bed, she tapped one foot, now booted. “How did he get through that window? It was reinforced glasteel.”

“Squill,” she exclaimed. “He was here before, setting us up.” She must’ve heard him two nights ago. She felt like a target. These days, she’d be hard to miss.

Brennen stepped out of the freshening room. He carried a medium-sized duffel. “Anything else you want, Mari?”

No one else called Firebird by that name. Brennen had given it to her last year, helping her hide from a hostile regime. When they married, she made it part of her legal identity. “Mari” meant her new life.

She shook her head. Finally, she felt safe enough to realize she was terrified. “I don’t need anything but you,” she insisted. “Nothing.”

Inland beyond the craggy Dracken Range, at the small town of Arown, the Sentinel College maintained one of the Federacy’s best medical facilities. Master Sentinel Aldana

Spieth laid her soft sonoscope on an examining room counter. “You’ll be fine,” she said, “all three of you, but I’d like you off your feet for a day.”

Relieved for her twins, and glad Spieth didn’t need to give her any injections, Firebird swung around to sit up on the table. Master Spieth’s lovely, laugh-lined face was framed by silver hair, and a gold star adorned her white tunic. Its eight rays proclaimed her, like Brennen, a Master Sentinel—one of Thyrica’s most powerful telepathic refugees.

“How’s Brenn?” Firebird clutched the internally warmed table’s yielding edge. “Where’s he gone?”

Master Spieth scribbled on a recall pad with one fingernail. “Kyrie probed out the glasteel shards, and that flash burn’s not dangerously deep. He’s all right. He’s busy for a while, though. You get to finish your night’s rest.”

“It’s morning.” Firebird glanced out the window. Beyond three rounded, red stone buildings, a new band of clouds turned orange-maroon. Dawn was racing the next eastbound storm inland. “There’s a murderer out there—”

“You will rest,” Spieth said flatly. “For two more months, you have a higher priority than chasing—”

“I can’t lie down and let Brennen take all the risks—”

“Yes, you can.” Spieth laid down her recall pad and narrowed her iron-gray eyes. “Your balance is completely out of whack. You could take a dangerous fall just by stepping down wrong. Couldn’t you?”

Firebird barely got her mouth open.

“Yes, you could,” Spieth snapped. “If you won’t promise to cooperate, I’ll either put you under voice-command or else lock you in. Which will it be?”

Firebird shook her head. She had no intention of risking her babies’ lives. She was determined to keep them safe, too—but she hated acting timid. “I can at least help Brenn. He won’t rest.”

“He’d do almost anything for you, but he can’t carry a baby until you deliver.” The Master touched a call button. “You’re young, Firebird. You’re strong and healthy, but a twin pregnancy has extra risks. You’ve just been stressed. You will rest. I’m ordering you an early breakfast, as well. Eat it all.”

Firebird folded both arms around her belly and those unborn sons, barely resisting the temptation to roll her eyes. She was eating six times a day and napping twice—ridiculous, but ... but Spieth was right. She needed both. She felt like a cruiser, but she couldn't seem to gain enough weight to suit the Medical Master or her staff.

She tired quickly, too. So far, she didn't think much of motherhood, even if her children-to-be carried the genes of a tremendously gifted family. "Find me a bed," she said curtly. "I'll rest."

Brennen eyed a newscan screen in the med center's third-floor lounge. As soon as Spieth had treated his cuts and his burn, he called his mother, wakening her to explain what'd happened before she heard it from some other source

—and sure enough, here it came over the net:

Master Sentinel Brennen Caldwell, new General Coordinator of Thyrian Forces, was attacked last night in his home by an unknown assailant. Neither he nor his wife, née Lady Firebird Angelo of the occupied Netaia Protectorate Systems, was seriously injured. Alert Forces and Soldane Police are investigating.

She would've spotted that and worried.

Her parting words were, "Please call your brother." He nodded, though he and Tarance didn't get along.

He cleared the connection and touched in a call code. He hated to wake Tarance's family. Once Destia bounced out of bed, Tarance and Asea might never get back to sleep. That would lay one more small grudge in the weighty basket Brennen's older brother carried so proudly.

Still, he didn't want Asea worrying.

The call light flashed for several seconds, then repeated. Brennen frowned. Normally Tarance jumped on night calls. They could be medical emergencies, and Tarance zealously guarded Asea's sleep. Tarance's medical practice, subsidized by the College, earned him general respect among even the non-gifted.

Brennen canceled his call, hustled up the passway's blue shortweave carpet to Firebird's room, and stepped in. Beneath a battery of deactivated sensors, she lay curled away from

the door. Sensor deactivation was a good sign. Spieth didn't think she or either of his sons was in danger.

They would both be relieved when she delivered those twins. He endured most of her discomfort and frustration right along with her, especially the mood swings. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

Her eyes opened. "Hm?" Then, instantly, "Brenn!" She pushed up onto her elbows. "What's happening?"

Muting his concern, he kissed her forehead. "I just contacted Mother. She wants me to check on Tarance."

She wrinkled her forehead. For an instant, she looked almost childlike.

Brennen knew her toughness, though. This small woman had nearly beaten a deep mind-access interrogation, and faced a firing squad. Scarred though she was by her cruel upbringing, she was literally part of him now, as he was part of her. "I know you're frustrated," he said, "staying here like this. It won't last forever. I'll give you an oil rub when I get back. Fair enough?"

Smiling, she shut her eyes, and as she sighed once more, her alert state faded in his senses. In less than a minute, she slept again.

She did need the rest, with her body changing so quickly. Six months ago, neither of them had known about a twin pregnancy's physical demands. Brennen caressed her shoulder, then returned to the lounge and tried Tarance's personal-carry line. Tarance kept that close, even when traveling.

Air Master Dardy poked his head through the door and eyed the com screen. "Everything all right?"

Brennen nodded. Dardy's aggressive deference made Brennen feel like an icon, instead of a talented human who was as guilty as the rest of the starbred—including the renegade Shuhr—of carrying artificially altered genes. Their ancestors had been created by scientists who hoped telepathy would create lasting peace on Ehret, their original home world. Instead, the first telepathic Ehretan starbred matured into normal, selfish young men and women, whose power cravings touched off a devastating civil war.

"I'm just trying to reach Tarance," Brennen answered, "and let him know we weren't hurt."

“Heavy sleeper?”

“No. He could be on vacation.” Or ...

Holy One, is he all right?

Brennen and Dardy hurried across Dr. Tarance Caldwell’s rooftop landing pad. The coastal drizzle soaked moss-hung trees far below, down on the avenue. Early commuters guided streamlined groundcars through puddles. Their headlamps made glittery streaks in the rain.

Eleven years ago, after eight years of college and medical training, Dr. Tarance Caldwell had bought a compact home in this area, one of Soldane’s pleasant urban neighborhoods, settling into a life as comfortable and secure as Brennen’s had been unpredictable.

No one answered Tarance’s entry bell.

Dardy frowned.

Brennen turned inward for his epsilon-energy carrier and sent a quest pulse indoors. The home felt eerily empty.

They could all be asleep, he reminded himself. A quest pulse would only locate alert minds.

“Could they be on vacation?” Dardy asked.

If Dardy sensed Brennen’s unease, he must’ve diffused his epsilon shields. Sentinels normally surrounded themselves with mental-frequency static, so not to sense the constant assault of others’ emotions. “He would’ve taken his personal-carry,” Brennen objected. Tarance hated it when he let himself in, but he felt he had no choice. He keyed up the unlock sequence.

Dim gray daylight filtered onto Tarance’s longweave carpet and the overstuffed furniture down below, on his main floor. Cushions lay everywhere. Tarance and Asea’s three children often stayed up late. Brennen paused at the foot of the stairs and dropped his own epsilon shields.

He still felt no one awake but Dardy. “Hello?” he called. “Tarance? Asea?”

Dardy paced into the kitchen to open the cold cabinet. His concern rose to answer Brennen's, and now—without epsilon shields—Brennen felt it with excruciating accuracy. "Full of perishables," Dardy said, shaking his head. "They haven't gone far."

Disquieted, Brennen strode up the hall. He turned left, into the master room.

On the bed in half darkness, plush covers draped two forms. "Tarance," Brennen called. He repeated, louder, "Tarance." Neither body moved.

Brennen waved on the room light. Tarance lay on his back, Asea on her side. Their eyes remained shut, their faces peaceful, but neither breathed. Brennen froze, as helpless as if he'd been caught in voice-command. "No," he croaked.

Dardy hustled around the bed. Brennen reached toward his older brother's throat to check for a pulse, then saw the scorched left ear. Blazer, point-blank range. Death would have been sudden and silent.

Dardy laid down Asea's wrist, shook his head, then pulled up the bed sheet to cover both faces. "Get out of here, Caldwell. Go sit down."

"I've seen death before," he said, but his hands felt numb. "Let me help." Then he exclaimed, "The children!" and flung himself across the passway.

The boys, Brit and Kether, lay on narrow beds across a smaller room from each other, two gangling teen-aged bodies that showed no sign of pain, struggle, or life.

Dardy met him in the hallway. "Destia?" Brennen cried, wheeling toward the third bedroom.

Dardy shook his head. "The girl's ... dead, too. Go sit down. I just called Soldane police."

Brennen sank onto a lounge and pressed both trembling hands over his eyes. Twice in eighty years, someone had tried to wipe out his ancient bloodline. Did this make a third attempt, or had Tarance's family fallen to someone's private vendetta?

He slumped. His breath came in puffs. He was trained in emotional control, but he couldn't squelch this sudden storm of grief.

No, not grief. Guilt.

Stop, reason insisted. You aren't responsible. You merely survived—because Mari was awake.

Then who struck here? The Shuhr?

According to Alert Force reports, none of their renegade cousins cared about the Sentinels' ancient faith. Surely the Shuhr scoffed at prophecies about the Carabohd-Caldwell family, although—as a precaution—the Sentinel kindred tried to keep most of those prophecies secret.

Who else would've done this?

Tarance's dim living room seemed light-years away from Brennen's point of consciousness. *You're going into shock*, reason observed. *Lie down. Get your feet up.*

He obeyed. *Tarance*, he groaned again, this time into the invisible realm. *Oh, Holy One, welcome him. Make him content, as Asea and I never could do in this lifetime.*

Another memory stabbed deep. Only two dekia ago, twenty all-too-short days back, they celebrated Destia's spiritual coming of age by consecrating her into the faith community.

Twice before, one ... only one ... adult male in his line had survived.

But Destia was only twelve! And what about Asea? They never killed women before!

Or was this someone else's work?

Agony choked him. He was too numb to weep.