

Warriors of Gaia: Liberty's Cry

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ISBN: 978-0-9883424-0-8

For Barbara, my steady light

Thanks Kristin, for all your help and support.

*Within each of us lie seeds of glory.
Nurture them, and they will grow.*

Prologue

Silvia was gathering berries for dinner when she realized with a sharp feeling of panic that the afternoon sun had long since disappeared below the treetops. She was about to break the most fundamental rule of her people: never be caught outside after dark. She had been distracted by dreamy thoughts of her upcoming wedding to Valentine. In a panic, she dropped the berries and began running for the safety of her village.

She broke into the clearing and saw the tall wood walls that marked her village and safety. Hope grew within her, only to disappear like the glimmering afterglow of fireworks when she heard the sound. She knew the sound well, and it sent icy fear rocketing up and down her spine and into those corners of the body reserved for the most primitive of emotions. The howling of wolves carried to her on the evening air. There were dozens of wolves, and their excited howls meant they had caught the scent of their prey. She continued to run, but a glance over her shoulder revealed gray streaks, light against the darkening forest, gray streaks that devoured the distance between themselves and her with impossibly long, lunging strides. She saw the luminescent yellow of wolves' eyes as she stopped, turned around, and, with stoicism common to her people, spread her arms wide to embrace her fate.

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My name is Erin Taylor, but most people call me ET. My parents never had much money, so when they went on their honeymoon, they stayed in Tucson. They planned to tour the telescopes and go hiking in Madera Canyon. One night, they went to a classic movie festival at the Loft. The movie ET was playing. They loved it. When I was born exactly nine months later, it seemed appropriate to name me Erin so they could call me ET for short. So, I'm named after a dumpy little alien who made bicycles fly. I'm a soon-to-be junior at Sierra Vista High School ("Home of the Battlin' Rattlers") in Tucson, Arizona. The story I'm about to tell is true. I'm telling the story in the first person, but this shouldn't lead you to conclude I'll be alive at the end. In fact, the odds against me as I write these pages are pretty steep. Of course, as my friend Kennedy, the optimist, points out, all people die at the end of their stories.

* * * * *

"ET, there's something I need to show you," says Tyler the minute I open my front door.

"Okay, what would you like to show me?" I respond.

"I have to *show* you," he insists, "because if I told you, you wouldn't believe me. Please come with me."

"I have the second shift at work tonight, so I have to be home by four." I check my watch. It's only 7:00 a.m.

"No problem. I'll have you back in plenty of time."

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“Just a second.” I slide on a pair of shoes and check the mirror to make sure my hair looks roughly respectable. I pull my shoulder-length brown hair back into a ponytail when I realize it doesn’t, and yell out, “I’m going with Tyler, Mom.” I get a muffled, positive-sounding reply.

Tyler and I pile into his ancient Jeep. He’s wearing his trademark round-rim glasses, and his curly blond hair peeks out in back from under his Diamondbacks cap. It’s a warm Arizona morning, which promises to become another blazing-hot desert summer day. Ty’s Jeep is far older than I am, but it runs like brand new because our friend Brianne, who knows how to fix almost anything, takes care of it.

“Can you give me a hint?” I ask.

“All I can tell you is that it’s big. Huge. Enormous. Fantastic.”

I can see from Tyler’s body language that he’s excited. And there aren’t many things that get Tyler excited. Ty is our resident genius. He mastered high school calculus as a freshman, so he’s taking integral calculus from Stanford online classes. He’s also taking advanced physics classes from MIT.

“Are we picking up anybody else?” I ask. Tyler and I are part of a group of kids who have been best friends since third grade at Bessie Mae Reynolds Elementary School. Brianne, another member of the group, calls us the “Tucson Ramblers.” I assume Ty will want to pick up at least a couple others for something that has him this excited.

“No, just you and me, for now. You have a level head, and I really need your advice on what to do next.”

“Okay,” I reply. I wonder if this is an attempt on Ty’s part to bond more closely with me. I know he’d like us to become more than friends. But I’m not interested. It’s not because Ty is a geek (actually, I really like that about him), and he’s kind of cute in a distracted, scholarly sort of way. I’m just way too busy to have a boyfriend.

My dad is an alcoholic. He’s not a get-drunk-and-beat-your-wife-and-kids kind of alcoholic. In fact, he’s what his friends call a

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“happy drunk.” He’s very charming, drunk or sober. But he’s chronically unemployable.

As a result, I work two jobs to help with the bills. And I need to get excellent grades in school because I’m determined to go to the U of A premed, and there isn’t any money to pay tuition. So a scholarship is essential. I also run the 3200 for our high school track-and-field team. There’s no way I can fit a boyfriend into my schedule.

Tyler is driving out of town on Speedway.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Midnight Mesa,” Ty answers.

Midnight Mesa is a popular spot. Because it overlooks all of Tucson, it’s a popular place for kids to hang out. From the serious look on Ty’s face, and because it’s early in the morning, I assume hanging out is not on the agenda. There’s an old Indian medicine wheel on top of the mesa, but Ty isn’t even remotely interested in Native American legends. I’m getting more and more curious about our objective.

We continue without speaking until we reach the track that leads toward the mesa. Calling it a track may be an overstatement. There are lots of dusty arroyos along the trail, and it’s very easy to get stuck in axle-deep sand. Ty makes the turn and engages four-wheel drive. Even though Brianne has the shocks well tuned, we’re bouncing up and down vigorously.

Two miles down the track, the rocks become too big to drive over or around, so we abandon the Jeep and strike out on foot. We weave our way around the rocks, carefully avoiding the cactus: fuzzy cholla, stout little barrels, and prickly pear. A few straggly mesquite and green-barked paloverde trees cast pathetically small pools of shade.

Tyler has a short metal rod hooked onto his belt with a C-clip.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“You’ll see in a few minutes,” replies Tyler mysteriously.

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