

# THE INFINITY GUARDIANS

*Alarms started sounding in her cockpit – a sign of a potential attack, her shields automatically falling into place. Her comm crackled again. The Byroneans were demanding she identify herself. Identify herself, or be destroyed.*

*For a few milliseconds, Ash dropped the shields around her fighter, and the shield round the crystal. The cockpit alarms heightened in pitch. The Byroneans had clearly recognized the radiation signal already.*

*Her hand left her hair and tightened round the controls. She closed her eyes.*

*And jumped.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. M. Wilson is obsessed with books – she has read thousands and written more than fifty. *The Infinity Files* is her second teen series, channelling her love of all things sci-fi. She lives with her family on the west coast of Scotland.

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*The Extinction Trials*

*The Extinction Trials: Exile*

*The Extinction Trials: Rebel*

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S. M. WILSON



For my three heroes: Kevin, Elliott and Rhys Bain

## CHAPTER ONE

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Ash Yang looked down at the view beneath her and took a deep breath. Silence. From the vast array of ancient artefacts in the Library to the dark space littered with stars above her head, she was surrounded by silence.

Sometimes she had to pinch herself to believe she was actually here. The Library at the End of the Universe was the storage place for the Infinity Files – a range of artefacts and antiquities from throughout the universe, all taken from planets that were either on the brink of extinction and about to be lost for ever, or from places that were about to destroy themselves with war. Some artefacts would be held permanently in the Library, and others would be returned when the time was right.

Ash's eyes scanned the cavernous room below. She'd been here for six months and still knew only a fraction of what was stored here. In one display lay a bright-orange scroll with brown inscriptions. It had caused centuries of fighting

on a distant planet, before she'd retrieved it with her team on their most recent mission. In the mission before that, they'd acquired a tiny microchip, thinner than a strand of hair, that contained coordinates of every major city across numerous continents on Veroagus – allowing them to be targeted with weapons that would wipe out millions. It was now in a safe within the Library walls.

Some aspects of the Library still made her head swirl. Particularly now Orius was no longer here to guide her. All she knew for certain was that, as Guardian, the responsibility for all the artefacts was hers. And only hers – now that Orius, the holographic Keeper of the Library, had finally disintegrated after nine hundred years of service. She hadn't realized just how much of an ache she would continually feel in her chest after he was gone. The space he'd left behind was immense.

From the first day she'd stepped into the Library – on its tiny, lonely moon – he'd guided her work and taught her the roles and responsibilities of the Guardian, in his own unique way. At times Orius's teaching methods had felt like “sink or swim” or “less is more”. But Ash had found her feet. She'd battled to save the Library from a former Guardian named Aldus, who'd gone rogue, and then fought to save her own solar system from an endless war based on theft, misunderstandings and the will to survive.

All along the way she'd learned. On each planet she'd visited as Guardian, Ash had found a Friend, a person to assist her with the task of either retrieving an artefact or returning it. One was here now, helping her in the Library.

Amara was a Callean from Columbia 764. It was a planet that had two distinct species – one Human-like and one lizard-like, the Calleans. Amara stood upright and wore clothes like Ash did, but her forehead was ridged and her skin was covered in a variety of green and brown scales. Her fingers were elongated, with claws instead of nails.

“We've got one,” said Amara, as an image appeared in the air in front of Ash's face, along with the sound of its now-familiar hum. This was information around her next mission. Diagrams and written text telling her exactly what was at stake hovered on the screen right in front of her and Amara's eyes.

Ash scanned the details. Her task was to retrieve an artefact – a stolen crystal – before it caused the imminent destruction of a space port. It had strange magnetic properties, but also let out dangerous levels of radiation, and was currently being pursued by a powerful and ruthless race from the other side of the galaxy.

Her hand went automatically to the bangle at her wrist – her usual method of transport for missions. It had appeared on her wrist when she'd first become Guardian, and Orius had let her know it would only disappear when she died. It had been a bit of a shock but it almost felt like part of her now.

Ash smiled at Amara as Trik and Ezra appeared from their room, obviously responding to the familiar low hum of a new Library mission.

Things had changed at the Library at the End of the Universe. Before Ash, the Guardian had always worked

alone, blindly following the instructions of the Library, which monitored millions of civilizations across the universe and calculated probabilities every nanosecond. But Ash was sceptical enough to realize that even the almighty Library couldn't possibly know everything, and wise enough to know that decisions often had to be rationalized and talked through. And so she'd invited Amara to join her here, as well as two of her fellow space-academy recruits, Trik and Ezra.

Since they'd helped her to stop the war in their home solar system, and a peace treaty had been negotiated, there wasn't much for a fighter pilot to do at the Star Corporation Academy, so they'd jumped at Ash's offer to join her at the Library. Together they made an unlikely quartet, but they worked well as a team. And it felt better – safer – because while Ash liked to act on her instincts, sometimes she knew she had to listen to other opinions. Being Guardian was a big job, and Ash still wasn't entirely sure she was up to it.

She glanced back at the instructions for their new mission. They seemed simple enough. She pulled her hand away from her bangle.

"Let's try something different this time," she said, with a grin on her face.

"Do we just land?" Trik's voice crackled across the comm from his craft.

"I told you we should use the Proteus circle," murmured Ezra from the craft to Ash's right. "This is already too tricky."

Ash bit her lip, scanning the busy space port ahead of them. Quisquilla wasn't exactly a standard port any more. It had started out that way, but over thousands of years it had developed and now resembled interlocking DNA strands, spread throughout the black space ahead.

"It's like a junkyard," said Trik. "Where do we even start?"

Ash couldn't exactly argue. Over years and years, docks, landing platforms, hangars, extra accommodation and connecting walkways had literally been bolted on to the space port, leaving multicoloured, oddly shaped parts hanging in space. Some sections looked as if they were held together with pieces of wire cable. How could those tunnels be safe? And it did look like junk. Even from here, she could see the vibrations of activity on the station freeing the odd tiny piece of metal from its last fastening bolt, to float off into oblivion.

And yet this place was likely home to houses, shops, meeting places, workshops, enforcement compounds, schools – wait, did this place have schools? Did kids actually live in a place like this? Amara was the brains of their team – she didn't often join the other three on missions, instead finding out as much as she could about each destination and briefing the team, to help them avoid trouble. But details about Quisquilla had been a little sketchy. Ash knew that some of the people who ended up here were refugees from distant planets, who'd landed at the space port after hitching a ride, and had nowhere else to go. So the population was probably a mix of many different species. But that was about all the information they had.

Most of the official port traffic flowed in and out of the space docks in neat rows. But that required landing permissions and identification papers – none of which would have been needed if Ash and her companions had stood on the Proteus circle in the Library and used her bangle to instantly transport inside the port, like they were supposed to do.

But it had been over a month since their last mission. The days had been long and they'd all been restless. Which was why Ash had been tempted to try things differently this time.

Without Orius, what happened at the Library was all down to her. So, what if she and her Academy comrades had wanted to take out the super-fighters they'd found stored under the Library? Maybe Ash hadn't become a fighter pilot, but the temptation to fly through space was still in her bones, in her blood. She missed the thrill. The sensation. Any chance she got to be in the pilot's seat again was something she grabbed with both hands. It wasn't often that a mission was actually close enough to do it. So this had been too good an opportunity to miss.

Something caught Ash's gaze. A variety of spacecraft were dotted all around the main port, but she could see another point in the far distance where the occasional ship seemed to disappear out of sight. There must be an alternative landing bay – or at least somewhere to dock.

Ezra must have spotted it too. He sighed. "Do you see that? It's got to be for the smugglers."

She smiled. He knew her well. When they'd trained together for the Star Corporation Academy, he'd always been more cautious than Ash. Skilful, brave, but still cautious. Ezra liked to try and weigh up the odds, which could often be against them. Trik was somewhere in between them both. Full of fire and gusto, he seemed to have been born with an inbuilt enthusiasm for the moment.

They were her friends. Her crew. They were helping Ash navigate the strange new life and destiny that had unfolded for her since she'd been appointed Guardian. And she needed them – even though the decisions were ultimately hers to make.

"Let's go around," she said. "And try not to attract too much attention."

"Smuggling," mused Trik over the comm, as he banked left to follow her. "I'm sure there were some smugglers in my family. Hey, maybe I'll meet some distant relative up here in..."

She could practically see him glancing around them. His voice cut across the comm. "What system are we in again?"

"We're in the Anagos system. Six light years from the Library."

Six light years. How long would that have taken them in a regular ship? In her home planet's technology, it would have taken a few weeks – but only if there were a few wormholes to jump through. With the bangle and Proteus circle it would have taken seconds. But with these ships that they'd found underneath the Library, the journey had taken a little over an hour.

Amara's voice cut across the comm. "Guys, I've found some more information. I know why the Byroneans are so desperate for this crystal."

There was an ominous tone to her voice. "Okay," said Ash, as her eyes scanned the rear side of the space port, watching how the ships seemed to line up at a ramshackle smugglers' dock and then be hooked in by some kind of giant magnetic lure, anchoring them in place while a docking tunnel was attached. "Why?"

"The Infinity Files mention that the crystal can have multiple uses. I can only find details of one, but it's probably the most relevant to your mission."

"I don't like the sound of this," muttered Ezra.

"The crystal is a source of power for the Byroneans," said Amara. "Not only that, when the two in existence come together, it allows the Byroneans to reproduce more of themselves."

Trik started coughing and choking. "Wh...at?"

"They can survive with only one," continued Amara, "but their numbers remain the same. With two, they can reproduce themselves exponentially. The Byroneans are notorious for being powerful and dangerous, with no mercy or empathy. Just imagine the damage they could do across the universe if they could create a never-ending army of themselves."

There were a few seconds of silence as Ash swallowed nervously. "So let's assume they already have one. We'd better find this second crystal quickly."

## CHAPTER TWO

A hiss came across the comm. "Vessel BC679, what is your landing clearance code?" said a high-pitched nasal voice.

Ash flinched, knowing that BC679 was the identifier for her craft.

She switched on the screens in front of her, to see Trik raising his eyebrows and Ezra giving the smallest shake of his head. I-told-you-so was written all over his expression.

Amara cut back in. Her voice was smooth and perfectly in control. She was the most unflappable of the team: practical, even when she sometimes had to relay worrying information.

"I have a few you can try, Ash. Sending them through now."

Ash's screen flashed with an array of 44-digit codes. "Where did you find these?" she murmured in wonder.

"I've been scanning channels in and around Quisquilla since you left," she said. "It's a smugglers' haven – and even