



TAMIA  
by

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters places,  
and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to  
persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who contributed to this novel's completion and accuracy, no matter how great or small the contribution. To my family, who spent endless hours listening to me bounce ideas around, and particularly to my brother, Matt, and my father, Don, who answered countless annoying questions and provided technical and mechanical expertise where mine was lacking. I'd also like to thank all the individuals whose websites provided in-depth sources for military background on such things as SEALs, weaponry, and military justice. To my friends, Philip and Tina, who answered my endless questions on life in the Orient.

I have to say that my hardest challenge was in altering the world as we know it enough to serve my purposes without taking away from what makes humanity truly unique among all life on this planet – the ability to change our own fates. It's important, in looking to the future, to not forget the past, or our humanity and decency. Nor is it impossible to overcome adversity, no matter how terrible it seems. This is the message I hope I have managed to convey, in Tamia; that no one is beyond hope of saving.

Below, I have listed a few of my research sources. I would like to thank these authors for providing their wisdom, and point out that all errors, either accidental or deliberate, in Tamia are completely of my own making.

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## JUST ONE MORE TIME

It's been a long time,  
Since I felt this pain,  
It's been a long time,  
Since I held onto a dream;

I've been living on the run,  
And hiding from the sun,  
Alone in this dark night of mine,  
Until I have to reach out, and hold on,  
Just one more time;

I've watched my dreams fade,  
And my life dies every day,  
I'm a captive to my pain,  
And all alone with my fears;

I've locked away the sun,  
And told the moon that I'm done,  
As Hell closes over me,  
And my heart screams to hold you,  
Just one more time;

But comes a quiet voice,  
Within my haunted heart,  
To remind me that, in love this true,  
Forever is just one more time.



## CHAPTER ONE

Damn. Not again. Frustrated, Captain Tamia Kuan shoved a honey-tinted hand through her dark, shoulder-length hair and muttered a few choice epithets under her breath as she studied her Flight Tank's repair estimates, scrolling across the diagnostic terminal's screen. Damn thing wasn't worth the money it cost to keep it flying. Mahogany eyes narrowed furiously, she sat back, her fingers already working over the touchpad screen as she inwardly cursed out the piece of trash. Five hundred and thirty-six Mobile Armored Flight Tanks in the unit, and she had to get stuck with the proverbial "bucket o' bolts." Hell, she was the flipping Flight Commander, and she was riding around in a death trap of a machine.

"Problems, Captain?" An amused tenor voice asked from behind her.

She shook her dark head, but didn't turn to look at him. "No, sir. Just three-ten again. Stupid thing's a waste of time and money to repair."

She glanced at him when he didn't move on. She counted Colonel Rodney Bennet in her small number of friends, but for all his good looks, she'd fortunately never felt any attraction for the spit-and-polished Marine who was also her boss. She didn't like perfect; David had been living proof of that.

Tamia shook herself sharply, dislodging the painful memories. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Central Command's issuing recruiting rosters again. This one came in through orderly, and they said it's for the Flight leaders."

"Will do," she said, plopping the sheaf down beside her and returning her attention to the diagnostic terminal. A dark glower marred her features as she calculated



how long she'd be stuck fixing a machine she didn't even like.

“Yo, Cap! What’re you still doing here?”

Tamia glanced at her digital wristwatch as the familiar voice echoed off the concrete hanger floor and metal undercarriage of her Tank. Muttering a sharp expletive, she slid out from underneath the machine and squinted up at the dark man standing at her feet.

“Christ, Gibbons! Why didn’t someone *tell* me it was so late?”

Lieutenant John Gibbons grinned, displaying the gap in his front teeth, from a Tank accident two years ago. “You looked like you were havin’ too much fun to stop, Cap.”

Tamia snorted in response as she rose to her feet and shut down the diagnostic terminal’s power grid. As she watched the green glow slowly recede from her Tank, she sighed, rubbing her face wearily.

“What the hell am I doing here, John? I never put in for Tanker duty,” she muttered, wiping her hands on a grease rag. “I’m a ground-pounder, not a flipping mechanic! I’m supposed to be slogging around in the mud, not scooting around under a piece of machinery!”

Gibbons laughed, leaning his five-foot-ten inch frame against the prone Tank.

“Bureaucrats, probably. How’d you ever get mixed up with the military, anyhow?”

“The draft,” she replied quietly, as the memory of her first look at a battlefield, only four weeks after her number came up, flashed through her mind. It hadn’t really

seemed that much different from the streets of Old 'Frisco, except that she hadn't been drugged out of her mind anymore. She'd been terrified. Tamia swallowed hard at the memory. "They'd never have taken a doped up street punk like me if it hadn't been for the Divide."

Gibbons made a face. "Nasty business. I was glad to miss most of it. Got in on the tail end, two months before the Atlantic Treaty. How much action did you see?"

Tamia closed her eyes, trying to block out the gruesome images that invaded at that query. She'd spent a long time now trying to block out the years of horror no human being should have had to endure. "I got drafted in September of 2109, just three months into the war," she said quietly, her gaze fixed on the rag in her hands. Seven years of her life, a place deep in her died a little more inside every day. She shuddered. "I'd thought it was a way out of Hell, a way to get off the streets that were slowly killing me. I was never so wrong in my life. It wasn't a way out; it was simply a trade, one Hell for another. I spent three weeks drying out from the drugs, and four weeks learning how to stay alive. Ten minutes after our first drop into battle, I would have traded my soul to be high again."

"Can't say I'd have blamed you, Cap," Gibbons said quietly. "From what little I saw of the Divide, Hell wouldn't even *begin* to describe taking years of that."

Tamia smiled wearily, still lost in her memories. "David and I thought we were invincible. We'd survived gang life, with its low life expectancy. We were so sure we'd survive the Divide, too."

"And you did –"

"But David didn't." Tamia closed her eyes, seeing dark, angry eyes in a scowling face. David had been her boyfriend for years before the Divide, whether she liked to

admit it or not. She had owed him tears, when he'd died, but she'd had none to give him. She'd come to hate him, by then. "He was killed in the Easter Raids on Rio Bantos in '10. Took a Kriomite bullet in the head."

Gibbons whistled. "Those make a nasty mess; but I thought they were illegal."

She shook her head. "Not back then. They banned the manufacture of Kriomite bullets near the end of the war, when it looked like the damned things might end up on the streets."

"Must've been tough, boss."

She shrugged. "I was no stranger to war, even back then. I was born a couple of months before the Reaver War began. In Tibet, that was practically a death sentence all on its own. Everything I can remember about that time feels like Hell." She scowled. "If it hadn't been for my grandfather, I'd be a brainwashed Chinese slave, by now."

He gave her a curious look. "So, if you were drafted, and never put in for Tanker duty, how'd you end up here?"

She snorted a laugh. "Beats the hell out of me, John. But, I'll trade all this back in an instant to get back on the ground!"

Tamia sighed. At least she wasn't involved in too many skirmishes anymore. The Divide had ended two and a half years ago, with the Atlantic Treaty. The Commonwealth of Euro-American Developed States, or CEADS, had remained fairly strong after the war was over, but the Council of Separate Economic Countries, COSEC, had splintered into little, warring factions that the more advanced CEADS nations pulled strings in. There were still hostile conflicts between former CEADS and COSEC parties, which had led to the establishment of the Equatorial Patrol a year ago. The Patrol was funded by the Neutral States, those nations that had stayed completely out of the Divide.

The EP kept an uneasy peace between former enemies, but Tamia didn't count on it lasting. She'd watched too many friends die during the Divide, including David.

Tamia winced. She and David had been lovers, though they'd easily had their differences. They'd been as opposite as two people could be, with nothing but their years together in 'Frisco in common, but that had been enough, in war, even if David'd had a way of attracting enemies rather than friends.

She winced again in guilt. She hadn't thought of David in a long time; didn't think of him much at all anymore. He'd been a fairly easy lover to forget, especially as they'd hardly been what she'd called *close*.

Everything had changed for her, anyway, after David had died at Rio Bantos. She barely even recalled his death, most days, and when she *did* remember, it was with the dispassion of an objective observer, and some small relief. But the battle... oh, yeah, she remembered *that* all too well.

Pinned down inside the communications outpost for nearly forty-eight hours their squad survived a COSEC mortar unit keeping them jittery from shelling, and a sniper team in the Columbian jungle around them making escape impossible. They'd already lost half the squad to those damned snipers. It was a goat fuck, clear through. They weren't even supposed to be there; but some brainiac at the War Department had decided to send Troopers in to do Military Intelligence work in one of the border's hottest spots. It'd been a suicide mission.

Their squad leader had decided to make a backdoor break from the outpost when their supplies had begun to run low. But the break would have taken them deeper into hostile territory, and their morale was already dangerously low. David, never one for following orders when it required risking his neck, had argued with Captain Bryant, just

before a sniper's Kriomite bullet had torn through his skull.

Tamia'd lain there in the trench; her eyes squeezed shut against the knowledge that she was going to die, either way. She'd just been getting ready to stand on her already-wounded leg and at least go down fighting, when she'd heard the unmistakable roar of thermal torps striking the jungle nearby, and then the glorious sound of silence from the mortar locations. And, when she'd opened her eyes next, she'd found herself staring into the grease-painted face of the man David would never have been.

He'd been a Naval SEa, Air, Land operative, with cobalt-blue eyes and a worried frown that had gripped her heart, and never let go. In the years that had followed, she'd told herself it was just gratitude, and maybe hero-worship, that she'd felt; but those stern self-lectures hadn't dimmed her obsession with him. She'd sought out every function he'd ever attended, just for the chance to watch him. She'd conned a friend in Military Intelligence into slipping her copies of his service record and Internal Affairs profile, and studied them avidly. She'd watched Richard Carinson from a distance, and fascination had slowly turned to lust, and then to compassion, as she'd learned about the man behind the military machine.

Sadness and pride mingled within her chest. Commander Richard Benjamin Carinson had, by the time the Divide reached its height in 2114, been decorated beyond his class of service. He'd retired from active duty shortly afterward, and formed a pseudo-military branch of his own. Formed without any direct government chain of command, the Commandos were a very elite group, very covert, and very outside proper military channels. Sure, everyone knew they existed, and there wasn't a man or woman in the military that didn't have dreams of joining that outfit, even if most of its members didn't appear to have military records. But not very much else was known about the

Commandos. Whatever it held for them, public glory was not one of the benefits. That suited Tamia just fine. She had little interest in fame -- she'd seen what it did to people as a child. All she wanted was to have control of her own life, and death, back in her own hands, and if anyone could offer her that, the Commandos could.

Looking up, she found Gibbons watching her worriedly.

"You okay, Cap? You spaced out there for a second."

She smiled tiredly. "Yeah, I'm okay. Guess six hours staring at a leaky hydro pump fried my brain."

He laughed. "That'd do it!" He pushed away from the Tank and strode toward the bay door, calling over his shoulder, "See ya tomorrow, boss!"

Tamia waved after him, grinning at his seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy. Shaking her head wryly, Tamia turned to reach for the list Bennet had given her. Might as well find out what they wanted now. As she scanned the first line, however, her eyes nearly popped out of her head. *Attention: Command Com. Enclosed is request from Commander Carinson for new recruit. Contains list of possible candidates and service records. One volunteer with above-average interest requested. Distribute to commanding officers of listed units.*

Her heart leaping into her throat, Tamia flipped open the folder, her eyes already searching the headings on the sheets within. *Beta Command. Air Flight Delay Sector. Quatron Trooper Squadron.* Ah, there it was. 103rd MAFT Division. Holding her breath, she moved her eyes down the short list of names. One name leapt out at her, causing her to release her breath in a small cry. *Kuan, Tamia.* Leaping from her seat, she rushed toward the Colonel's office.

"Sir!" She cried as she burst into the room. "Sir, I need to speak with you!"

Bennet glanced up from his paperwork. "Captain," he acknowledged with a nod. "What is it?"

"This list, sir," she replied, holding it for him to see. "Colonel Bennet, I'd like to volunteer for the transfer."

"What transfer?" His brows knit as he took the list. "What are you...?" She watched his eyes widen as he scanned it. When he looked up at her again, his eyes were troubled. "Are you sure?"

"Sir," she said evenly, pulling herself up tall, "with all due respect, I'm a Trooper, not a paper pusher, or a grease monkey. This is my chance to get back where I belong."

He sighed, putting down the list and gesturing her to the chair opposite him. "Captain Kuan, I realize how much you want back out in the field with ground combat. Not only as your commanding officer, but also as your friend. Hell, Tamia, I wish I could give you the commission of a Troop commander - you more than deserve it. And yes, your credentials are impressive, to say the least, but you're one hell of a Flight leader, and I need you here. I can't submit you."

"Sir," she responded dully, feeling her heart beginning to sink, "I have to have a chance, at least. What if they need someone with my background? Besides, three-ten's trashed anyway. If I fly again, I'll come back in a body bag. Please, sir, I have to know that I tried."

A tired smile inched across his face. "I know how important this is to you, Tamia. I'll submit you as willing. But," his smile disappeared, "if you're not picked, I expect you to file for another Tank, and be back out there, leading my Flight."

"Yes, sir!" She replied smartly, rising and giving him a salute. Deep inside, she was sure she'd never see the cockpit of a Flight Tank again.

As she walked out of Bennet's office, a grin broke across her face, and she felt as if she was walking on air. In almost no time, she covered the distance between Bennet's office and her own bay. There, she gave her Tank an once-over, then, for the Hell of it, stuck her tongue out at it. The squat-bodied things had always reminded her of some repulsive metal gnome from some seriously warped fairy tale. She didn't know who was responsible for their original conception, but whoever it was had been one sick puppy.

A grin broke across her face, then. If her luck held, she wouldn't ever have to look at one of these beasts again.

"Yo! Captain! Heard you're lookin' to trade your Tank for boots!" A deep baritone voice boomed behind her. "Bad deal, if you ask me!"

A wry grin spread across Tamia's face. "News travels faster around here than these lugs, doesn't it?"

She swung around then, to look up at the man. Lieutenant Scott Leysenhuk was not a small man, by anyone's standards. Standing six-foot, eight inches and weighing upwards of three hundred pounds, he was nearly as massive as a Tank himself. The sheer muscle mass of the man made him imposing -- the kind of man you wouldn't want to meet in a back alley. But Tamia knew her second in command better than that. She knew what an absolute pussycat he was, and what a vicious tiger he could be. On the battlefield, Scott was a terror, a born Tanker who, in Tamia's opinion at least, should have been the unit commander. But once he was out of the cockpit, the man was too easy-going for his own good. That was the reason he kept getting passed over for promotion, in spite of her recommendations. That was why he kept losing the commander's seat. He wasn't aggressive enough to the brass. Well, the brass never saw the man in action.

"Yeah," she answered his question and her own. "Yeah, I'm tryin' to get my feet



back on the ground, where they belong. If all goes right, this'll be *your* baby by tomorrow evening." She jerked her thumb at the Tank.

"Gee, thanks, boss." He laughed then, and shook his blond head. "Naw, three-ten's headin' for the scrap yard, whether or not you get the commission. Maintenance saw the diagnostic printout. They're declarin' it 'unsafe.' I was just in informin' the Colonel, and he told me you were lookin' for a transfer anyway." He sighed then. "We're gonna miss you, boss. You belong in a Tank..."

"Like a fish belongs on a bicycle!" Tamia finished for him. "Save the pretty speeches, Scott. We both know I'm out of my element here. I remember you clipping my ears good several times when I was a rookie. No, the hundred 'n' third needs a commander who knows these damn things inside out, and loves them. That's you, not me. I was made for the grunt work."

"Bull. With your brains and reflexes, you could have been anything. I still don't understand why you went to the Troopers to begin with. That's not considered a prime career choice, Boss."

She laughed as she gathered up papers off her desk and stacked them in a drawer. "I was a doped-up street punk when I was drafted. They don't let dopers choose where they go; we're cannon fodder. And it was something I liked. I was used to living on the edge, and there're few places closer to the edge than the Trooper lists. Only Special Forces are closer, but *they* don't take shit-faced street kids. This is the first chance I've had at Special Ops and I'm not letting it pass me by."

His brow wrinkled in worry. "If you want to die so bad, just stay where you are. Three-ten's gonna suicide soon enough."

She glanced up, and stopped. "I didn't say I want to die. I just like to know I have

control over when and where I die. I want to know that my life rests in my own skill, not the finicky wiring of a machine.” She shrugged then as she grabbed up her jacket and headed for the door. "Too much of my grandfather's teaching, I guess."

And, as she walked away from the hanger, Tamia knew that, Kuron’s teachings or not, she was going to do everything in her power to make that slot in the Commandos hers.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Tamia's shoulders slumped, and she regarded herself critically in the polished black surface of the Pelham Officer’s Club bar. A small, tight laugh forced its way from her mouth. She looked like Hell. Her efforts to clean the grease and grime from her face

and hands and smooth her dishevelled hair had failed miserably. She shook her head then, another laugh bubbling out. What did she expect to look like, after scooting around under a horizontal Tank all day?

As she rubbed at a particularly annoying stain on her forehead, she had the distinct impression of eyes on her. She turned her head slowly, surreptitiously looking for the perpetrator. That one, sitting at the second table on her right. God, was he huge. Built like a linebacker, with a crop of regulation-style fiery red hair, he looked dangerous. Yep, he was dangerous, she decided as his steel grey eyes bored into her again. When he saw she'd noticed him, he rose slowly from his seat and started toward her. Tamia turned back to her beer, but every fibre of her remained focused on the man walking toward her. When a man like that looked at you, he was after one of two things -- either a fight, or a fuck. While she was more than inclined to give him the former, regardless of what he really wanted, it wouldn't look good for the 103<sup>rd</sup>'s Flight Commander to be sitting in the brig tomorrow morning. She kept forgetting she wasn't a Trooper anymore.

"Captain Kuan?" A deep voice that could only belong to the behemoth asked.

"Yeah, that's me. Who're you?"

"I'm Agent Frank Harlin, United States Drug Enforcement Administration --"

"Lovely, so you know my record. I'm clean."

He made a startled sound. "Ah... Right. Actually, I'm not here for that reason."

"Wonderful," she replied, turning to look at him. "Then just what the flying fuck *are* you here for?"

"This," he said simply, reaching into his coat.

Reflexively, Tamia's hand moved to clamp on his wrist. He wasn't going to pull a piece, or a badge, here. The twinkle of amusement in his eyes stopped her. What the

hell...?

Harlin finished removing his hand. In it was a small manila envelope, which he placed on the bar beside her. "Captain Tamia Kuan, it's my duty, and questionable honor, to inform you that you've been chosen for a selection interview for the Commandos. This envelope contains the necessary information. Please read it."

Tamia's jaw dropped. Finally, regaining her composure, she croaked, "Couldn't you have just *told* me who you were?" At his laugh, she shrugged. "Oh, well. How about I buy you a drink, Harlin? To make up for being an ass."

He laughed again. "Actually, I was expecting that reaction, but hey, I'm never one to turn down a free brew, Captain."

An hour later, Tamia was alone at the bar again. Her eyes went to the envelope still lying beside her. A selection interview, eh? God, she didn't believe it! After years of betrayals and shit-faced beatings, she hadn't thought she had any luck left. But an interview... damn, that was good to hear! Best thing she'd heard since David died.

Tamia winced. What was this? For some reason, ever since she'd started thinking about the Commandos earlier, David kept popping to mind. Was she actually feeling *guilty* about taking this chance? It wasn't like she would have felt guilty for taking a career change when he'd still been alive. She laughed darkly. God, David always did bring out the worst in her.

"Here's to you, you filthy sonuvabitch," she muttered, lifting her glass in a mock toast. "I hope you're rotting in Hell."

She definitely needed to get out of here.

*Go home*, she told herself severely. If she stayed here, thinking about David,

she'd soon drink herself under the table, which she couldn't afford to do, now. She had a busy day tomorrow. Slipping off the barstool, she picked up the envelope, looked at it, laughed again, and headed for the door. An interview. God, she felt like a kid at Christmas!

As Tamia flipped on the lights to her apartment, she stopped, frowning. Lying in the middle of her bed was an envelope roughly the same size and type as the one Harlin had handed her. Who the hell had gotten access to her apartment?

It struck her immediately that whoever it was could still be there, and she reached to flip the lights back off. Letting the door slide closed behind her, as though she had left again, she slipped her Glock-44 from its holster as she attuned her ears for any strange sounds in the apartment. Damn. Whoever was doing this was a first-class idiot! Moving cautiously in the dark room, she moved to the closet door, and pushed the touchpad to open it. Nothing. Next, she checked the bathroom and kitchenette, with the same results. Apparently, whoever had left her the envelope hadn't stuck around after all.

Moving back to the door, Tamia flipped the lights back on and slipped off her jacket, tossing it across the nearest chair. Might as well see what was so important. Slipping off her shoes, she crossed to the bed and sat down, dropping her gun on the bed. Her hand stopped halfway to the envelope as her eyes fell on the gun, and she reached to touch the plastic casing as memories flooded over her.

She'd claimed it as spoils after David had wasted a Federal Marshall in 2105, not the first gun she'd ever laid her hands on, or the last, but definitely the one she'd liked best. Standard issue to all Special Forces by the middle of the 21st century, the Glock-44 had soon become the survival weapon issued to most military and federal protectionary

forces. Tamia couldn't agree more with the policy. God knew, that pistol had saved her life more times than she could count while she'd run with the Panthers between '05 and '09.

Of course, she'd made a few adjustments of her own over the years. She'd put her growing assembly and marksmanship skills into the old Glock, knowing that it was the only thing between her and a nasty death on the streets. She'd had to find a new case for it after the old one had been cracked in a shoot-out near the old Golden Gate Park in '06. She'd swapped an old Beretta with a missing recoil spring for a special polymer technology, or polytech, Glock casing.

The rest she'd far more easily altered. Cannibalising other weapons she'd acquired over the years, she'd replaced all thirty-five -- thirty-six if she counted the firing pin assembly -- components of the Glock with newer, non-metal parts. The only things still metal about the Glock were the bullets. And, since Basic, she'd managed to alter the firing mechanism to shoot everything from the standard .9mm bullet to a biopellet. Every piece of that gun held a piece of her life, a memory she couldn't let go, and so the Glock stayed with her, even through the evolutions of weaponry since the Divide had started. She'd refused all the newer model Colts and Berettas for that old Glock.

Tamia sighed as her gaze travelled from the gun to the envelope. No more stalling. Picking up the envelope, she examined it, her brow furrowing. There was no return address. Strange. Turning it over in her hands, she drew a deep breath, then opened the envelope and pulled out the contents -- a single sheet of paper with a generic military letterhead. The letter was neatly typed, but the words froze her blood.

*To: Captain Tamia Kuan, USMC*

*It has recently come to our attention that on 14 September 2104, Tamia Kuan did wilfully and illegally enter the territory of the United States of America from Socialist China, bearing neither proper identification nor authorization. The United States Bureau of Civilian Justice further holds warrant for the arrest and incarceration of one Mia Ku, a.k.a. Tamia Kuan, on the charge of murder of a federal officer, specifically one Timothy Malcolm, United States Marshall's office.*

*However, due to commendation and service rendered during the recent war, the United States Department of Military Justice, in accordance with the Department of Defence and the War Department, stands prepared to defer all charges, providing that said accused accepts a special undercover assignment on the War Department's behalf, per instructions as follow:*

*1. The agent will work to expose a possible threat to National Security that exists within the boundaries of the United States Special Forces sector by: (a) uncovering the missions and objectives of the Special Forces organization known as the Commandos, (b) reporting said information to designated parties within the War Department, and (c) destroying all files held by said organization in regards to the War Department or its personnel....*

The letter dropped from Tamia's hand, and she stared numbly at the wall. She couldn't. She had to. Her life was on the line here. But how could she? She'd waited all her career for a shot at Special Forces, and the Commandos...! That was the dream of every Trooper since 2114! To expose the Commandos, to dig into their work and report back to the War Department... that was a flagrant betrayal of every code she'd ever striven to uphold. But, if she didn't, she'd face deportation, at the very least, and more likely death, or life imprisoned on Mars, if one took the liberty of calling that living.

Her expression hardening, Tamia crumpled up the letter and stuffed it into the bottom of the footlocker beside her bed. She knew what she'd do. It wasn't like she had

much of a choice.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

Jogging down the three flights of stairs – didn't these people believe in elevators?  
– leading down into the Commando compound known as the Underground, winded  
Tamia when she finally reached the door at the bottom. In moments, she'd either make



or break her chance. She only hoped she wouldn't screw it up too badly. Inside the conference room now, she looked around, seeing nothing here that even resembled a normal conference room. The only table in the room was a large oak one, comprising roughly three-quarters of the room's entire space. It was almost perfectly round, with ten chairs around it. Papers, maps, and various clippings tacked here and there on the walls, or scattered across the table. File cabinets and boxes were jammed against the wall and into the corners. It was, surprisingly, a very organized clutter. Everything appeared placed in some sort of order. Only, Tamia couldn't even begin to make sense of it. These people were obviously of the busy variety, with little time for the spatial inconvenience of multiple offices and storerooms.

"Admiring the view?"

Tamia spun to confront the source of that mild tenor, and her eyes widened, even as her heart went into overdrive. It was *him*! She'd been seeing those cobalt eyes in her dreams ever since Rio Bantos, when the SEALs had pulled her squad out of their pinned-down position behind enemy lines. She'd opened her eyes in that Hell, to find this man bending over her like a guardian angel, his dark hair shining in the sunlight and those intense blue eyes worried as he'd assessed her wounds. She'd given him a piece of her heart, laying there in that jungle mud, even knowing she'd probably never see him again.

"It's an honor, sir, to be given this chance!" She said briskly, straightening into a smart salute.

Commander Richard Carinson's brows knit as he studied her, and confusion flickered in his eyes. She wouldn't be stunned if he didn't even remember her, Tamia decided glumly. Last time he'd seen her, she'd been covered in jungle muck, sweat, and blood, and her hair had been shorn close to her head in keeping with battlefield

regulations. She'd been dirty and smelly, and her mahogany eyes had probably been bloodshot with lack of sleep, back then. Nervously, she barely restrained herself from smoothing a hand over her dark hair, now hanging loose to her collar, and checking her uniform for grease or dirt she already knew wasn't there as his cobalt eyes raked over her, making her skin tingle.

"At ease, Captain. I see we've got a lot of ground to cover. Obviously, you were never briefed."

She shot him a bemused glance. "Briefed, sir?"

He gestured to a chair at the table. "Have a seat, Tamia, and let me explain how we operate here at the Underground."

Her brow furrowing further, she did as he said, sitting rigidly in the chair he indicated. She was nervous as Hell, and she figured she had a right to be. She was sitting next to the man who'd filled her steamiest fantasies for the past eight years, and she was terrified of what he might think of her. She wanted, at very least, for him to be impressed with her service record, even if she knew he was probably disgusted by her personal history. Her heart fluttered anxiously, aware that her entire future rested in the hands of a man who could crush her completely, if he wanted to. He, however, clearly wasn't aware of her turmoil. He plopped himself down in the chair next to her, nonchalantly propping his booted feet on the table, causing her gaze to fly to his face, shocked. Never before had she witnessed such ambivalence from a unit commander. He could tell that, too, judging by the grin that spread across his face.

"Okay, Tamia, let's get a few things straight. First off, you wouldn't be here, at the Underground, if you hadn't been picked. You would've been briefed on all of this, in proper military fashion, except that you weren't with your unit at oh-seven-thirty hours

this morning, were you? I was prepared for this."

She sat up straighter. "*How* did...?"

His laugh cut her off. "I checked out your unit this morning. Bennet said you'd gone to Headquarters. You were chosen because you showed more than a cursory interest in Spec. Ops., and your qualifications were perfect."

She glanced away, stunned. It was rather obvious that very little escaped those deep blue eyes. That thought made her nervous as hell. If he ever found out...

"Secondly," he was saying, "my name isn't 'Commander' or 'sir', or even 'Commander, sir'. My name is Rick. You want to talk to me, use it. We operate as a single unit around here during Red Codes and missions. There's no time for pulling rank and bullshit like that. Hell, most of the unit's never held any rank - but then, you already know that. We have names. Use them. None of that 'sir' stuff, okay? I got more than enough of that as a SEAL - I don't need it here." She nodded numbly, wondering out how much more she'd learn that she hadn't expected. "There's one form of protocol around here. Your seat. Get used to it - it's the only one you get. We're our own little 'Round Table', if you will - each of us has a seat. Since you're the last member, you get the *Siege Perilous*. Enjoy."

He shot her a grin, and her heart stuttered. "There's not much else. Oh, you'll be glad to note you've entered the 'retired' lists from active duty. Can't have both jobs, after all. You will be required to re-sign the Fertility Code, however. That's our only red tape. And you can lose the uniform, too. I'll get our quartermaster, Kathy, to provide you with your mission suits, but otherwise, we stick to civvies unless we have to work on a military base for any reason. Now, I'll show you around the compound, and then leave you in your quarters to go over the regs. in peace and quiet. Your stuff should be in

transfer by now. I have someone picking it up at depot as we speak." He stood then, prompting her to rise. With an endearingly lopsided grin, he said, "Welcome to the best damned unit in the world, Tamia."

She found herself grinning back at him. "Thanks. I've got a few questions, though."

"Shoot," he said equably, half-sitting on the tabletop, and crossing his arms over his chest.

She drew a breath, gathering her thoughts even as she battled the surge of desire that rushed through her. She might want him, but she already knew she couldn't *have* him. She wasn't going to embarrass herself. "You said that everyone has codenames. Are they open knowledge?"

He grinned. "That's easy. Inside the compound, yeah. You remember mine from the Divide, I take it?"

She nodded, swallowing hard as her heart stalled at the flicker of heat she thought she saw in his eyes. So he did remember her. "Ace."

"Everyone else has codenames, known to everyone in the unit. Outside of here, unless we're on mission, don't call someone by their codename. If it's on a mission, it's forbidden to use someone's real name. Any more?"

"What do I use?"

He flipped open a file folder on the table and handed it to her. "I came up with one based on your stats. Welcome to the party, Blade."

It took her a moment to realize what he was referring to. Her weapons skills. Her martial arts training had extended to edged weapons, and she'd perfected a deadly form while on the streets of 'Frisco. She'd had a perfect score on her edged-weapons use in

Basic. Her Drill Instructors, and later commanders, had called her more lethal with a blade than a gun, which was no light praise, considering her high marksmanship scores with both conventional and thermchem weapons. She grinned in response to the almost ironic codename she'd been given. "I like it."

"Thought you might," he said easily, straightening. "Now, if you don't have any more questions, we'll be on our way."

"Where?"

"Around the compound. This place is larger than you think. Building underground has definite advantages in space, and, believe me, there *are* areas you won't want to just stumble into," Rick said as he crossed the room toward an inner door.

"Coming?"

Curious, Tamia followed him. She'd never seen the inner workings of a Special Operations unit. Now *her* unit, she reminded herself with a small shake of her head.

As the door slid open, Rick gestured inside. "This is our communications hub. On assignment, we report back here on our current status, on what we've dug up or been doing. Usually, the computer records and correlates the calls. We don't always have the manpower to leave someone here."

Tamia shook her head in amusement as she stepped into the small, soundproofed room. "What a collection!"

Her eyes scanned the room's contents again – video phone arrays, an old desktop cased computer, a Secured Automatic Transfer linkage system, satellite imagery computers, and even an archaic black box - a field radio unit from the late twentieth.

"Looks more like a museum than the Comm center for the world's most elite unit."

Rick laughed. "Don't let any of it fool you. Walter, our techie, is damned proud

of this room. He calls it his masterpiece. Not a single communication or movement slips past us when we're looking for it."

Tamia ran her fingers reverently along the field unit's black plastic case. "I'm amazed some of them still work."

Rick grinned. "Walter'd be heartbroken to hear that. But, honestly, I am, too, at times. Anyway, most of it rarely gets used. We rely primarily on the newer equipment for day-to-day monitoring. Walter's probably the only one who knows how to use most of the older stuff."

Tamia smiled, nodding, as she looked toward the vid-phone array, thermoscanners and telemetric systems. "Nice place."

"This is only the start. C'mon."

As they stepped into the corridor outside the conference room, Tamia looked curiously at her guide. "How big *is* this place?"

"The official response is 'that's classified.' The truth? I'm not sure myself. We couldn't just survey the spot, after all. Somewhere between a block and a half and three blocks, I'd say, not including the launch bay for our mission vehicle," he answered as they passed the elevator.

Tamia let out a whistle. "Big place."

Rick nodded as he stopped just around the corner, outside another door. "This is the Arena. Fully programmed for combat simulation and programmable for any scenario."

Tamia nodded. Most military and pseudo-military installations were equipped with Arenas. They were reliable combat training simulators developed during the Polar Wars to train troops to withstand the harsh polar climate. Since then, a wide range of

simulations used and, in recent years, Arenas were equipped for Special Forces use, becoming entirely programmable.

"Gym's right there," Rick's voice cut through Tamia's thoughts. She looked to where he pointed, and her eyes widened. The gym was located almost directly across the corridor from the Arena.

"That's an odd place for a gym," she commented.

"Not really. There's a full underwater simulation chamber directly below our feet, and it doubles as the gym's pool when it's not involved in combat exercises."

"Underwater...? Isn't that dangerous? The Arenas use electrical waves to create battle zones and opponents."

A half-smile twitched on Rick's lips. "That's classified."

Tamia grinned. "Official line again?"

"Yep. Actually, though, it's amazing how little revamping it took to get the systems to move from electrical to projection impact."

Tamia's eyes lit. "That's how you do it!"

He gave her a grin, then turned and headed back down the corridor. They passed a door labelled Comm., and Tamia's brow furrowed a moment. "This an outer entrance to Communications?"

"Yeah, that goes to Comms, and *this*," he stopped briefly before another door, this one unlabelled, "is our security room, for intelligence communications and the like. Anything dealing with intelligence is kept here; and yes, we do interrogate when we feel it necessary."

Rick turned and went to the door opposite, tapping in a code at the access terminal before he laid his hand on the access pad, explaining, "Everything in the compound is

coded to the genetic signatures of the team. The scanners in the door pads pick up fingerprints and genetic readings of anyone who touches them and runs it through the central computer. We're all in the Scanbanks, but no one else. Anyone who isn't a member of the team who tries to get in triggers a lock-down and activates the alarm. No one gets in here that we don't know about."

Tamia followed him, her brow furrowed. Why the coding on an unmarked door? She was about to ask, until they stepped into the corridor on the other side. The door to her immediate left labelled with a teardrop-shaped symbol and the word *restricted*.

"Biochems."

Rick nodded. "Standard biochem arsenal. We also have a lab in the infirmary, in case we come up against an agent we can't ID."

Tamia looked to the right, and saw another door also *restricted*. On it was also a small flame symbol. "Thermochem, and standard arsenal as well, right?"

"You got it." He headed down the corridor then. "C'mon. I'll show you to your quarters."

Five minutes later, Tamia tossed her uniform jacket over the arm of the sofa in her quarters, and dumped the thin volume of regulations that Rick had given her on the coffee table. She still couldn't believe she'd been chosen so easily. Hadn't they reviewed her records? Or didn't it matter? She sighed heavily as she opened her bedroom door to find the boxes that contained her life stacked neatly inside. Looked like she'd be doing some unpacking, later. For now, she was going to take Rick's advice, and lose the dress uniform she hated anyway. Walking over to the boxes, she flipped one open and rummaged around until she found a comfortable, form-fitting bodysuit in dark brown and a tan shirt. Stripping out of the uncomfortable uniform, she donned the other outfit, and



sighed with relief. Oh, yeah, she decided with a grin, she was going to like this new job a lot. Her smile collapsed into nervousness again, as she remembered that she'd yet to meet the rest of the people she'd be working with. Rick had said he'd introduce her to the rest of the team that evening at the command meeting. That meant only Rick knew her record. She couldn't believe a man of his military background wouldn't fully screen each new recruit.

With another sigh, Tamia plopped down on the sofa, reaching into her bag to retrieve a file. Well, even if Carinson hadn't thoroughly researched her, *she* had done her homework on him. Tamia smiled wryly as she flipped open the file in her hand. Yeah, she'd read up on what made the Commandos tick. Every shred of information she'd ever been able to get her hands on was in this file.

The top sheet was what her research into military history databases had dug up. The Commandos had been established as a Special Operations unit that, technically, didn't exist, per Carinson's specifications. Their funding came from a Special Ops account under the CIA and Internal Affairs, though the exact account was classified. Their contract, however, declared them free agents at any point when either the military or political branches of the government attempted to dictate "law and policy outside of the specifications agreed upon in mission contract." In other words, if the brass started handing them shit, the Commandos were free to call off the party. They had, however, agreed to one military policy in exchange for continued access to top-secret military information. All members of the team had to sign and affirm the Fertility Code.

The Commandos' base was funded and supplied by an anonymous private contractor, and the base's location was unknown by even the Intelligence community. Tamia had some guesses as to who the "private contractor" was, but she couldn't say for

certain. Rick Carinson had called in a lot of favors for this entire project. The military had scoffed at his idealism in the beginning, especially when he pulled most of his team from civilian channels rather than military, but he'd soon been vindicated when the Commandos had gained national, and then world, recognition by the end of the Divide. Why, exactly, he'd chosen the guidelines he had was a mystery to the world, but Tamia believed she knew why.

Rick was a front-liner, one of the people who put their lives on the proverbial line, and watched all those he cared for do the same, for their entire careers. He'd watched probably hundreds, maybe even thousands, of men and women die in the line of duty, only to be forgotten. It was an experience that jaundiced for life. No one knew that better than she did. She'd grown up surrounded by that horror, and she read a similar pain in Rick.

Tamia sighed heavily as she flipped to the next page -- Rick's IA profile. She'd pored through every scrap IA had on Richard Benjamin Carinson over the years since she'd first seen him. It was a sketchy and sad, picture the profiles painted, and they made her ache for him. His mother, Lydia Carinson, had been a Boston socialite, until her father had thrown her out after he'd learned of her fling with Dr. Marshall Bannington, her Harvard Law professor, and Rick's father. But Bannington had shunned her once he discovered she was pregnant. With nowhere left to go, she'd sought help from the Boston Mission until she'd died giving birth to Rick in 2088. Rick had been handed into foster-care, and passed from one home to another until he'd turned twelve. He'd been turned over to the Boston Youth Care halfway houses then, tossed from halfway house to halfway house, for the next four years.

Tamia drew a sad breath as she thought back to her own childhood. She knew

what it was like to be orphaned; but even haunted by her family's death, she hadn't been alone. She'd always had her grandfather, and, for a little while, a surrogate brother in Kyato Hoshimiro. But, to go on his file, Rick had been *alone*. His profile was eerily blank of any mention of close friends or loving foster-parents.

For some unexplained reason, Rick had suddenly left Boston in 2104, at the age of sixteen, and come to New York. He'd enlisted then, and, within three years, he'd managed the impossible. Not only had he made it as a Navy SEAL, but one of the Navy's most-decorated men, in the process. A lot of people had touted his dedication to duty as his means of success, and though Rick had never corrected them, Tamia saw a vastly different reason. Rick was running away. He was running from Boston, from his memories, and possibly even from himself, just as *she* had done in 'Frisco. Tamia recognized the signs only too well. Total absorption in what he was doing, and denial of everything outside of the day's work. She had found no mention of friends, or lovers, or even favorite places to go. Just a string of missions and compounds. There was no doubt in her that Rick was running, just as she once had. Only, she'd learned to face her past after David had died. She wasn't convinced Rick ever had.

It apparently hadn't mattered to Rick, because, by the age of twenty-four, he suddenly and inexplicably decided he'd had enough. The SEAL commander by that time, he'd threatened to resign completely unless certain policies were changed. Then, when the military refused to buckle under, he finally did resign, and, calling in favors, he'd put together the Commandos in 2114, halfway through the Divide. He'd become a military legend, respected and admired by so many...

Tamia shook her head sadly. As much as she respected him herself, she couldn't help wondering if he'd ever truly let himself go. Had he ever let any of those emotions

out, any of the pain, the rage, or the fear? Or was he holding it in on some misguided notion that he had to punish himself? That *he* was at fault for what had happened in his life? Was he...?

The door tone sounded just then, startling her out of her thoughts. Quickly, in case whoever it was came in, Tamia stuffed the file back into her bag and dumped her jacket over it. Rick's voice reached her from the hall, then, sounding amused.

"Let's go, Blade! It's time you officially joined this party!"

Springing up from her seat, Tamia slipped her shoes back on, and, as she opened the door, smiled up at him. "So, what're we waiting for?"

His eyes clashed with hers in that unguarded moment, and she swore she saw a flicker of heat there. Then, he swept it away with a grin. "Two seconds flat! Where'd you learn that kind of speed? 'Frisco? Or is it part of that mysterious training I'm told your grandfather gave you?"

Tamia laughed. "Both, or maybe neither. I've always been a little fast on the draw."

She studied him discreetly as they moved through the corridors. His question told her one thing. Carinson had done his homework, and thoroughly. Not that she'd expected anything less from the leader of one of the world's best covert operations teams, but it made her uncomfortably aware of what he might know about her. Her own IA profile was mercifully brief, but then, military psychologists didn't ask near as many questions as a man who had almost a decade of Special Ops experience did. Left to wonder what he knew of her past, and whom he might have talked to. Her old gang members in 'Frisco? Most of them were probably dead by now, and those who weren't probably wouldn't remember her anyway. The doctors at the military hospital where

she'd undergone Detoxification before Basic? Yeah, he probably had, and they'd be sure to remember her. She'd been living Hell for them during those three weeks. But, beyond that, they weren't liable to be able to provide anything of great importance. Her grandfather? She almost laughed aloud at the idea. Kuron didn't trust anyone over the age of twelve who wasn't his own flesh and blood. Anyone asking after Tamia there received the answer she was dead. And Hoshimiro didn't know where she was or what she'd been doing for the last ten years. No, there was no one who could, or *would*, have told Rick all her sordid secrets.

No one except whoever had left the mysterious letter in her apartment last evening, Tamia realized with a sickening lurch of her heart. She didn't know who they were, but they appeared to know an awful lot about her, and if Rick ever found out what she was hiding, she could be in worse danger here than anywhere she'd ever been. And, most disturbing of all to her, was how much it actually *mattered* what Rick thought of her.

"You're awful quiet all of a sudden," Rick said with a worried glance her way. "Something wrong?"

*More than you'd ever imagine.* She quelled the thought quickly, and flashed him a strained smile.

"Just nervous, I guess," she lied, praying he wouldn't press the issue.

He laughed, then grinned at her when her brow furrowed.

"Sorry, I'm just laughing at the irony of it. Do you know that the Tankers call you 'Steel Doll'? They were practically *reverent* about how unflappable you are under pressure, how you never lose your cool. Now here you are, telling me you're nervous. I can't believe it!"

Tamia flinched as that hated nickname slid from his lips. Yeah, she'd heard it, more than she cared to remember. But she also knew something Rick didn't. She knew that it hadn't been the product of her steely nerves, and it hadn't been won on the battlefield, though it had eventually come into that use, thanks to Scott Leysenhuk. But the first Tanker to call her a steel doll had been referring to her sexual nature, rather than her piloting skills. Marcus Remil. He'd been a fling of hers, just after she'd joined the 103<sup>rd</sup>, and he'd called her a steel doll in the sack. Not a very flattering testimonial and not something she advertized. Aware that Rick had no way of knowing that little piece of her history, she dredged up a teasing grin for him. "That from a man called bullet-proof!"

Tamia caught the falter of Rick's smile, the haunted look that flew across his face, before he grinned at her again.

"I guess you have a point."

She wondered about the lapse of his good humor, as brief as it'd been. It obviously wasn't any of her business, though a part of her cried to ease that pain. Pushing it aside, she hinted, "Suppose you tell me a little about these people I'm going to meet."

He flashed another grin. "Oh, no you don't! You're not getting anything out of me before it's properly time. Besides, I'll be highly surprised if you haven't already looked into them."

She flashed a wry grin his way. "I did, but this team is the best-kept secret since the Roswell incident. Not only do I know nothing about these people, but I don't even know *who* they are. Now do you see why I'm nervous?"

He laughed.

"Touché! I hardly think about it, anymore, but you're right. None of the rest of the team's names or pictures are ever publicized. It's a safety net that's very necessary.

But don't worry; no one bites." He grinned at her as they stopped before the command center's door. "You might even recognize a few of them."

Tamia opened her mouth to ask what he meant, but stopped as the door slid open and she realized exactly what he meant. There, sitting around the table, were five faces she didn't recognize, and three she distinctly did – DEA Agent Harlin, talk-show celebrity Kathy Terrell, and Chelsea Perez, the daughter of one of Peru's top drug lords.

As she stood gaping, Rick grinned and announced, "Well, everyone, here she is!"

Guiding Tamia along by the arm, he crossed the room to their seats, then, going clock-wise around the table, began introducing people to her.

"This is Major Walter Maddoc, our resident computer wizard and technician," he said, laying his hand on the shoulder of the lanky blond man sitting to his left. He smiled at Tamia then. "And you probably already recognize the lady sitting beside Walter."

Tamia, regaining her bearings, nodded and grinned at the sandy-blonde woman. "Ms. Terrell."

A laugh answered her.

"Call me Kathy, hon. I don't even go by 'Ms. Terrell' on my show," Kathy explained in the husky, southern-accented voice that had propelled her to fame.

Rick grinned and went on, "Kathy handles all our celebrity interviews. They seem to like talking to her more than to me."

"That's because I'm not trampin' all over them, darlin'," Kathy replied, a humorous lilt in her voice. Giving Tamia a look, she finished, "Ya gotta watch that guy, hon. He'd geld the Devil himself to get what he wants!"

Tamia couldn't help but smile at that, deciding she liked Kathy's outspoken, charming wit. But then, that was probably why she was one of the best-loved talk-show

personalities around.

With a chuckle, Rick went on to the next person, sitting to Kathy's left. "That's Ishmael Gordon. If anyone knows how to stop a terrorist, or plan out the logistics of a desert mission, it's Ishmael."

Tamia grinned at the olive-complected man. With his dark hair and eyes, she had little doubt he was Middle Eastern in origin.

"And that's Dr. Kelly Blake. She's the best counter-espionage expert I've ever come across," Rick said with a grin for the dark woman. "She's had plenty of experience in avoiding spies, or tails, right, Kel?"

A flash of white teeth lit the woman's dark face.

"Y' got that one right, mate," she said, revealing her Aboriginal origin as she spoke.

Gesturing to the black man on Kelly's left, Rick told Tamia, "You and Matt there have something in common. Both of you've spent quite a bit of time on the streets. That's his playing field, still. Matt Clipper knows the streets of New York, and every gang on them."

Tamia's eyes widened at that, and she gave Matt a respectful look. Even when she'd run with the gangs, she hadn't known *all* of them in 'Frisco, and it was *half* the size of New York! That Matt managed to keep the trust of so many enemies was a feat well deserving of great respect.

Rick gestured toward the woman beside Matt, then, and, as Tamia's gaze shifted, she found herself gaping again. That woman had the most absolutely *green* eyes she'd ever seen. Those eyes stood out like piercing green flames in that olive-complected face.

"That's Dr. Jenifer LaSaulle, our team physician, and a bona fide shrink."



Jenifer laughed. "I should expect that from you!" Turning her green gaze Tamia's way again, she smiled. "Rick's the only man I've ever met who has a problem spilling his life story to me."

Rick rolled his eyes, but grinned back. "And you're the only person who won't let me forget that fact, Jen!"

As Jen laughed, Tamia smiled bemusedly at Rick. He gave her a warm look, and then asked, "Do you recognize the lady beside Jen?"

Tamia smiled at the Latina, with her cherubic, almost innocent, face. "How could I not, after all the stories about the drug lords that've been splashed across the papers in recent years? *Hola, Senorita Perez.*"

The woman smiled shyly. "Please, *mi amiga*, call me Chelsea."

"Chelsea handles our forays into the drug world. She makes a very good spy in that quarter," Rick explained with a smile for Chelsea. Then, turning back to Tamia, he grinned wickedly. "And, last but not least, I know you recognize the guy sitting beside you there."

Tamia grinned at the redhead, then mimicked him, "DEA Agent Frank Harlin... wasn't it?"

Harlin laughed. "I gotta admit, it was hard keeping a straight face on that one, Captain."

She grinned wryly.

"I'll bet." Then, turning to Rick, she raised one eyebrow in question. "Do you want to introduce me, or should I do it myself?"

He grinned at her, and then turned to face the room at large. "Everyone, this is Captain Tamia Kuan, codenamed Blade. She'll be our weapons specialist and marksman.

Now, I think it'd be best if you all tell her your codenames."

Harlin spoke up first. "Codename's Red. Welcome aboard, Blade!"

"Gypsy," Chelsea acknowledged quietly.

"I'm Cat," Jen said with a feline smile that left no doubt in Tamia's mind as to how Jen'd gotten her codename.

Matt looked her up then down until Jen jabbed him in the ribs. With a grimace, he nodded at her. "Watchdog."

Kelly grinned openly, a welcoming smile so totally opposite of Matt's surly attitude that it threw Tamia off for a moment. "I'm called Hood, lass. Welcome."

"Crimson," Ishmael acknowledged with a tilt of his head. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Call me Diamond, hon," Kathy said with a wink and a laugh. "Or just Di works, too!"

"And I'm Chips," Walter finished, a wry smile touching his face. "For reasons probably very obvious by now."

Tamia laughed as she settled into her seat. This might just work after all. As the noise level returned full pace, Tamia sighed to herself. She felt like she'd finally come home.

Rick glanced at her curiously as he took his seat beside her and reached for a file from the stack in front of him. "Something on your mind, Tamia?"

She shivered pleasantly at the way her name rolled off his tongue, that Boston-born accent wrapping around the syllables in a way that shimmied through her stomach. The husky dip of his voice whenever he said her name gave her a sensual thrill, even

though she knew he didn't mean it that way.

"No. I just never thought I'd make it this far," she confided with a smile as she watched the rest of the team moving around the room.

"I did." There was a definite huskiness to *that* statement. Tamia's eyes locked with his in astonishment, and her heart tripped at the flicker of fire she saw there, even as he murmured, "I knew from the moment I saw you at Rio Bantos that there was something different about you. Why the hell were you there, anyway?"

She shrugged as she swallowed hard, suddenly uncomfortable with his probing gaze. "We were sent in on an intelligence gathering mission, and to secure that COSEC communications outpost for the techies Military Intelligence was supposed to send in for decrypting—"

"No," Rick broke in, his gaze darkening as it held hers. "Why were *you* there? You'd barely been in the field six months; you were still green."

She laughed bleakly. "I had the experience they needed, even if I'd never operated in military channels before. I used to do 'intelligence-gathering' – mostly break-ins and infiltrations – for the Panthers, back in 'Frisco."

"Panth—? Oh, the gang you were in."

She nodded. "I was used to playing con-games, and to getting into and out of heavily guarded places. I'd even been involved in several robberies, prior to being drafted." She frowned at the memory. David had made her rob innocent people, but she'd drawn the line at hurting them. Funny, how *that* line had changed beneath her feet,

with the Divide. She winced at the battlefield memories that hit her. “Rio Bantos was a goat fuck.”

He grinned at her use of the SEAL term for a fouled-up mission. “I can’t argue with that one.”

She offered him a grateful smile. “Did I ever thank you for saving my ass?”

He looked suddenly uncomfortable as he yanked his gaze away from hers. His lips moved, and she swore she heard him mumble something about her ass being too perfect to lose. Whether that was what he’d actually said or not, the thought warmed her, until she glanced over and saw Frank Harlin watching her with a speculative look. Uh-oh. Looked like she was about to get busted, again.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Okay, people, everyone have a seat," Rick said as he finally pushed aside the files and rose. The team fell silent as everyone found their seats, all eyes fixed on him as he flipped files to each person. "We've been doing intelligence work for four months without a damned clue of what we were looking for, or why. Well, we've finally been given orders."

"'Bout time," Matt grumbled. "I was gettin' blisters on my ass from all this sittin' around."

"I'll blister your ass, if you don't shut up," Jen returned darkly, with a scathing look for the black man.

"Promises, promises."

"*People*," Rick broke in, "this is deadly serious. We are dealing with a possible breach of the National Security Network. That means every single one of us is in danger. Family, friends, lovers, the works. If this turns out legit, there'll be a lot of people getting access to all Covert Operations files -- ours included -- and that means not only are we in danger, but everyone we care about will share that risk. So let's get serious, shall we?"

All eyes fixed sombrely on the man.

"Now," he continued, "I've been informed that the intelligence we've been

collecting up to this point is being used to track down a Mole in the system. Once we know who our Mole is, we're going in after him."

Red raised a brow inquisitively. "Are you saying *we*, as in the team, are supposed to figure this mess out, alone?"

"Not alone," Rick said, shaking his head. "We've got Internal Affairs and the FBI on our side. CIA will help, if we come across anything outside the border, but I'm not expecting much help there. IA will profile case histories for anyone we find suspicious, and the FBI will help check leads -- they realize we can't possibly be everywhere. Science and Research will run tests for chemical or DNA traces on any space or thing we think are connected. We get the basics, they'll all check them out, and give us any information they find. We'll have to track from there." He gestured to the files he'd passed out. "What you've got is a list of suspects, from most to least likely. I've been in touch with military Special Forces, and they'll help however they can, but their hands are pretty much tied by red tape, so we'll be doing a lot of this on our own. Any questions?"

"Yeah." Tamia looked up from her file with a frown. "Why do you have the head of the War Department on the top of the list?"

"Thought you'd ask that," Rick said with a sigh. "It's quite simple, really. He's got the least to lose, and the most to gain. It's no secret that Martin Panfild doesn't like the Commandos, or Special Forces. He's tried for years to get all of us disbanded, since his instatement, actually. I think he'll sink to any level to get rid of as many SF units he can -- even murder and treason. That makes him our number one suspect."

Tamia nodded slowly, her eyes scanning the list, but said nothing else. Rick looked over the group again.

"Okay, everyone, hit the rack. Fall in at oh-three-hundred hours tomorrow. We should have our assignment details by then."

Groans answered him from around the table, and Matt muttered something under his breath.

"Sorry, folks," Rick said, "but we've got to get cracking on this ASAP. We've all got people depending on us. Dismissed."

The team filtered out of the conference room slowly, talking quietly about what they'd learned. Tamia barely heard them, her eyes fixed on the file in her hands.

"I can hear the gears turning, Blade. What is it?"

She looked up at Rick, and shook her head in amazement.

"Just admiring our cast list. We've got the head of the WD, three ex-CIA specialists/operatives, two retired Military Intelligence officers, twelve major military brass, six Division Eight spies, and twenty-nine other politicians, smugglers, and affiliated trash. Quite a variety."

He sat down, propping his booted feet on the table. "Seems like it, doesn't it? The really funny part is they've all got one factor in common. Greed. Each of those people, except for Panfild, have been stripped of rank, summarily dismissed, or arrested on charges of everything from the illegal distribution and sales of drugs and contraband weaponry to trading valuable secret information to hostile parties."

Tamia shook her head. "But, why Panfild? I understand what you said earlier about Special Forces, but if he's never been indicted..."

"We don't know that yet. I haven't put an official inquiry on his profile or military record. So far, it's only been gut distrust."

"But he's always been a firm believer in security, and the military. He's said himself how highly he values both, and with the spotless record..."

"Sometimes, the cleanest records hide the darkest secrets. A man who's never even been cited for a uniform inspection in his whole military career has to be covering something," Rick said quietly. "The SEALs taught me one thing. There are no good guys. You do something. Whether you meant it or not doesn't mean a damned thing. All that matters is you *did* it, and it haunts you forever. You've become a bad guy in someone's eyes because of it. In this business, everyone's a bad guy. You don't trust anyone with your life... not even yourself."

She nodded slowly. "I know. What bothers me about Panfild is how and why. Why would he compromise his *own* safety like that, and how could he have gotten away from his escort long enough to give out that kind of information?"

Rick shrugged. "Very good questions -- ones I've asked myself repeatedly. I can't answer them, either, but I know one thing. There's something about that man that makes him harder to trust than anyone I've ever met. Call it a gut instinct, or a professional hunch. Either way, I know he's hiding something, and if he's not our Mole, he knows who is."



Tamia nodded, turning her eyes back to the file. She heard Rick rise, and felt his hand squeeze her shoulder before she heard the sound of a door sliding open. A moment later, the door closed again, and Tamia knew she was alone. It was a feeling she found ominous.

As she left the command center and made her way toward her quarters, a voice spoke out of the shadow of the gym's doorway, startling her. "Why are you really here, Kuan?"

Whirling, she watched Frank Harlin step out of the darkened room, and felt her pulse kick in dread. She'd known that some of the team was going to be wary of her, but she'd never expected Harlin to openly question her. He was a federal agent; DEA, no less. Years of standing up to his kind of authority had her bristling automatically.

"What's it to you, Fed?"

His grey eyes narrowed. "Can the street punk attitude; I get enough of that from Matt. I just want to know what your agenda is."

"Agenda?" Tamia blinked, confused. What the hell was he talking about?

"What makes you think I have an agenda?"

"I heard that conversation between you and Rick, back there." He jerked his head toward the command center. "I want to know what went on between the two of you."

"Not that it's any of your business," she snapped, "but *nothing* went on between me and Rick, and there's *still* nothing going on between us. He saved my life, eight years ago. That's what we were talking about."

Frank started, shock flitting through his grey gaze, before a small, wry grin touched his face.

“Sorry,” he apologized, “but my suspicious-activity radar’s been going off since the two of you came into the command center, earlier. I’ve never seen Rick act that way, before.”

She blinked at him again. “Act *what* way?”

He smirked. “Like a man.”

With that, Harlin turned and strode away, whistling atrociously. Tamia stared after him, nonplussed. What was he implying? Rick hadn’t done anything improper, and neither had she.

As she continued on to her quarters, Tamia pushed aside Harlin’s speculations and thought back over the briefing, admitting to herself that she was troubled by what she’d learned. It wasn’t that she had any illusions about the government being above getting into trouble. She’d just never come face-to-face with the dark underside of politics, before. Mentally running through the list of suspects again, a shiver of dread danced along her spine. Bad enough that the underbelly of American culture had, since the Reaver War, become powerful enough to be considered a threat to national security. But that the Military Intelligence community, as well as the civilian one – to say nothing of the head of the War Department! – could be involved was a terrifying prospect.

In her quarters, Tamia kicked off her shoes and began stripping off her clothes as she made her way toward the bathroom. What she needed right now was a nice, hot

shower to relax her, and a good night's sleep. She'd worry about the mission in the morning.

Four hours later, Tamia sat up in bed, sighing in disgust. It wasn't any use; she couldn't sleep. She'd been tossing and turning, unable to settle her thoughts since she'd lain down. Restless questions spiralled endlessly through her mind.

Rick seemed so certain Panfild was hiding something. He'd said the man didn't even have a uniform inspection violation on his record. Something about that statement had triggered a vague memory in Tamia, but she couldn't quite grasp it.

With another disgusted sigh, Tamia swung her legs from the bed and started pulling on clothes. There wasn't any point trying to sleep until she figured out what was bothering her. Running her hand through her hair, she sighed again and started for the door, wondering where she should begin. The image of file cabinets and boxes stacked along the walls of the conference room came to her. Might as well start there. She rubbed her face wearily. This wasn't a job she was looking forward to.

Halfway to the door, she stopped suddenly. There was another question she could use the Commandos' files to answer -- the identity of her blackmailer. Tamia turned back to her bed. Pulling open the nightstand drawer, she pulled out the folded, wrinkled page. It was time she did something about solving its mystery. Stuffing it into her shirt pocket, she turned toward the door again, a weight settling on her shoulders as she realized just how serious what she was about to do was. If the wrong people saw her, it could mean

her life.

Tamia drew a deep breath and stifled a yawn as she sat back from the table. She'd poured through just about everything the Commandos had on Panfild, but she still couldn't find what was bothering her. She agreed with Rick, that something definitely felt phoney about Panfild, but that wasn't what was bothering her. It was something about those damn uniform inspections Rick had mentioned.

Tamia turned her attention back to the files with a shake of her head. There was so goddamned little information about Panfild, and what existed was more propaganda than fact. Mostly clippings from newspapers and magazines, a few profile notes from IA, and a personal history file which seemed suspiciously empty to her. Not a bloody lot to go on. With a small sigh, Tamia flipped open another file full of clippings, and stopped a chill spreading through her.

*There.* Right there on top of the interviews and articles was the answer to her nagging doubt. It was a photo of Panfild, snapped at the awards ceremony following the Altura campaign, just before the end of the Divide. Tamia'd been there, command recipient of a Congressional Medal of Honor and three purple hearts. She remembered watching Panfild give his speech, but she couldn't recall what he'd said. Her attention had been fixed on his uniform. It hadn't fit him right, she recalled, staring at the picture in her hands. At the time, she'd been sure he'd rip right through the back of it if he moved, and the waist of the jacket had come a good inch above his own waist. The pants

had been just long enough to reach the tops of his jump boots... *jump boots!* Tamia jerked up straight. He was wearing jump boots with a dress uniform! And the final, and most disturbing, revelation of the picture was the rank insignia on his epaulets. They were a colonel's, but the War Department head wasn't a colonel. Panfild only *referred* to as "the Colonel," a cast-off from his days in Military Intel. His actual rank was Commandant; a rank formed especially for the heads of the War Department after its establishment the Polar Wars. That uniform wasn't Panfild's!

It wasn't all that hard to see what was wrong with his uniform. In fact, it was damned obvious, if anyone paid attention. But paying attention and having the guts to speak up were very different animals, when the infraction was perpetuated by the man who controlled the entire CEADS Defence Network. The only ones who ever had the guts were Special Forces and they... Tamia sat up straight as she remembered what Rick had said. Special Forces were the ones Panfild was trying to do away with!

Tamia remembered the letter in her pocket then. Was that Panfild's work as well? Should she mention it to Rick and the others? She pulled out the letter and studied it intently. It would be some solid proof... but it would also spell two criminal sentences for her, and the possibility that the Commandos would think her a spy. Better to not say anything, she decided as she laid it aside.

Tamia's eyes fell to the photo again, and she wondered if Rick had seen this photo, or realized what he was looking at. Most people never gave newspaper photos more than a cursory glance. Rising, Tamia returned everything to the file cabinet, except

the photo. She scribbled the name of the newspaper on the back, and then stuffed it into her shirt pocket. She'd check it out first thing in the morning, and see what the paper knew about Panfild that they weren't telling.

As she stepped into the corridor, Tamia sighed. If she'd been too confused to sleep earlier, she was definitely too wound up to sleep now. A workout in the gym would get rid of some of that energy, and then maybe she could sleep.

Tamia tapped the access pad to the gym, and, as the door slid open, stopped dead. Apparently, she wasn't the only one who hadn't been able to sleep. There, his shoulders gleaming as he pumped out push-ups, was Rick. Tingling heat built up in Tamia as she watched his body move, muscles straining. Closing her eyes, she told herself it was a fascination she didn't want to pursue. He was her commander, now.

She was about to retreat into the safety of the corridor when he suddenly glanced up, and stopped. His brow furrowed for an instant before a disarming grin spread across his face. As she stared at him, he rose from the floor in a single fluid motion.

"You're up late," he commented as he picked up his towel and casually draped it around his neck. "Any particular reason?"

She swallowed hard, tearing her eyes away from his broad, bare chest. God, was she so sex-starved she couldn't carry on a normal conversation with a man anymore? Not this man, she already knew. Eight long years of watching him from afar, unable to work up the nerve to approach him directly, had taught her that. Shaking her head, she tried to

remember what he'd asked.

"Couldn't sleep, that's all."

He continued to grin at her, further unsettling her nerves. God, David had never made her feel like this... Tamia drew a breath, and sternly set aside such comparisons. Rick had shown a sincere interest in her doubts earlier, but that was nothing more than part of being a unit commander. She'd been in similar positions before; she ought to recognize that. It was obvious; from the interest he'd shown in personally meeting with her, and showing her around the compound, that he wanted to be her friend. But then, so did the rest of them. It was part of being a team. She could deal with that, couldn't she? She'd have to. Done making a fool out of herself, Tamia pulled her thoughts together. She'd been done with that the day David had died.

Forcing a smile to her face, Tamia turned her attention back to Rick. "I figured I'd work off my energy here. I didn't think anyone else would be up still."

He shrugged. "Someone has to monitor Comms," he said, indicating the beeper on his belt, "but nobody said I had to be bored." He looked at her for a moment, then said, "Your file says your speciality's hand-to-hand. I'd like to see you at work for myself, if you don't mind. How about sparing with me?"

She flashed him a grin. "If you can keep up."

He laughed. "I'll be trying to do more than that."

With a grin, Tamia stripped off her shirt, leaving her in only her sleeveless bodysuit, then pulled off her shoes and began running through a series of warm-up

stretches.

As he watched her, Rick's mind went reeling. He'd experienced a rush of heat he hadn't felt in years when she'd slipped the shirt off. It shocked him how disappointed he'd been to find her bodysuit underneath. Now, as she ran through her warm-up stretches, he admired her feline grace, how the center of her back dipped gracefully toward the floor as she limbered her shoulders, pressing her hips against the sparring mat. Her breasts strained against the tight bodysuit as she rolled her shoulders, and his mouth went dry. As he watched her roll her head, he found himself wondering what the hollow of her neck tasted like. Good God, he was coming unhinged. Rick suppressed a groan as he felt the uncomfortable press of his jeans against his erection, and told himself he was crazy. Tamia was a Marine, and a damn good one to judge from her record. She'd come here to get out of a Tanker squadron she decidedly didn't belong in. The last thing she needed, or most likely wanted, was to have him gawking at her like some depraved schoolboy. Almost as an afterthought, he noticed the slight shadow of smudges on her fingertips. What the hell...?

Tamia came to her feet then, her hands and feet snapping out kicks and punches that were probably as lethal as they looked. Rick's attention shifted to her routine, and he had to admit he was impressed. Each punch and kick perfectly measured so that no movement was wasted. They flowed into each other like a dance without music, both beautiful and deadly. A lot like her, he mused wryly. Her moves appeared unfixed,



unpatterned, reminding him of some old martial arts movies he'd seen. Bruce Lee. That Jeet Kune Do stuff he'd read about in high school. Obviously, Tamia had been very well trained by her grandfather. Rick was suddenly uncertain if this fight was such a good idea. He'd always been the best at hand-to-hand, whatever unit he was with. Now, he'd met his match, and more. Though he'd never been beaten before, as he watched Tamia, the possibility of a severe trouncing crossed his mind.

Tamia jogged to a stop, stretched her arms, and grinned at him. "Ready?"

With an internal, resigned sigh, Rick nodded, and they squared off around the mat. As they began circling, Rick watched Tamia's attention narrow, as if her entire being focused on their fight. He advanced cautiously, his arms blocking access to his body, but couldn't find an opening for attack. She kept moving, shifting her weight around so that she was never in one spot as solidly as she appeared. His hands were half-fists, while hers hung open in her blocking stance. His body tensed. She reacted an instant before he swung surprising him. As she ducked under his right hook, coming up well inside his defenses with a sharp blow to the ribs. He jerked backwards, startled, but recovered swiftly, sending his fist flying toward her again. She ducked around it, grabbing his arm at the wrist and elbow as she did, shifting to flip him over her, headfirst toward the mat. But, just as she stepped into the flip, he broke free, grabbing hold of her wrist and yanking downward as he did. She let out a dismayed sound and toppled gracelessly to the floor. In a flash, he had her pinned down, and grinned wickedly at her.

"Sorry. I guess I win this time."

She shot him a dark look, her chest heaving indignantly. She looked pissed that she'd lost. She confirmed it as she fumed, "No one's ever broken that before!"

Rick grinned at her again, feeling the heady sense of triumph wash over him as he looked down at her. He'd won! He still couldn't believe it, and, judging from the mutinous expression on her face, neither could Tamia. The heaving of her breasts as she caught her breath drew his attention, and he watched them in fascination, wondering if they'd look the same heaving in passion, if the golden honey hue of her skin was a promise of how it'd taste. His throat went dry as he raised his eyes to her full lips. God, they were so perfect, so delicately shaped. He felt his body respond, though whether to his thoughts or her proximity he couldn't tell. Maybe both. He saw her eyes darken, her dark lashes fluttering, and had an insane desire to kiss her. With a small groan, he leaned to capture her mouth.

The sweetness of her lips had him instantly craving more. His hands itched to touch those perfect breasts, and to slip through her silky, dark hair. Slowly, his hands slid up her bare arms as the kiss deepened, and he realized he wanted her. Badly.

She sighed against his lips, and then moaned as he took the kiss deeper, his hands sliding up her arms. That moan shot through Rick's overcharged system, turning his already painful desire into a driving need. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her, and watch her succumb to the passion he sensed hovering at the edges of her kiss. With another of those maddening little sounds, her fingers burrowed through his hair, and then became hands that roamed seductively down his back, jolting him with

lightning stabs of pure lust. His body was beyond on fire. Rick buried his lips against her neck, groaning at the sweet temptation of her skin, and the heady scent of her arousal as he eased away the straps of her bodysuit, desperate to see, feel, and taste *all* of her. As he slid the spandex down, she arched toward him, and he closed his eyes, biting back a low oath as his hands cupped the soft weight her breasts, his fingers sliding over her hot, silky flesh. With a moan that drove him crazy, she slid her hands down his back, pressing him toward herself, an impatient little sound escaping her as his body pressed against hers. Rick groaned as he lowered his mouth to her breast, a shudder of desire passing through him as he tasted that soft, sweet flesh. Tamia gasped and arched toward him, offering everything he'd craved for eight long years. *Her.*

A loud beeping filled the air, and they both jumped, startled.

"Damn," Rick muttered as he realized it was the beeper on his belt. He rose swiftly, reaching to shut it off. When he turned his gaze back to Tamia, she was rearranging her clothing, her eyes averted from him. Damn it, what did he think he'd been doing? She'd come to this unit voluntarily, but only as a way back to ground combat, not to be seduced by him. She didn't need that, and he'd do well to remember it, in the future. Drawing a deep breath to muster control of his body, he grabbed up his shirt and headed for the door. But, as he made his way to the Comm. center, Rick couldn't help but wonder how far it would have gone if the beeper hadn't interrupted.

Alone in the gym Tamia rose unsteadily to her feet, feeling cold and restless.

God, what had she done? She wanted him. She refused to lie to herself. She'd watched him and wanted him for years, telling herself all along that it was just a dream, would always be a dream. But now... she couldn't believe she'd actually maneuvered him into making a pass at her. Into nearly having sex with her, she realized with a tiny gasp. She really hadn't changed since 'Frisco, then. She'd been a slut back then, spreading her legs and baring her breasts to every male who entered the gang hideout. But she hadn't really wanted any of them, not specifically. She'd just wanted to feel loved, to feel good in a shitty world.

Tamia swallowed hard and groaned as she realized one way she *had* changed. She didn't just want to feel good anymore, and she didn't just want to feel loved. She wanted Rick. She'd never known anything quite like Rick's hungry, insistent kiss. It was almost as if he'd wanted her, not just the sex most of her encounters had ever wanted. She wanted him as desperately; she wanted to love him, and know he loved her. It was impossible, not to mention wrong. What they'd done, or nearly done, went against every regulation she struggled to uphold about a unit. She couldn't screw her commanding officer, no matter how badly she wanted to. It just wasn't permissible. She'd have to learn to control herself, and hope he decided to overlook her indiscretion.

Rick sat staring at the dark vid-phone screen, his expression bleak. He couldn't believe this. A shipment of weapons bound for the Dallas munitions depot had disappeared. That made the third munitions shipment in a month to vanish without a

trace. Military Intelligence thought it fit the pattern of the Mole, but even they couldn't say for sure. The manifest of weapons in this most recent convoy made Rick's blood run cold. It was enough equipment to start a war. His expression turned grim. If he ever got his hands on the person behind this...

He glanced at the clock. Quarter to three. Everyone'd be in for the morning briefing soon. Suddenly, he was anxious to get the whole thing resolved. Why, he didn't know; or maybe, he did.

Rick's mind whirled back to that shocking kiss with Tamia and he bit back a groan. With that lithe body, she'd unraveled him completely. His brow furrowed. Tamia was a walking contradiction. She was tough, but not hardened, beautiful, but oblivious to it. By the expression on her face when she'd first come to the Underground, and then again when he'd noticed her in the gym, she was petrified of him, but trying hard not to show it. Had a previous commander assaulted her? Maybe as a Trooper? He'd heard of things like that happening in some of the Trooper squads back during the Divide. His jaw clenched at the thought, but he told himself that it had nothing to do with Tamia, specifically. That kind of lack of control by commanding officers had *always* appalled him; and he hadn't proved himself any better, Rick decided with a groan. If she'd been afraid of him before, she now had a reason to avoid him like a plague. He'd do well to try and fix his mistake, to treat her as a friend and a member of the unit *without* trying to maul her. Not an easy thing to do, when all he'd dreamed of since Rio Bantos was seeing the look that had been in her mahogany eyes then come back now, for him.

Rick rose wearily from his seat and went to the file cabinets, to begin preparing for the briefing. As he pulled out the first drawer, however, he stopped. What the hell? The contents of the Panfild files, which he'd arranged precisely after the last briefing, were out of order. Not enough that anyone else would be able to tell, but just enough to cause his brow to furrow. Pulling out the first folder, which should have been in back, he flipped it open, and gasped. The newspaper clipping of the Altura campaign awards ceremony was missing! Who'd been into the files?

The image of Tamia standing almost forlornly in the gym doorway came to him. Her eyes had been too bright, as if she held some secret too big to keep. That had been newsprint ink on her fingers, Rick realized with a start as he recalled watching her stretch out before the fight. What had she been looking for, and why had she taken that useless photo of Panfild?

Her absolute shock at finding Panfild on the list of Mole suspects came back to him. She'd almost sounded like she was defending him. With a lurch of his heart, Rick wondered if she could be trusted. Maybe, as depressing as the thought was, that whole scene in the gym was simply to throw him off. Then, as he closed the folder, he noticed a crumpled sheet of paper clinging to its back. His brow knitted, he pulled it loose and scanned its contents. The words hit him like a gut shot. Tamia was a *spy*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Tamia stifled a yawn as she eased herself into her seat. Damn. First day on the job, and she was already having trouble sleeping. The Underground was too quiet, especially for someone who'd grown up in the bedlam of the streets.

"At least try to *look* alive," a male voice quipped, drawing her attention to Rick as he plopped himself into his seat, a flicker of a smile crossing his face. A small thrill shot through her, but she quelled it and shot him a dirty look, instead. That anyone could be that awake at three AM was bad enough, but being that cheerful, this early was just *obscene*, especially when he had been the reason, inadvertently or not, that she was drug out.

Suddenly, a stack of files and printouts hit the table in front of Rick, causing Tamia to start. Jen threw her a wink, and added even more printouts to the top of the pile.

"Mornin' reports, Rick."

Rick nodded, already reaching for the red priority folder on the top. "Thanks."

As Jen moved past her, Tamia reached out and caught the other woman's arm. Quietly, she asked, "Everyone always get up this early around here?"

Jen laughed, pushing dark hair from her eyes as she leaned against the table, her Creole roots clear in her drawled, "Whatta mean, *early*? Ya shoulda been here when the

machines started goin' two hours ago!"

"You've been up since one?"

"Nope, not me. I don't happen to be crazy; or on watch 'til tomorrow. Him, on the other hand," Jen jerked one olive-complected thumb Rick's way, "well, sometimes I wonder if he *ever* sleeps."

Tamia's brow furrowed. "Why do you say that?"

Jen sighed, turning her head to watch Rick as the man engrossed himself in yet another file. "Call it Mothering Hen Syndrome, or a professional prognosis. I came here from IA, and I cased his profile. Lord knows, I wouldn't be able to sleep if I was in his shoes."

Tamia nodded slowly. "Battle is hard on a person's mind, especially under prolonged stress. Some people can't handle it, they snap. But others," she shrugged, "war hardens them, makes them immune to pain, to any emotion. It's their only means of survival."

Jen shook her head. "He acts like it doesn't matter, a lot of the time, but his habits say otherwise. Personally, I think he's looking for something. He never batted an eye at giving up his commission, or the SEALs, even though the military was the only life he knew. Like he was running away from something, or looking for some way to make peace with his past."

"Or himself," Tamia agreed quietly, drawing a startled look from Jen. "Hey, aren't we all? I spent years trying to decide if my shitty excuse for a life was really worth



living. It doesn't surprise me he gave up his commission; it was getting him nowhere. Only a madman enjoys watching friends die."

"Yeah, I guess," Jen replied in a murmur, her eyes averted. Then, with an enigmatic smile for Tamia, she said, "Well, I gotta go mind Comms. Rick won't be ready to start for a while, yet."

Tamia's eyes went to Rick then, afraid he'd overheard their exchange. But one look told her that if the man had, he certainly wasn't going to let on to it. With a sigh, she sat back and watched the bustle in the room, so out of place this early in the morning.

Chelsea and Kathy were going through file boxes looking for something related to a printout Chelsea held. Frank and Kelly appeared deep in discussion over a map, while Walter and Ishmael took apart and examined a weapon Military Intelligence had sent over late last night. Of all the seasoned Commandos, only Matt looked bleary-eyed.

Tamia smiled to herself. Matt probably wouldn't be his obnoxious self until well after noon. She knew what it was like; she'd spent most of her teens on the streets of Old 'Frisco. As the Commandos' only connection to the militant underground -- mostly gangs -- Matt's job would keep him on the streets until all hours. He'd probably only slept an hour, if at all.

The woman sighed heavily. She knew how Matt felt. She'd spent most of the night sleepless, too. First, it'd been Rick's comment about Panfild that had kept her awake, and then it'd been Rick himself. Visions of him, bent over her on the gym floor, had haunted her out of sleep. She'd finally pushed the image aside about two-thirty and

reread the regs, forcing herself to concentrate on the words. The regs, at least, had been easy to understand. To the outside world, the Commandos were an enigmatic horde of faceless professionals, all trained to kill at command. Only Rick, as the unit's commander, had any visibility at all, and even his own exposure was limited to the necessary. No unauthorized personnel were permitted access to the Underground, and visiting family members were restricted to the living quarters, and must be accompanied by a Commando at all times. All of it was standard Covert Operations procedure, including, of course, the pride and joy regulation of the military command – what every soldier, sailor, and airman referred to as "that damned Code" – the Fertility Code.

Tamia rubbed her eyes wearily. Nope, there'd been nothing unexpected in the regs. But the mission had made up for that. She was still dealing with the idea of the head of the War Department – the only man in direct charge of the world's largest army – possibly being a traitor and spy. It wasn't that she believed the military beyond corruption. If anything, she knew it was just the opposite. But nominees for War Department Commandant went through a rigorous CEADS screening process, and signed enough legal paperwork to sink the entire Navy. Those were safeguards, designed against just such problems. She hadn't seen how it was possible, until she'd found that photo. Now, the chilling possibilities made her shiver with dread.

"Gathering cobwebs?"

"Huh?" Tamia swung around, startled.

Rick flashed a tight smile. "Just something a friend of mine used to ask when I'd

space out like that. She was usually right, too."

"Well, I certainly hope you're not trying for a perfect record, too. Actually, I was thinking about Panfild."

Rick sat up a little, alert. "Still mulling over the impossibility of it?"

She nodded. "Yeah. With all the checking, all the affidavits, wouldn't an instability that dangerous be hard to miss?"

Rick sighed, putting down the file in his hands. "No matter how clean a slate looks, there's always some chalk left behind. Another of Jean's sagely sayings, and true. With as deep as IA probed, they should have come up with something, and yet, they didn't. No matter how far they probe into the human psyche, there's always something they miss. They'll only go so deep. Ask Jen, she'll tell you what a hell of a time they had with me. Is it likely Panfild is responsible for this? Right now, I'd say no. Is it *possible*? Definitely. I told you last night, there's something about him that's hard to trust. That's never a good sign. Right now, we have a job to do, wherever it leads."

With that, Rick turned back to the files in front of him. The rest of the team went about their morning tasks until Rick closed the last report file and rose from his seat.

"All right, everyone. If I can have your attention long enough to go over a few important details that came in over the night, we'll get cracking."

The room grew silent as all eyes turned Rick's way. The man slid a file to each of them, though Tamia could've sworn he hesitated an instant before handing hers to her.

"We've had a few developments over the night. First off, you can all cross Jim

Marcus off your suspect lists. I got a call from Mount Sinai Medical Center last night, and he is categorically deceased. He apparently welched on a huge gambling debt with Fingers Marcioni, and turned up in the reservoir with a bullet in his head and both arms amputated above the elbow."

Matt let out a low whistle. "Man, Fingers don't mess around..."

"How do we know for sure it was Marcus?" Jen asked quietly. "He's been known to 'turn up dead' before. That's how he got out of Banos Bonita three years ago."

Rick shook his head. "I had them run every test down to a DNA signature scan. Everything came back positive. It's definitely Marcus."

"I still don't think we should take him off the lists," Kathy interjected. "What's to say that he wasn't the Mole? Maybe we should wait and see if anything else happens before we just assume that because he's dead, he's not the Mole."

Rick's head shook again. "No, I don't think we can afford to take the chance of playing a waiting game. Besides, early this morning I received a report from Military Intelligence. Another shipment of weapons was heisted about midnight, and Intel's pretty sure it's our Mole again."

Harlin swore under his breath. "Do we have any idea what they were carrying, and where it was headed?"

Rick nodded. "The shipment was supposed to arrive at the Dallas munitions depot at oh-one-hundred hours this morning. About oh-one-thirty, Dallas reported that they still hadn't seen or heard from the convoy. About oh-one-forty-five, Intel contacted

us about the missing shipment. Full printouts of the munitions they were carrying are in your files, but I can tell you it was some pretty heavy stuff."

"And who knew what the convoy was carrying, and where it left from?" Ishmael wanted to know.

"Key people in Military Intelligence, the Dallas munitions depot, and the War Department knew what was in those trucks and where they were coming from. We also had it on file here," Rick shot Tamia a look, "as well as other information about the scheduled route."

Tamia's heart clenched as Rick's eyes came to rest on her. There was no doubting the pain in his eyes, the fearful expression written there. That piercing gaze was practically pleading with her, but she had no idea what he wanted her to say or do. Unable to meet that gaze any longer, she dropped her eyes, staring at her folded hands as tears blurred her vision. God, what was happening to her?

Clearing his throat as he turned back to the rest of the team, Rick finished. "If no one else has any questions or last minute reports, let's get hopping. I want everyone back here to report his or her progress at sixteen hundred hours. I'll get together the new duty roster then. Dismissed."

Tamia glanced at the clock as she rose from her seat. Nine thirty-five. The Times' city room should be open by now. Nervously, she fingered the photo in her pocket. She wasn't quite sure she should be doing this. Technically, it violated military regulations to initiate a search not directly ordered by a superior officer. Worse yet, she

wasn't even sure she knew what she was looking for. All she knew was that she needed to speak to the photographer who had snapped that picture. She had to know whether he had spotted anything strange about Panfild's uniform.

"Tamia, could you stay for a moment?" Rick's voice cut through her thoughts, causing her heart to jump as, with a sickening lurch, she realized what he probably wanted to discuss. God, how was she going to explain what had happened last night? She could barely explain it to herself; there was no way she could tell Rick. All she could do was apologize for her insubordinate actions and hope he left it at that.

"Yes, sir," she said in a quiet voice, nearly choking on the pain in her heart. This would be easier to bear if she remained formal with him. Then, lifting her eyes slightly, she saw his brows draw together, and felt tears prick her eyes. Blinking them away, she straightened her shoulders and said, "I'm sorry, sir, for my actions. Last night I just... didn't think, sir. I didn't I --" she stopped, biting back a gasp as she realized what she was about to admit to him. She stared straight ahead. "It won't happen again, sir."

Rick blinked as he noticed he was staring. What on earth was she talking about? She was as pale as death, and she had yet to meet his gaze directly. Worse yet, he had no idea what she was referring to. Was she talking about snooping through the files, or something far more personal? And why was she suddenly so formal? As he watched her lips tremble, his body swamped with the desire to kiss her until that stark terror left her face completely. Suppressing a groan, he forced his raging libido down. What had he

meant to talk to her about? *The files*, he remembered with a start. But, just as he opened his mouth to ask, Jen poked her head in from Communications.

"Rick, you better get in here. There's something really weird going down."

Rick glanced at Tamia, then hopped up and hurried into Comms. By the time he returned a few minutes later, Tamia was already gone. Rick's eyes darkened. If he'd learned anything from his years in the field, it was that only the guilty ever ran. And right now, Tamia Kuan was guilty as Hell, and he had all the proof he needed. So why didn't that fact make him happy?

Tamia breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped off the elevator and into the bustle of the busy shopping center that served as the Underground's front. She'd hated running out on Rick like that, but if she'd stayed, she'd have told him either what she'd been thinking about since last night, or what she'd discovered in the files. Neither one was something she wanted to blurt out before she knew for sure what she was doing.

Tamia sighed again as she made her way out of the building. She'd desperately wanted to tell him something, but she still wasn't sure what. All she knew was that she'd never wanted to spill her guts to anyone so badly in her life. Oh, Kuron had his ways of making her talk. There were times she was sure the old man could read her mind. But Tamia had never felt such a desperate need to talk to someone, until Rick. He loosened some wall inside of her, made her feel like she could tell him anything, and he wouldn't think any less of her for it. So why hadn't she? Tamia bit her lip nervously, and faced

the truth. She was scared of that feeling, terrified to let anyone in that deep.

Tamia thrust her hands into her jacket pockets, and her fingers encountered the newspaper clipping. Drawing a deep breath, she reminded herself that she had a job to do, no matter the consequences. She needed to check this lead. The Commandos already had their hands full gathering Intel from much more closely connected sources. They weren't liable to consider one newspaper photo, or the rookie member's suspicions, a serious enough lead. But everything in her told her this photo could supply some very valuable answers to a lot of unanswered questions burning inside of her.

Everything that wasn't focused on Rick, that was. Tamia gave her head a firm shake to dislodge the thought, but it clung stubbornly. What was she going to do? No matter how she tried to focus on her mission, she found herself wondering about Rick. Jen had said his IA file was incomplete, and Rick himself had hinted at as much. So what wasn't he telling? Could whatever secret he held explain why his eyes had darkened yesterday when she'd joked about him being bulletproof?

Tamia bit the inside of her cheek in thought. Rick gave the outward impression of a man troubled by nothing. She could easily have believed, if she'd looked no deeper than the surface, that Rick's past was all wine and roses, and that he'd never had a care in the world. But something about Rick wouldn't let her stay that shallow.

She found it difficult to accept that a man as outwardly friendly as Rick had never had any close friends, yet his IA profile made no mention of anyone who wasn't either entirely removed from him, or long-dead. To Tamia, that spoke of intense loyalty, not



complete isolation. The man wouldn't name his friends because he didn't want them at risk from the life he'd chosen.

The Commandos operated under similar conditions, shrouded from public view. No one knew their names, and no one could hurt them. Tamia had to admire Rick's dedication to security, though it also worried her. It was obvious that Rick didn't trust lightly, or easily. How would such a man receive her secrets? Probably not very well at all, she decided grimly. Even more reason to say nothing about them, ever.

Tamia stopped before the wide glass doors of the Times building. Drawing herself up tall, she summoned her courage, and then reached to open the door. Walking into the lobby, Tamia closed her eyes and drew a breath. Now she would get some answers.

"Good morning. Can I help you?" The young man behind the large bank of vid-phones offered her a syrupy smile, his bespectacled hazel eyes puppy-dog adoring.

Tamia stifled a grin. These types of guys had always been her marks, on the street, because they didn't look any deeper than her shell, and thought she was soft and cuddly. They never got a chance to find out otherwise. She could handle this kid with her hands tied behind her back. Leaning over the counter so that he got a decent view of the cleavage displayed by her bodysuit and half-buttoned shirt, she smiled sweetly as she handed him the newspaper clipping.

"I sure hope so," she drawled in a sugary voice, batting her eyelashes slightly. "I found this in an old bunch of papers, and I was wondering who took it. I'm trying to find

out why Daddy kept it.”

His eyes clouded with sympathy, and he reached to cover her hand with one clammy paw. “I’m sorry for your loss. I don’t know who took it, but if you’ll have a seat,” he took the clipping from her and indicated a small lounge to the right of the reception area, “I’ll call upstairs and check it out for you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, biting back her grin as she turned away. Another easy score. Looked like all those years of running her con-game marks in ‘Frisco finally had some use.

She didn’t have to wait long. Barely five minutes after she settled herself into one of the plush lounge chairs, she heard someone enter the room, and looked up to find a man in his mid-thirties leaning against the doorframe, a curious expression on his stubbly face. His strawberry-blond hair was in disarray, and his half-hearted attempt at a suit was ruffled enough to convince her that he’d slept in it at least once.

“You’re the lady asking about the Altura piece?” He sounded suspicious.

“Yes. My father left some paperwork—“

“I’m not as gullible as Pete, out there,” he snapped, stepping the rest of the way into the room.

Tamia straightened instantly. “Who the hell are you?”

“Carey Feldar.”

She gasped. She’d heard of him. Carey Feldar had been one of print news’ top-

rated war correspondents during the Divide, and the troops had always been eager to talk to him. He'd been sympathetic to their troubles; the Trooper's crusader, they'd called him. Feldar had won four Pulitzers covering the fiasco in Montreal. "*The Carey Feldar?*"

He smirked. "There sure as hell ain't two of me, honey. And I'm the man who snapped this pic," he held up the clipping she'd given Pete. Feldar's eyes narrowed. "I know who you are, Lieutenant."

"Captain," she corrected automatically, and then sighed. "Okay, so I was there. I didn't really want to advertise that fact, Mr. Feldar."

"I'd already figured that out, but I think I'm going to enjoy hearing why," he said with a brief grin. "And congratulations on your promotion."

She glanced around. "Is there somewhere else we can talk about this? I need some information from you, about that photo."

He glanced at the clipping in his hand, and frowned. "Why do I get the feeling it isn't aesthetic appreciation that brought you here?"

"Because it's not," she confirmed grimly. "It's a lot more important than that."

He looked resigned, but interested. "So what's in it for me?"

"The chance to help prevent another war."

He smirked. "Haven't you heard, Captain? War means news. Why would I want to put myself out of a job?"

"Because you're playing a game with me, and maybe even yourself, right now."

You're the Trooper's crusader, and that wasn't a title you earned, or ever took, lightly." She met his green eyes head-on, reading the discomfort there. "You saw enough of war and death to never want to see more."

He sighed, his shoulders slumping as he nodded. "All right, you got me there. Let's go on up to my office. I've got plenty to show you."

"Have a seat," Feldar offered a few moments later, as they stepped into his office. With a quick glance, he grinned wryly. "If you can find one."

Tamia looked around the tiny office, and laughter welled up within her. Carey Feldar evidently worked his Pulitzer-winning magic in complete chaos. Piles of paper filled, and overflowed, just about every reasonably flat surface in the office. Why didn't any of this alarm her? He'd never balked at front-line Trooper camp conditions.

"That's okay," she said with an easy grin. "I'll just stand."

"Suit yourself." Feldar shrugged, yanking open the middle drawer of an archaic metal filing cabinet. "This is going to take a while."

He wasn't kidding. Tamia's eyes widened as he emptied the contents of the file drawer onto his already-cluttered desk. "What is all of that?"

"Rotted meat," he said with a grim smile. "The same rotted meat I've been sniffing ever since Martin Panfild was instated as Commandant of the War Department."

Tamia reached to pick up pages and files at random, flipping through them with a wry smile. "I'll bet the Recycling Agency has a field day with you."

Ever since clean technology had come online following the Polar Wars, deforestation for paper had gone the way of petrol-carbon engines, which the government disposed of at the start of World War III, in 2048. Paper, like many other products that had once caused environmental harm, was now made entirely of recycled materials, reducing landfills to practically non-existent, and allowing the forests to be re-grown.

Feldar shot her a grin. “Hey, now. RA *loves* me; I’m one of their best customers.” His good humor collapsed, then. “It’s the WD that has a bounty on my head.”

Tamia sighed, shifting a stack of paperwork to the floor to sink into a seat. “Join the club. The War Department’s already tried to blackmail me.”

His eyes focused on her intently. “Blackmail?”

She nodded. “I have a letter back at home. It came with a Military HQ logo on the top, but it’s unsigned.”

“It’s Panfiled,” Feldar said, scowling. “Ever hear the old saying about power corrupting? Well, he’s the model case.”

Tamia glanced over the pages she held. “You have proof of this, of course.”

He laughed shortly. “If I did, do you think I’d be sitting on it? I want Panfiled bad, and that would be the scoop of the Millennium! At the moment, what I have is a long chain of disrespectful and borderline illegal events. I have a hunch, but no proof of malicious intent.”

Tamia blinked. That had been, almost verbatim, what Rick had said, as well. She

frowned as she looked over the teetering pile of files. “How long have you been on this, Mr. Feldar?”

“Call me Carey, please. I’ve been working it a little bit at a time since Altura, but I’ve only been getting aggressive about keeping a paper trail for the past three years.”

“What do you plan to do with all this?”

“Until I have something solid, nothing.”

“Is there a way I can get copies of all of it?”

His gaze narrowed speculatively. “Why?”

“Because I’m investigating Martin Panfild,” Tamia allowed with a shrug.

“Since when do Troopers do internal investigations of the War Department?”

A small smile flickered at her lips. “Since I’m not a Trooper anymore.”

“IA?”

She flashed him a grin. “Don’t fish, Carey. The answer is ‘that’s classified’.”

His eyebrows rose, but he nodded. “All right, Captain. Give me about twenty minutes, and you can leave with disc copies of everything I have. On one condition.”

Tamia felt her heart stop. Damn. What was he going to ask? “What?”

“I want to see that blackmail letter, sometime. I think I might be able to help you, and it might just be the evidence I need to put a nail in Panfild’s coffin.”

Tamia sighed. “Only if you promise never to print it. For the sake of security.”

“You’ve got a deal, Captain.”

“All right.” She cast him a curious look. “Why are you so determined to get

him?”

Feldar’s expression darkened. “Like you said downstairs, I saw too much of the Divide first-hand. I saw more Special Forces die than ever should have. No one has the right to mock those sacrifices, or belittle their efforts. Especially not the man who sent them into those shit holes in the first place.”

“If you had to speculate, what would you say he’s up to?”

“I’m not sure,” Feldar admitted, frowning. He rooted through the pile for a moment, coming up with a stack of papers held together with a clip. “Have a look at this.”

Tamia took the proffered papers, her eyes widening as she scanned over a chronology of events. Panfild had committed everything from uniform infractions to deliberately flaunting military tradition and protocol by ordering the flag bearers absent from an awards ceremony parade for Special Forces. He’d even had the flags removed from caskets at several Special Forces funerals during the course of the Divide. As she flipped through the pages, Tamia loosed a low whistle. “This is pretty incriminating.”

He nodded. “Yet no one ever said anything, or lodged a formal complaint against him.”

“You think that’s what he wanted?”

“I think he was expecting it. He was looking for an excuse,” the reporter said darkly. “Those funerals, especially, were meant to draw an outcry from Special Forces. He wanted to shut them down, but unless he could charge them with dissention, he

couldn't touch them; not even after Montreal.”

“So how far do you think he'll go, to get what he wants?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea.” He gathered up the files and headed for the office door. “I'll be back with your copies soon.”

And, left alone to ponder what she'd learned, Tamia felt a chill sweep through her. She had a feeling she knew exactly how far Panfild would sink, and the idea scared the Hell out of her.

Forty minutes later, Tamia was back out on the street, a bag of discs tucked securely under her arm. The amount of information she had gathered should have been enough to make her giddy with relief, but the answers she had made her blood run cold. She had to get to the compound, fast! The Commandos needed to know what was going on behind the blandly innocent facade of the War Department.

Of course, she hadn't gone over everything, but Feldar had been more than cooperative, even promising to contact her if he dug up anything else of importance. She'd go over what she had in her quarters, but she was already dreading what she'd find, after what she'd already seen. Martin Panfild wasn't just looking to get rid of Special Forces; he was trying to find a way to ruin them permanently in the process. Feldar had speculated that Panfild's blatant disregard of military tradition and regulations were probably meant to elicit a response from the Spec. Ops. community, to give him a reason to shut them down. So far, his flagrant disregard of military policy had gone without



public comment. Probably because Special Forces were aware that they were being set up. Tamia smirked. Panfild would have to do worse than a few dress code infractions to get the kind of public stink he was after!

Tamia halted, gasping, at that realisation. Certainly, by now, Panfild recognized the necessity of a more devious scheme. And, while Tamia knew that whatever he did would have to stretch the law to almost breaking point, she really didn't believe Panfild would jeopardize his entire career, and his very life, to do so. So, though she doubted he was connected in any way to the Mole, she could only dread what his next step might be, and who might get caught up in it.

Rick sat alone in his quarters, a lit cigarette in his hand as he stared bleakly at the closed file on the table in front of him. He'd read it a hundred times now, and came up with the same lack of answers every time. How could Tamia be a spy? It just didn't seem possible! Previous commanders, and even her Drill Instructors, had noted Tamia's candor, and her integrity. More to the point, there was no record of her ever having had a part in the murder of a federal Marshall. He'd even dug up the homicide report on Timothy Malcolm. Nothing. Oh, David Farenes named as the suspected assailant, and the weapon listed as a 9mm semi-automatic pistol. And Tamia's record indicated that she'd been a close acquaintance of Farenes, while his investigation into her background had hinted that she and Farenes had been more than acquaintances. Lovers, was more like it. But how that tied Tamia to the murder, Rick couldn't figure out. At worst, she

could face the charge of an accomplice to murder, but without witnesses, or irrefutable evidence, that charge wasn't even liable to stick. Someone was shooting in the dark, looking for a weak spot; which didn't make sense, either. Tamia's IA profile cleared her for top-level security clearance. She wasn't noted to have any conflicting ambitions to military career, or to have any emotional imbalances that would make her weaken under pressure. The profiler had gone so far as to list her "categorically immune" to blackmail. And, her record showed a high interest in Special Operations. So why was she carrying around a letter that was nothing *but* blackmail? Why would she suddenly turn spy, now that she was in her desired career? It just didn't make any sense, yet he held all the proof he needed, in a letter that laid out exactly what was expected of her, and what would happen if she didn't comply.

Rick sighed heavily and took a long drag on his cigarette, noticing that his hand wasn't quite steady. He didn't want Tamia's being a spy to be true, which was part of the problem. His attraction to her was intruding into his powers of observation, and he hadn't been able to rest since he'd found that letter this morning, though he'd tried to sleep after the meeting was over. His stomach tied up in knots over this, over *her*; and it was an entirely new, and unwelcome, sensation to him. He'd had to force himself to act naturally at the briefing this morning; his heart had been ready to explode from uncertainty. He'd desperately wanted to accuse her openly and hear her deny it. He'd ached to see the shock of innocence on her face, and in her eyes. But there'd been nothing except confusion and guilt written there, and his heart had grieved for that. Bad enough that

being near her was like standing on a live hundred-volt wire. Seeing the painful guilt etched on her face had eaten at his soul.

That admission disturbed Rick. He'd never let anyone that close to him. Not since Tom and Jean. His life was just too volatile for companionship, for friends. He'd run away rather than deal with Tom's unfounded anger, and then he'd run from Jean, in his own way, after Montreal. Since then, he'd buried himself in his work. Sure, the team was like family to him, like an extension of his own abilities. But he hadn't even let *them* get all that close to him, afraid they'd be torn away one at a time. And now, there was Tamia. He shouldn't let her close to him at all. He didn't trust her motives, didn't trust her actions. It disturbed him to think he might trust her with his heart, but it was undeniably there. He admired her candor, and her strength. Tamia was strong enough to trust openly, even after the Hell she'd been through. That thought troubled Rick even more. Did that fit the mould of a ruthless, or even desperate, spy?

With a heavy sigh, Rick stubbed out his cigarette in his empty coffee cup and stood, stretching. Glancing at the clock, he sighed again. Almost time for the briefing. How he'd get through it this time, he didn't know, but he knew he would. And this time, he'd do what he had to for the safety of his team, and forget about his damned heart.

## CHAPTER SIX

Rick drew a deep breath as he laid down the file he held and looked around the table at his team. These men and women were his only friends, his family. He would die to protect any one of them, and yet... he swallowed hard as his eyes came to rest on Tamia, her face curtained behind a veil of dark hair as she studied the file in front of her. He could almost see the furrow of her brow, the confusion written across her face. For reasons he could hardly explain, he could read her reactions in every nuance of her posture, and knew she was confused by what she'd been given.

He'd planted dummy information in front of her. As much as she twisted his heart and gut with one of those bright smiles of hers, he'd learned a long time ago that emotions only got people killed, and he couldn't afford to risk his team. A small ache formed behind his eyes. God, he wanted... wanted... *what?* To see her smile at him, to hear her laughter as he had that first day she'd arrived, to hold her close and never let her go. He bit the inside of his cheek in frustration. All that was damnably true; but there was something he wanted more than any of those things. He wanted to know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that she was innocent. He wanted to hear it from her, to see the proof of it in those mahogany eyes. But she didn't look at him any more than she had to, and when she did, all he read was painful guilt.

All eyes rose to him as Rick stood every one of them aware that their situation was a precarious one.

"I don't think I need to tell any of you that we're running short on time," Rick started, flicking a glance at Tamia before he continued, "CIA reports indicate that there's been a growing amount of mobilization south of the Patrol border. What kind, no one seems a hundred percent certain, but there's a good bet it has to do with those stolen arms. The EP hasn't started raising a stink yet, but I'm fairly certain it won't be long before the shit hits the fan. We're going to have to step up our timetables. I know you've all been working steadily at this, and I'm sorry to re-arrange things on you, but the possibility exists that we're being monitored, and I can't have any of you working outside what appears normal for your skills and professions."

"Any ideas what we're up against?" Jen asked, leaning forward to prop her elbows on the table.

Rick shook his head. "Nothing definite, but I'm hoping to turn something up, quick."

"What'll happen if this goes public before we're done?" Kathy asked quietly, toying with her necklace.

Rick sighed heavily. "A shitstorm. The last thing we want is a war-panic. If people think there's a possibility of another war brewing, we're going to have mobs of panicked people out there on the streets, and not a damned thing anyone can do about it, so we need to clear this up before the media gets wind of it. Frank," he turned to the redhead, "there's something odd going down over at the ATF. I'd like you to check it out while you're out that way. I'm handing you Matheson, Peters, Rostontini, and Kroynosva. I'm not really concerned about keeping an active track on Ben Peters... the ATF usually keeps a tight enough watch on their people that I don't think he'll be going anywhere they, and we, don't know about. But questioning him will give you a chance to

scope out what's going on at the ATF."

Red nodded, but his brow furrowed. "Why Kroynosva? If we're staying within professional bounds, my tracking a Commerce Department agent is a little out of the ordinary."

Rick shook his head. "He's been indicted once on charges of drug-running, and he's on the CIA's 'watch list' as an arms dealer. You'll need to keep a close and careful tail on him, too. CIA says he's good at spotting a tail, and even better at giving people the slip."

Harlin nodded grimly and sat back, his eyes going to the file in his hands as he opened it.

"Kathy," Rick went on, turning his gaze again, "I'd like you to cover all the politicians." At her groan, he grinned apologetically. "Sorry, Kath. I realize they make up the bulk of the list for now, and it'll be a long and difficult process, but it's relatively safe, well within the bounds of your career, and they like talking to you."

She nodded glumly. "I'd debate that 'safe', but I'll do it."

Rick's brow furrowed as he turned to Chelsea. "Chels, I want you on the next plane to Lima. I'm sending you home for forty-eight hours. See what you can get out of your family about any weapons they've been receiving, and what they've been paying for them. I want to know who their supplier is, if possible, and what he's offering them. I know it's risky, but..."

"I will do it," the petite woman acknowledge quietly. "It is less risky for me than for any of you."

"Chips, we're going to need some ID to get into some of these places, and there's some secured files on the Intel agents we're tracking that I'll need the coding cracked to.

Intel won't give us anything more than *they* think we should know, and what they're giving us is shit. I need into those restricted mission files."

Walter nodded. "Sure. I'm going to need help, though. I'll have to physically patch lines to get into the host systems. They're separate from the main lines."

Rick nodded and turned to Kelly. "Kel, you used to do that kind of stuff for the Resistance. Think you can help Walter out?"

"Righto. Electrical wizardry's a speciality of mine!"

"Good. After you've got him up and running, see if you can track down Fingers Marcioni. I want to know if Marcus squealed anything valuable before he bought it."

She nodded.

Rick sighed then, as he turned to Ishmael. "We've got a problem, and I need you to handle it personally."

"Understood. What is the difficulty, precisely?"

"The CIA's lost three spooks over the last month. They're said to have gone AWOL with important information on our friend's last little Tupperware party in Libya. One of them is on our list, and it's highly possible that, even if she isn't the Mole, she knows who is. I need you to hop a flight to London and find her. I've already contacted Interpol, and they'll have two agents waiting for you at Heathrow. The woman you're looking for is Maria Trechel. There's a picture of her in your file, along with the names and pictures of the other two agents that have gone missing. If you should find any of them, try to get whatever information they have pertaining to the Mole. If you get your hands on Trechel, though, haul her back with you. I've gotten you a CEADS warrant of arrest for her. And, Ishmael? Be careful. These people are trained to be deadly, and the CIA's looking for them, too."

Ishmael tilted his head in acknowledgement. "I shall take that into account."

His eyes fell on Watchdog next, and Rick drew a deep breath. "Matt, I want you back on the drug trade search. This time, see if you can get in on some of the runs. I want to know who's selling what, and to whom. It's not very likely that the Mole's into the drug scene at all, but one of his henchmen might be willing to talk for a gram or two."

Watchdog cracked his knuckles with a grin. "If they don't want to talk before, they'll sing sweet afterward!"

Rick gave him a stern look. "Keep it as legal as possible. I don't want to have to bail you out of jail for some dumb-ass routine."

"He'll behave," Jen responded crisply, "or he'll be stuck in stir for a while, to dry out."

Rick smiled as that comment knocked the wind completely out of Matt's sails. Then, as the gravity of Jen's job settled over him, his smile disappeared completely.

"Jen, I need some more info on three new suspects. You'll find their names and pictures in this file," he said as he slid an unlabeled file across the table to her.

Jen caught it, and flipped it open. A frown crossed her face and, when they lifted to Rick, her green eyes were troubled. "Are you sure about this?"

"Very. Please be as thorough as possible. This is vitally important, and there are lives counting on what you dig up."

Scanning the rest of the table, Rick nodded at them all. "Well, that's it, for now. Good luck."

"Hold it," Tamia spoke up, a frown on her face. "I know I'm new at this, but surely there's *something* I can do to help!"

"You can stay put, and out of the way, for now," Rick returned sharply. "You're



dismissed, everyone."

As the Commandos returned to their duties, they exchanged troubled looks, and Jen LaSaulle cast a furtive, worried look at Tamia, and then met Rick's eyes, sympathy overflowing her emerald gaze. Rick felt his stomach knot, knowing then that she'd seen how troubled he was over Tamia; clearly, his turbulent emotions hadn't remained as hidden as he'd hoped. He met Tamia's eyes with a final, tortured plea in his own, and then turned on his heel. He had to get away from her, before he gave in to impulses he couldn't afford to act on.

Tamia noticed the exchanged glances, and, even more ominous, the lack of noise. No one spoke a word as they left the conference room. Just what the hell was going on around here? Her file had been full of gibberish, stuff not even related to the mission at hand. She'd thought it was some kind of initiation joke or something, and that Rick would clear things up for her as the meeting progressed. But she'd read a tension in him that she couldn't fathom, first as he'd looked at her, and then when he'd risen to brief the team. And now.... why the hell was she being confined to quarters? She hadn't joined this team to sit on her ass! Oh, granted, Rick hadn't directly told her she was confined to quarters, but the intent of the words he'd used was clear as day. He didn't want to see her face during this investigation.

Tamia's eyes narrowed. He was acting like he was afraid to face her, or... she gasped. He was afraid of her! Was that what this was all about? Was she being locked out of the team's mission because he was afraid she'd jeopardize the mission and the team with her unchecked libido? Tamia's face flamed. He probably knew about what she'd been in 'Frisco, too. But, damn it all to hell, she wasn't like that anymore! She'd taken

control of her life quick in Basic. She was a military woman, in control of her situation, and herself, at all times. Her face flushed again as she remembered that night in the gym, and how out of control she'd let that kiss get. Something about Rick made all those walls around her wounded heart vanish.

A sound beside her caused her to look up, straight into Rick's troubled eyes. She saw pain flicker and settle in those cobalt depths, and wanted to cry, knowing that she'd done something unforgivable, to wound him this deeply. Yanking her gaze away from his, she rose quickly from her seat, and felt a small measure of her anger and determination return. She was going to be involved in this investigation, whether he wanted her there or not!

As Rick turned and walked toward the door, Tamia went after him.

"I want to talk to you!"

He kept walking, as if he hadn't heard her.

"Oh, no you don't!" Tamia muttered under her breath, and surged after him.

She finally caught up to him a short distance from the living quarters. Grabbing his arm, she whirled him around to face her. "You have a lot of explaining to do!"

The iciness of his glare, and the smouldering heat that lay under it, made her feel as if he could strip her clothes away with his gaze alone.

"I don't have to explain anything to you," he said frostily, moving to yank his arm away.

Tamia glowered at him. "The hell you don't! Why am I stuck here? I'm more use to the team if I'm out there, helping!"

"You," Rick said tightly, "are better off learning to follow orders. I told you you're confined to quarters, now do it."

"God *damn* it, Rick," she snapped, grabbing his arm again as he turned away, "I didn't join this outfit to sit on my ass! Why are you doing this to me?"

"It's safer for the team," he said quietly.

"Safer for you, you mean," Tamia shot back, glaring defiantly up at him. "It doesn't change anything, dammit! What happened—" She stopped, sucking in her breath, at the smouldering look he turned on her. Dear God, she'd had no idea his eyes could get so blue!

"Between us, you mean? Tamia, my decision has nothing to do with what I want."

Staring into those eyes, Tamia's world tilted.

"What you want?" she asked breathlessly. "What do you want?"

"This, dammit," he swore, his mouth coming down on hers with a hunger that defied sanity as he reached to meld her against himself.

Tamia gasped, and then, her eyes closing, pressed closer. She could feel the heat of his hands on her, of his body pressed against hers, and the barrier of their clothes frustrated her. Time hung, suspended, as she lost herself in the overpowering shelter of his arms. Never before had she felt so secure, or in so much danger, as she did now.

"Rick," she breathed against his lips, pressing her hands to his face, pulling him more firmly to her.

"Dear God," he muttered, pressing kisses over her face and neck, "it's so hard to remember you're a spy when you get this close."

"Spy?" The word was torn from her lips in a breathless cry, its accusation piercing her heart like a frigid spike. She pulled away from his touch then and demanded, "What are you talking about?"

Rick sighed heavily, his eyes alive with longing, and betrayal. "Admit it, Tamia. You can't hide the truth, you know."

Tamia gasped, her eyes going wide in horror, as the frigid chill of his words hit her. He really thought she was a spy!

"No," she whispered painfully, taking several steps backward. "No, Rick. I'm not... I'm not a spy!"

He rubbed his face wearily. "Don't you think I wish the evidence wasn't there? That I could believe you? But I can't take that chance. I've got a team to look after, and I can't afford to trust you just because I happen to feel something for you that I probably shouldn't."

Tamia's heart clenched tightly in her chest, and she backed up another step, feeling her control cracking with every step. And, as her heart broke wide open, she fled him for the solitude of her quarters. She'd promised herself a long time ago to never let another man see her cry.

As the door slid shut behind her, Tamia sank to the floor; her shoulders shaking with the tears that welled up from a source she'd thought had long since run dry. Burying her face in her hands, Tamia sobbed. Suddenly, it didn't matter anymore how far she'd come since 'Frisco. It didn't matter that she'd turned a self-loathing road to destruction into a dedicated, much-decorated path to selfless service, or that she'd accumulated ribbons and medals for risking her own life for the sake of others. It no longer mattered that she'd become someone she'd finally been beginning to accept, and that she'd been clean for almost ten years. It didn't even matter that her decision to deny the mission from the War Department could spell her death if they ever found out. All that mattered was that she had forever lost Rick's trust. He thought she was a spy!

Tamia's eyes lifted, and she stared hard at the phone beside her bed. She could take care of it all herself; she could call the War Department; tell them once and for all where they could shove their mission. That would guarantee her a one-way ticket to the electric chamber, and she didn't give a damn if it did. She couldn't live like this, an outcast in the eyes of someone she had come to care deeply about. She wasn't made that way.

The door tone sounded then, and she thought she heard Rick's voice in the corridor. Biting her bottom lip hard, she covered her ears with her hands and waited. It buzzed again and, as it did, Tamia's eyes sprang open. What if she could prove she was innocent?

Springing to her feet, Tamia glanced at the file she'd been compiling from Feldar's notes as she heard voices, and the fading footsteps of a person moving away down the hall. That was it! Rick probably suspected her because of her comments about Panfild, but he'd misinterpreted her. Her investigation would prove that to him.

Rushing to the sofa, Tamia began gathering up the scattered notes and pictures. Her eyes fell on the newspaper clipping she'd just picked up, and her heart stopped as she realized that Rick had noticed the photo of Panfild was missing. She hadn't thought he would, or that he'd think to trace it to her, but at least now it made sense why he believed she was a spy.

Heart pounding in her throat, Tamia gathered everything up and headed for the door. Rick would probably be in the command center by now. Drawing a deep breath to calm her nerves, Tamia rushed down the corridor, hoping that she was doing the right thing.

Rick sat staring miserably at the table. He should be going through the files again, but he couldn't seem to concentrate. He blamed his raging hormones, and that heart-stopping kiss. He sighed, shaking his head as he faced the truth. Hormones alone weren't responsible for his lack of focus. The stunned, horrified look in Tamia's eyes when he'd let that one accusation slip out, and her breathless, heart-wrenching avowals that she wasn't a spy, haunted him. With a small groan, he tore his mind away from it. Bad enough he could barely control himself around her, but to feel that kind of compassion... His face set grimly. He'd let her in too deep. The only solution was to block her back out.

Rick's eyes closed at the thought, and his gut twisted hard. He didn't want to push her away. He wanted to believe her. He wanted to believe her so badly it hurt, but he couldn't afford to do that. His team came first, and they'd all suffer if she truly was a spy. He just didn't know what the truth was, anymore.

Rick glanced up, startled, as the door opened, and his heart collided with his brain, short-circuiting his thoughts. Tamia stood in the doorway, determination shining in her mahogany eyes and a grim expression spread across her face. She held a stack of paperwork clutched against her chest, her knuckles white around her cargo. Rick's heart plummeted clear into his stomach. Had she taken more than he'd realized? His eyes narrowed on her.

"Yes?"

Rick winced at the icy tone of his own voice, and watched her face blanch completely. Dear god, she was actually trembling! Was she afraid of him? After the way he'd behaved toward her, he couldn't blame her if she was, but the idea of her cringing before him caused a black wave of self-loathing to wash over him.

"Rick," she said quietly, clearly struggling to keep her voice steady, "I know why you think I'm a spy." She stepped further into the room. "But you're wrong. Yes, I took the clipping on Panfild, but not for the reason you think. I've been doing some inquiries of my own."

"What sort of inquiries?"

She swallowed visibly as she set the stack of files on the table in front of him. "Remember when I first came here? You said Panfild didn't even have a uniform infraction on his record. That bothered me, but I didn't know why, until I came here that night. I went through all the files on Panfild, and then I found that photo. It was taken just after the Altura campaign, at the awards ceremony."

"Yeah," Rick agreed, nodding slightly. "But what's...?"

"My point? I was there, at the awards ceremony, too. That photo jogged my memory. Take a good look, Rick. That's not Panfild's uniform. Look," she continued, leaning over his shoulder to point at the man in the picture, "his dress coat is about two sizes too small, and see how it rides up a good inch from his waist? And here, look at his epaulet. The rank's wrong. It isn't his uniform, though I've no idea whose it really is. That doesn't really matter, anyway. It doesn't even matter that he showed up at a formal military function so far outside of regulation that he should have drawn lots of comments and attention but didn't. What matters is the reason he did it."

Rick glanced at her face, just inches from his own, and held his breath. Here it came. Here was where she proved she was a spy, and defended Panfild's actions, like she had at that briefing.

"What reason?" He asked quietly when she didn't say anything.

She turned to look at him, her eyes stormy. "He was trying to goad the Special

Forces recipients into accusing him, so he could revoke their awards, and drum them out of the military on the charge of gross insubordination. Those were some of the best, and bravest, people who ever fought in that damned war, and he was trying to destroy them, and everything they stood for." Righteous pride flared in her eyes, then. "But those guys stood right there with their chins up, and silently took that insult. They knew that what Panfild was doing mocked everyone who'd died, mocked everything that all of us had bled for, and lost friends for, but they wouldn't let him win. If anything, they deserved medals for that!"

Those words, and the look in her eyes, hit Rick square in the gut, and he felt the knot of anxiety disappear. She wasn't a spy! Not only was she not defending Panfild, but she was also tearing the man, and his ethics, to pieces. Suddenly, Rick wanted to grab her and kiss her until they were both breathless. But that wasn't what she wanted, he reminded himself sternly. She only wanted him to trust her. Glancing at the rest of the paperwork she'd brought, he asked, "So, what's all this?"

"The results of my inquiries. I borrowed that photo from the files so I could track down the reporter who'd snapped it. His name's Carey Feldar, and he's provided some very valuable information about Panfild, including all the instances he could find where Panfild not only went outside the regs, but clean outside the law."

Rick's eyes lit with pride as he looked into her face. She was a wonder! He must have looked at that photo of Panfild a hundred times, but he'd never thought to look any closer than the surface. She'd dug right in, and turned up a contact that could prove invaluable to them later. And she'd done all this at a great risk to herself. His heart clenched as he remembered the letter he'd found. Whoever had wanted her to play spy would find out that she'd refused to play their game, sooner or later, and then she'd be in



mortal danger. He swallowed hard. She'd be in peril, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

Looking into Tamia's hopeful eyes, Rick forced a smile to his face. "All right, Tamia. You wanted dealt into the game, so I think I've got you a hand. You've dug up some impressive shit on Panfile already. Are you ready for round two?"

"Hoo-yah, Commander," she said, grinning

"Okay, I'm giving you the War Department investigation. I'll set you up with Walter to get proper ID and passcodes, and Kelly and I will put you through the Arena's training sims. for the building. But when you go in there, you're going to have to do it solo. We need some kind of solid proof that Panfile is involved in that missing arms shipment, and we need to find out what other skeletons he's hiding, too. One person has a chance of getting in and back out with minimal difficulty. Two people would be taking a chance we can't afford to take."

Tamia grinned. "You got it."

"Tamia..." He sighed heavily and looked up at her. "You'll be walking into a death-trap, over there. If they find out your ID is falsified, or if they change the passcodes between when you get them and when you get there, you'll be heading for a possible death sentence for espionage and high treason."

She smiled sadly. "If the wrong people find out I'm in the building, I won't live long enough to get arrested. I know the risks I'm taking."

He nodded solemnly. "Then, let's get to it, Tamia."

She grinned. "I'm ready when you are!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Okay, Blade, you’re almost ready,” Rick’s voice came over the Arena intercom. “We’ve walked you through the security procedures four times, and your scores are still perfect. Come on out, now, and we’ll finish getting you outfitted.”

“Way t’go, sheila,” Kelly seconded. “We’ll make a spy out of you, yet.”

Running her hand through her hair, Tamia blew out her breath and glanced down at the Battle Dress Uniform, or BDUs, she was wearing. To get into the War Department without arousing suspicion, she was going to have to become full military again, after a fashion. She grinned wryly, shaking her head. What she felt like was a damned chameleon.

Tamia strode to the door, letting herself out of the Arena as the holographic projection of the War Department’s interior faded around her. She smirked as she watched it; too bad they couldn’t blink the real one out of existence as easily. She’d always been impressed by Arenas, though. They were state-of-the-art technology, projecting holographic surroundings and combatants from a combination of light-and-sound projectors and electrical current amplifiers built into the bulletproof walls of the room. Up until shortly before the Polar Wars had begun, in 2075, the technology had been little more than science fiction. Now, barely forty-three years later, that same technology had become so refined that commercial industry was beginning to scale down holotech in a variety of consumer forms for those who could afford the expensive trinkets

and devices.

As she stepped out into the corridor, Tamia found Rick waiting for her, a friendly smile on his face.

“That was pretty awesome, considering you’ve been hit with different problems in there, non-stop, for five days. How’re you holding up?”

She laughed. It had been a long week, with even longer days spent training for her upcoming infiltration. “Now I know what you went through during Hell Week.”

His grin widened at her reference to the first phase of training for the Navy’s SEa, Air, and Land programme. “Not even close, smart ass. Now, c’mon; Jen’s waiting to stick you.”

Shaking her head wryly at the wicked gleam in his blue eyes, Tamia followed Rick toward the infirmary, where Jen and Walter were waiting to draw the blood necessary to create her secured network tags. “Did Walter get into the system, yet?”

He shrugged, and cast her a look. “He says he did. Walt’s dependable, so don’t worry. You’re in the system if he says you are.”

She forced herself to relax. “And is he any good at this tagging shit? It’s supposed to be complicated, from what I’ve read.”

“He’s former Military Intel, Tamia. He used to cook this kind of stuff for a living, so just relax, okay?”

Tamia subsided with a sigh. “Sorry. I’m just nervous. Last time I did anything remotely like this, you had to come and rescue my ass.”

She was talking about Rio Bantos, and they both knew it. He shot her a teasing grin, and she swore she saw a flash of heat in his cobalt eyes as they met hers. “That’s a habit I could get into, Captain.”

“Men,” Tamia grumbled affably. Then, changing the subject, she asked, “When do I go in?”

His smile collapsed suddenly, sending a shaft of dread through Tamia.  
“Tomorrow afternoon.”

So soon? Tamia’s heart pounded anxiously. All during training, it had seemed a lifetime away. Suddenly, she felt nervous.

Jen glanced up with a grin as Tamia and Rick entered the infirmary, and Tamia felt some of her trepidation abate.

“Hey, girl,” Jen said easily in greeting. “Kelly said you kicked ass in the Arena today.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Tamia replied with a small grin. She’d been too nervous to think about what she’d been doing.

“I would,” Rick murmured, sending Tamia a look that made her heart flutter.  
“I’ve only rarely seen scores that good from career, seasoned SEALs.”

“High praise,” Jen said, one brow raising as she picked up a sealed hypodermic needle and vial from the table and nodded for Tamia to have a seat. “You ready for this, Tamia?”

Tamia snorted a laugh as she rolled up her sleeve. “Needles don’t scare me, Doc. It’s not like I’ve never seen one before.”

Jen caught sight of the dark lines on the inside of Tamia’s arm, and a frown of concern settled over her face as her eyes went between Rick and Tamia. “I didn’t realize...”

“Just draw the damned blood, Jen,” Rick snapped, drawing astonished looks from

both women. Tamia's brow furrowed as she saw the protective gleam in his cobalt eyes. Why did he think that period of her life still bothered her? She'd long since moved on.

"It's okay," she assured Jen quietly, even as she laid a stilling hand on Rick's arm. "They're really old. It was a long time ago."

The other woman nodded, swallowing slightly, though she shot a curious glance toward Rick as she prepped her supplies. "You still want all three of those profiles you requested, Rick?"

Tamia glanced at Rick, confused, but he wouldn't meet her eyes, his gaze fixed on Jen as he gave a short, sharp nod, and then turned on his heel and disappeared through the infirmary door without a word.

"Wow." Jen looked after him, and loosed a quiet whistle of disbelief. "Okay, now I'm totally convinced that the man's gone off the deep end. Straighten your arm and make a fist, please."

Tamia studied the other woman with narrowed eyes, confused, as Jen snapped on the thin tourniquet and searched out a reasonably undamaged vein. "Why do you say that?"

Jen chuckled as she swabbed Tamia's arm and swiftly inserted the needle, letting the vial fill with blood. "Because in five years, I've never see Rick lose his cool like that."

Tamia blinked, and her eyes shot to the door in concern, even as Jen finished, dabbing coagulative agent on Tamia's arm before labelling the vial and reaching for her palm-size computer. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I've never seen him react like that; not even when I cased his profile for IA. The man's always been unflappable, until now." Jen tapped something into the

computer and looked up. “Have you taken any medications in the past seventy-two hours?”

Tamia shook her head. “No. Surely, you’re exaggerating. Everyone has a breaking point.”

Jen tapped Tamia’s response into her computer, and shrugged lightly. “Everyone also displays distinct situational response; it’s a psychological maxim. But Rick was the exception; he drove my superiors crazy. When they put him through the Crisis Monitor – it’s like an Arena, except that it monitors and scores responses to different types of crises, to help us gauge personal comfort zones – Rick didn’t even register on the machine, his responses were so cool and methodical. They were identical to what the machine itself had mapped out as the ideal solution.”

That information troubled Tamia in ways she really didn’t want to consider. Like, why had she never seen Rick as cool and methodical? Even at Rio Bantos, there had been worry and fear in his eyes when she’d first looked into them. And, ever since she’d arrived here, he’d seemed tense and unpredictable. Of course, when he’d kissed her... Tamia’s mind flashed on the memory of what had happened between them in the gym, and she felt her face heat.

“Okay, Blade,” Walter’s voice saved her from Jen’s speculative gaze as he poked his head into the exam room from the lab. “If Jen’s finished inputting your medical data, and if she’s given me the correct medical history, we should be in business soon.”

“How long?” She asked, turning her eyes toward him.

“An hour, maybe,” Walter said as he took the vial of blood Jen held out. “By then, we should know if any breakdown’s occurred.”

Curiosity overcame Tamia’s embarrassment, and she followed him into the lab.

“Breakdown?”

Walter nodded as he donned protective gear, to keep from contaminating the specimen, and began measuring out drops of her blood. With a wry smile, Tamia decided it was a lot like watching a crew-cut version of Dr. Frankenstein at work.

He glanced at her. “You know how military dog tags are made.”

She nodded. “The DNA is sealed, and then stamped inside the metal plates, like a DNA barcode.”

“Same basic principle applies to Spook tags,” Walter explained as he drew a bottle of clear liquid toward where he was working. “Until you get to the anti-clotting agent, that is. The military uses an alcohol-based inhibitor. But spy tags use something called Bioback.”

Tamia’s brow furrowed. She’d never heard of it. “What’s that?”

Walter smirked as he showed her the bottle of syrupy liquid. “Nasty stuff, that’s what. Only a few government agencies even know this stuff exists, and only about half of those can actually get it.”

She eyed him warily. If what he was saying was true... “Do I even want to ask where you got that from?”

He grinned. “An anonymous source at CIA.”

“I see.” Her lips twitched as she leaned a hip against the counter near him. “This anonymous source... she know what you wanted it for?”

“She doesn’t ask.”

“Every man’s dream woman,” she teased.

His grin collapsed completely, and Tamia caught a flash of pain in his eyes.

“Oh, God, Walter. I’m sorry if I—“

“My wife died during the bombing of Quantico, in ‘thirteen,” he said quietly, his voice and face pained as he stared at his hands blankly. “Jolynne was my life, and there’s no replacing her.”

Tamia’s heart broke for him. To lose someone he clearly adored in one of the worst bombings of the Divide was a weight she could empathize with all too well, after losing her family.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I’m an ass. I just assumed...”

“My source is my sister,” he told her, his gaze returning to what he was doing with new determination. “Meg doesn’t ask, because she knows better.”

She nodded, and awkwardly changed the subject. “So, what’s so special about this Bioback stuff?”

“A lot of things. It’s radioactive—“

“Excuse me?” Tamia broke in, blinking hard at him. “You expect me to wear something that’s going to slowly poison me to death?”

He chuckled, his good humor clearly restored. “It won’t affect you, Tamia, so don’t worry. The radiation’s a tracking isotope; it’s not lethal. The problem with it, however, is in mixing it with blood.”

She frowned. “Why’s that?”

“It has to be mixed exactly, or you get complete genetic breakdown. Trust me; it might not be toxic on a radioactive level, but you don’t want to be getting any large quantities of this stuff into your bloodstream.”

“Great. Remind me not to add it to my tea,” she quipped, and then eyed him warily. “And you know how to work with this stuff?”

He nodded, and then went silent in concentration as he slowly started adding



drops of the clear, syrupy chemical to slides dotted with her blood. As he finished, he looked up. “Military Intel. Sent a lot of spies across the border during the Divide. Making these things was a large part of my job.”

Tamia grinned. “The I’ll leave the professional to his task, and get out of your hair. Let me know if you need anything else from me.”

He murmured his assent, turning back to the first of the slides, and Tamia shook her head wryly as she left the lab. So far, it looked like she was batting a thousand in the communications department, when it came to dealing with Commandos. Who’d have ever thought it would be so difficult?

Two hours later, Tamia, Rick, Kelly, and Jen sat at the command center conference table, waiting for Walter. As he strode in the door, Tamia took one look at the flat case – roughly the size of a shoebox – and decided she didn’t really want to know what all her job was going to entail.

“Okay, everyone. We’re ready to get this show on the road,” Walter said as he set the case on the conference table.

“And it only took a week. Geeze, I’d hate to see what a *real* mission requires,” Tamia quipped to cover her nerves, hoping to break the tension she felt hovering over the command center.

“Don’t blow this off now, Tamia,” Rick warned, frowning. “This is probably the most difficult mission of this entire investigation. We’ve never infiltrated one of our own secured sites, before, and certainly never the War Department. Our IA charter says we’re not permitted to carry out this kind of intense investigation of our own agencies without authorisation.”

Tamia sobered. “I know. Okay, Walter, what’ve you got for me?”

Opening the case, Walter presented her with a neck chain containing two small, circular discs about the size and thickness of a quarter. “Your secured network tags.”

Tamia swallowed hard as she gingerly took the tags, eyeing them uncertainly. Walter had said they were safe, but the idea of putting anything radioactive around her neck was unappealing at best. That the tags could only be read by special machines – machines the Commandos didn’t have access to – made her even *more* nervous. “You’re sure it worked?”

Walter cast a sympathetic look. “I’ve been making these things for years, Blade. As best I can tell, yeah, it worked. The only real test, I’m afraid, will be when they go through the reader at the War Department, however.” At her wince, he smiled sadly. “Sorry, but I can’t make you any better guarantees.”

She sighed, looping the tags around her neck and trying not to feel like the ancient mariner draping the albatross around his neck. “All right. What else?”

He presented her with two cards roughly the size and thickness of credit cards, but made of aluminium. One was a light green, the other a deep, dark red.

“These are passcards. The secure wing of the War Department has modulated-system security that requires a collection of passcards and a timing codebook. We don’t have the necessary clearance for those cards or books. However, this card,” he tapped the red one, “has a modulation strip imbedded in it, to get you into the Intelligence Wing. It’s a code-breaker card that’ll mimic the codes in the system. But this,” he handed her a slip of paper, “is the code you’ll need to memorize to get back out of the wing. It’s a manually coded exit system.”

She sighed. Of course, the Spooks couldn’t make it easy on her. “And the green

card?”

“Access to the secure-access corridor. This one’s a little trickier,” he admitted, his expression openly concerned. “The codes are modulated in a way that can’t be fooled by a code-breaker. I had to hack the system, with Kelly’s help,” he flicked the dark woman a smile. “We set a magnetic strip with today’s codes and modulations into the back of the card, plus a timing chip to control the cycling.”

“What’s the problem?” Rick asked quietly; the first he’d spoken since Walter had arrived.

“The problem is, they could have modified the modulations since last night, or their clocks could be synchronized differently; in either case,” he looked at Tamia, “you’ll be a sitting duck.”

Rick shifted uncomfortably, and Tamia sighed. “Is there any good news in all this?”

Walter chuckled. “Yeah. Once you get past the access doors, you’ll be home free.”

“The codes we’re looking for are in the six-hundred section, and the information should be easy access once we have the right codes,” Rick supplied.

Chips nodded. “Kelly went over the blueprints we downloaded. She’ll walk you through the corridors. Kelly?”

“Military Intel and coding information are both in the mainframe sector, in room six-twelve,” Kelly explained, laying the blueprint map out on the table and tracing the path. “It’s easy access, and the panels on the mainframe should be practically in your face, once you get in.”

“No one expects anyone but secure-cleared technicians to be in that sector,

“Walter supplied helpfully. “It’s essentially a huge information containment zone, with nothing but mainframe systems. Most people who’d be accessing the information in those systems are going to do so from connected stations elsewhere in the building, so you should be able to do a physical patch and download without drawing much, if any, notice.” He handed her a small, hand-held unit. “Patch this directly into the system and download. Everything should transmit directly back here via the SAT link in Comms. I have it programmed to the same frequency, so it’ll be ‘listening’ for you.”

She nodded. “Anything else?”

“Just one thing,” Rick said, dropping a small pile of pale yellow latex in front of her. “You’ll need these.”

Tamia’s brow furrowed as she picked up the latex gloves. Hardly anyone used these, anymore. “Why? What about sealers?”

He shook his head grimly. “Pore sealers and fingerprint paints need special adhesive removers to take off.”

“Yeah, I know. But what’s—?”

“You’ll probably have to provide prints to get into the War Department building, and you won’t be able to get in or out of the Underground without tripping an alarm, if you put that shit on.” He sighed. “If your prints don’t show up on scans at the front door, they’ll want to know why, and if you need to get in here, quick, afterward, waiting for an escort could be dangerous. The gloves are the best solution; you can put them on and take them off as you need to.”

She nodded her understanding.

“Well, that’s it,” Rick said, rising. “Get some sleep tonight, Tamia. You’re going to need to be totally alert, tomorrow.”

And, as she moved along the corridors of the Underground toward her quarters a few moments later, Tamia admitted she was scared. Even knowing what she was doing, and that her support team was well trained, was small consolation when her very life rested in carrying this off without so much a sneeze out of place.

The next afternoon, Tamia drew a deep breath, for courage, as she stood looking warily up at the forbidding grey building. No matter what it housed, that building would always send a chill down her spine. That it housed the War Department only underscored the wave of dread that washed over her. Somewhere in that building was a maniac who held her very fate in his or her hands. Tamia's hands clenched by her sides, and she was only too aware that she could be walking into a trap.

Tamia drew another deep breath and shook off the feeling with a shrug. Oh, well. A job was a job. She'd put her life at risk enough times that the thought of death had long since ceased to frighten her. Besides, she'd been trained by the best in the business. She could handle this. She squared her shoulders and marched confidently up the steps and into the building.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the guard just inside the first set of doors stopped her, "but I'll need to see some ID."

She nodded briskly and presented her military ID. The young man looked it over, swiped it through the key-slot on his terminal, and then handed it back.

"Please press your hand to the ID confirmation plate."

She did, waiting while the machine read her hand for identifying prints. Then, looking up, she met the guard's smile.

"Thanks, Captain. Go ahead," he said as the doors slid open a moment later.

Tamia smiled her thanks as she moved through the second set of doors. There, another guard stopped her. "Captain, I'll need your security passcard and your destination."

With another nod, Tamia presented the guard, an older woman this time, with her passcard. "I'm here to see the Deputy Director of Intelligence. I'll be leaving about eighteen-hundred hours."

The woman slid the card into the access slot, and punched up something on her terminal. Her brow furrowed. "Do you have an appointment?"

Tamia shook her head. "Deputy Director Philips knew I would be by, but due to security, he thought it best I come unannounced."

The woman frowned. "In that case, I'll need your secured network tags."

Tamia forced herself to breathe normally, even as she nodded and unlooped the tags from around her neck. Her heart pounded, loud, in her ears. She still wasn't sure how good Walter really was at this, and, according to him, spy tags were a bitch to manufacture. They had the spy's encrypted genetic coding in them and a tracking isotope as well. But what bothered Tamia more was the system hack Walter had supposedly done. If he hadn't got into the system, it wouldn't matter how well trained he was at Spook tags. She'd be just as dead; because, if the coding on those tags didn't match the coding on a spook record, she'd be spending the rest of this lifetime in the Brig; if she was lucky.

Oh, shit. The guard was studying her warily, like she was *looking* for some reason to suspect her. Inwardly, Tamia forced herself calm. The last thing she wanted was to look nervous. Finally, the guard turned back to her terminal. A second later, there was a beep, and the guard looked up again, this time holding Tamia's tags and card out, a

smile on her face.

"Thank you, Captain. Have a nice day."

As the lobby door slid shut behind her, Tamia breathed a small sigh of relief. Stage one down. Now, it was up to her to make sure the rest went so well. She had an hour, at tops. Right now, no one suspected that she didn't belong here, or that she wasn't here to see anyone at all, much less the Deputy Director of Intelligence. If he walked out the door while she was still in the building, she'd be up the proverbial creek. Closing her eyes momentarily, she recalled the map she'd spent all of last evening studying. She needed to find the Intelligence wing, and then the secured access corridor. She fingered the collection of passcards in her pocket. One of them would get her into the wing, and one into the corridor. Walter had imbedded some kind of access code-breaker into the magnetic strip on the backs. In theory, those two cards would trick the security systems into thinking she had the usual wad of passcards for each time the system modulated codes.

Moving swiftly, Tamia wound her way through the low-security corridors and up two flights of stairs, until she stood before the sealed doors to the Intelligence wing.

Well, here goes nothing, she acknowledged as she pulled out the first of the cards, drawing a steadying breath to keep her hands from shaking. Deftly, she swiped the card through the security scanner. She held her breath while the computer scrolled through the system, looking for authentication. Seconds later, it beeped, and the doors slid open.

Tamia smiled to herself in relief. It appeared that Walter was every bit as good as he'd claimed to be. Feeling more sure of herself now that she was through the worst of it, Tamia moved swiftly down the corridor, her eyes flicking over the room numbers as she

went. Five-fifty-two, five-fifty-three.... Rick had said the codes were usually stored in the old mainframe in the six hundred section. Tamia stopped as she came to the first break in the corridor. Now, which corridor was it? Mentally, she scrolled through the map, tracing her route from the front door inward. After the security door was the five hundred block... the first turn led to the security-coded rooms, the second was the six hundred block. Tamia grinned to herself. This was almost too easy.

Her grin vanished. When something was this easy, it usually wasn't a good sign. Her senses on high alert, Tamia continued down the main corridor until she hit the turn for the six hundred block. Moving cautiously, Tamia stopped before the door stencilled with the number 612 on it, and drew in a steadying breath. There could be people in there... Tamia gave herself a firm shake. She was going paranoid! This was a secured wing. The chance of people in all these rooms was next to nil, and the mainframe rooms wouldn't have anyone in them. Tamia laid her hand against the palm-sized disc-copier/camera in her jacket pocket, assuring herself it was still there. The next few minutes would tell if Walter's theory about direct link-up to the SATlink held water. Tapping the access pad, Tamia stepped cautiously into the room, and breathed a sigh of relief to find it dark. No one worked in the dark, except someone who wasn't supposed to be there at all.

Carefully side-stepping the power-supply and connection cords, Tamia knelt beside the huge mainframe, her fingers carefully searching out the access panel Walter had said could be found near the bottom. As she searched, Tamia looked up at the monstrous machine, giving it an appreciative once-over. She didn't know all that much about older systems, but this old box would impress just about anyone. A relic from the early days of the twenty-first century, the old PrimTech mainframe wasn't near as bulky



as the twentieth century models, but it still out massed any other system available. Unlike the IBM mainframes of the late twentieth, they built the PrimTechs to last practically forever. That Intel still used them was testament enough to that.

Tamia grinned as her fingers found the edge of the access panel. Carefully, she eased the metal plate away, and pulled her transmitter and link-up wiring from her pocket. With deft movements, she slipped the connectors into their slots and flipped on the power to the palm-sized machine. She nearly laughed aloud as, within seconds, she found herself scrolling through codes that would make a spy salivate.

A few moments later, Tamia shut down the mini-terminal's power and disconnected it from the mainframe. She had all she needed, and she'd transmitted a shitload of information back to the main system at the Underground. She was almost done. Now that she had the code, all she needed was to get into the War Department's secure-file room in the security-coded corridor.

It took a matter of seconds to navigate the corridor back to the security-coded rooms. From there, she used the match-number from Panfild's computer file to find the room most likely to be War Department property. Of course, she was only working on a hunch, here. There was no telling if the numbers actually meant anything or not.

Glancing around quickly, she tapped in the five-digit access code she'd found in the mainframe. If she was wrong, and this code didn't unlock this door, then it'd be all over in less than ten seconds. Tamia bit her lip nervously as the seconds dragged by, her nerves jumping with the strain of listening for alarms.

Tamia's heart jumped clear out of her chest as a loud beeping startled her back to her immediate surroundings, and the door slid open. Her eyes closed and a sigh of relief

escaped her. Not cut out for this undercover shit. She much preferred front-line battle tactics. In the front lines of battle, you faced your enemy head-on. You didn't sneak around behind his back, and he didn't sneak around behind yours.

With a sharp shake of her head, Tamia stepped through the door, firmly informing herself that she was to concentrate on here and now, not what she'd done in the past. What she was doing now was every bit as important as what a soldier did on the lines, or maybe more so. She was trying to prevent a war from happening. When it came down to it, all wars were really the result of bullshit, and all the political maneuvers war was used as a cover for weren't hidden where an amateur could get at them. That confidential information, and the most damning evidence of the world's greatest form of crime, was only very rarely kept in accessible areas or systems. War planning was still a hard-copy crime, the sort of stuff they kept sealed in physical files, because a good hacker could find ways into even a sealed system.

As the door slid shut behind her, Tamia blinked rapidly, adjusting her eyes to the near-darkness of the small room. There were no windows here -- windows only left easy access to second-story thieves -- and any other bright light would give her away if someone noticed it. The only access to the room besides the door was a vent along the wall to the left of the door, permitting air to circulate the room. Even with that, it was uncomfortably warm.

Slipping a palm-sized flashlight from her jacket pocket, Tamia flipped it on and moved her eyes around the room, barely stifling a gasp of dismayed surprise. There had to be millions of files stored here, in the cabinets alone! And there, tucked in one corner of the room, was an Integrated-Systems Unit, one of the most sophisticated computer-storage machines ever. Great. ISUs generally stayed programmed to regurgitate their

stored information via a synthesized voice program. Probably filled to capacity with information, too. There was no way this was going to go unnoticed.

Sighing inwardly, Tamia reached for the discs Walter had given her. She could download the computer files while she searched the hard files. Carefully pulling on a pair of latex gloves, she rubbed her hands against her jacket to be sure no prints or oils remained on the gloves. Then, cautiously, she flipped on the terminal grid, and held her breath as it sprang to life. A frown wrinkled her brow momentarily when the programming options scrolled across the screen, unaided by a digital voicebox. For a brief second, she wondered if she'd stumbled into a trap after all. Then, forcing herself calm, she thought it through rationally. If she was one of the highest-ranking officials in the military, and she was about to perform a coup on her own chain of command, would she really want to take the chance that anyone walking by her private storage/work room would overhear her plans? Would she want herself indicted on the word of a chatty machine that was only responding to programming? Of course not. Flashing her light over the terminal connections confirmed her suspicions. The voicebox had been manually disconnected.

Turning back to the screen, she quickly scrolled through several program listings, and punched up the file list, then slid a disc into the recorder and hit disc record and then all files. As soon as she was sure it was recording, she shut off the screen's power, so the light wouldn't give her away, and moved toward the first of the filing cabinets along the walls.

Quietly, she opened the first drawer and shone the flashlight over its contents. As she read the file titles, her brow furrowed deeper and deeper. There were files in here on some of the most important campaigns that'd ever taken place. That in itself wouldn't be

surprising, or damning, to find in the files of the War Department Commandant, though a few JAG officers might wonder why he'd bothered to keep hard copy files on them. No, what was damning was that the only campaigns that were accounted for here were the ones that had failed. The coup in Buenos Aires that had begun the Divide, the failed raid on Rio Bantos nearly a year later, the messed-up Airborne drop into Lima in 2111 that'd left a hundred and sixty Rangers dead and rotting in some unknown stretch of jungle. The SEAL fiasco in Montreal.... Tamia gasped. These had all resulted in mass casualties, and the loss of valuable information. Montreal had nearly been the turning point of the war, and CEADS had very nearly lost. Since then, the SEALs had carried a slight tarnish, an undeserved reputation as a blundering pack of amateur hunters. That'd been when Rick had given up on the military after Montreal. Tamia pulled out the file, and scanned its contents. What she read made her blood run cold. Those men and women had been cannon fodder, nothing more. Sixty-eight of the United States Military's most elite, experienced, and loyal operatives, both military and civilian, had been led into an ambush they'd had no way of escaping, by the very same man who was supposed to be their leader. And... Tamia's face blanched of color completely. There had been only one survivor of that massacre, one solitary witness to what was probably the greatest military betrayal since Benedict Arnold. The name leapt out at her, a bloody testament to why the Commandos operated the way they did. Commander Richard Benjamin Carinson.

Tamia fumbled in her pocket for the minicam, and ran it over the pages of that file, and the pages of several more files, as well as the file headings for the entire drawer. Pulling open the next drawer, Tamia scanned file after file labelled with names. She pulled several at random and scanned their contents with the cam as well, realising as she

did that each of the files she opened were for people who had something to hide, some secret they didn't want known. An uneasy feeling built up in Tamia as she scanned the rest of the file headings. She stopped, a gasp escaping her, as she came to one marked Kuan, Tamia. Yanking it from the drawer, she flipped it open, and her face paled. They had a copy of her birth certificate! Every piece of her life was documented here, except for the few, brief years she'd spent with Kuron, and the short time since the letter she'd received about becoming a spy. The last notation in the file, in fact, was about the successful delivery of a mysterious "package." Tamia's eyes snapped up. That blackmail letter had come from the War Department! Her expression hardened. Panfild might not be guilty in the eyes of the law yet, but he was damned guilty in her eyes, and she'd make sure he'd live to pay for all his crimes against not only the living, but also the dead.

Drawing a breath, Tamia reminded herself not to judge yet. After all, they had more than a dozen suspects in the War Department, and while Panfild's dislike of Special Forces and mercenary units was an established fact, it didn't necessarily finger him as the Mole, or connect him in any way at all.

Ten minutes later, Tamia slid the last drawer closed, popped the disc from the computer's recording unit, and shut down the system. At the door, she listened for a moment, and then stepped cautiously into the corridor. She nodded in satisfaction when she found it empty. . Careful to appear casual, as though she belonged there, Tamia strode past the guard who ambled down the hall, alert for trouble, and headed toward the security doors in the main corridor. At the security doors, she punched in the code to open the doors from within, and stopped cold.

Shit! She'd just punched in the wrong code! Before she could draw another

breath, the jangling of a security alarm sounded, and the doors unlocked to admit security teams. Her heart pounding in her ears, Tamia mobilized immediately, yanking open the door, and starting down the hallway in the opposite direction from security at a fast walk. She had to reach the main stairs, or she was dead! She drew in a sharp breath as she heard a security detail thumping down the corridor toward her. Damn, she wasn't going to make it! Glancing around desperately, her eyes lit on a nearby elevator. She bit her lip hard. She had no clue where that went, but it was the only door around! Her decision made, she punched the button. The door opened, and she vaulted inside. Now, if she could keep it on this floor... Tamia punched the floor stop button, and breathed a sigh of relief as it held. She listened intently as the security detail passed by outside, and breathed a sigh of relief. She reached for the door release, but, just before her fingers touched it, the floor stop button popped, and the elevator lurched and started to rise.

Tamia's heart leapt into her throat. Wherever this elevator was going, she decidedly didn't want to be in it when it arrived. Her gaze went up, and she grinned in relief as she saw the maintenance grate that led to the top of the cab. Thank God for pre-tech buildings! Drawing a deep breath, she jumped, grabbed hold of the safety bar, and brought her legs into an arc, busting through the mesh grate. Crouched on top of the cab, she looked up, and gasped as her heart squeezed sickeningly. The elevator trap! The sharp spikes of the trap were nearing at a deadly rapid pace. Heart hammering, Tamia studied the walls of the shaft above her. There! It was a vent, about ten feet from the trap. If she could make the jump, she'd be out of this mess in minutes.

Muscles toned from years of use bunched as she steadied herself to leap for the vent. Her pulse was pounding in her temple and throat, and her face and body were drenched in sweat as her eyes fixed on the vent, refusing to look at the trap that was

steadily drawing nearer. Closer...Closer...Now! In one fluid movement, Tamia launched herself toward the vent. Her fingers found the smooth interior of the vent walls, and began to slide under her weight. The elevator had stopped, about six feet below the vent. As Tamia felt herself sliding helplessly, the cab lurched again, and started back down

Shit! Tamia swore silently, her fingers clawing for purchase as the cab swiftly descended into the inky darkness of the elevator shaft. Then, just as her fingers reached the edge of the vent, they caught against a narrow band of loose metal plating. Dangling precariously, Tamia attempted to pull her weight up against that narrow ledge, dreadfully aware that death hung all around her. If the plating gave, or her fingers slipped, or her weight shifted as much as a fraction off the mark, she would be plummeting to a grisly death some twenty stories below.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Pain seared through Tamia's arms and chest as the minutes ticked by. She couldn't hold on much longer. Her only chance now rested in pushing past the pain and deciding which way to go. She could try to jump for the cables at the elevator shaft's center and pray she made it, or she could attempt to make it into the air vent. Cautiously, Tamia moved her feet along the wall, looking for anything that might support even a fraction of her weight. Her left foot hit a metal pipe and her breath caught. Moving her feet, Tamia managed to get both of them onto the thin line, and eased her weight down, her eyes closing as she listened to the creak of the metal beneath her. They re-opened in surprise when the slim bit of metal took most of her weight without excessive strain. Loosening one hand cautiously from the lip of the vent, she reached into her pocket for the survival knife she'd long ago learned never to go anywhere without. The sheath clasped between her teeth, she freed the blade and stabbed the knife into the aluminium panelling of the vent's interior. Then, in painful inches, she pulled herself up into the vent's opening. Snaking her body around, she slid her feet into the vent shaft, and slid forward, yanking the knife free as she went. She slipped it into its sheath, then into her pocket again, and lay in the dark ventilation shaft, panting for breath and flexing her shoulders as best she could to loosen the painful knots that had formed there.

Then, twisting back around in the cramped vent, she inched her way along the shaft in her elbows, following it out. If she were correct in her assumption, this vent



would lead directly outdoors if she followed it straight. She only hoped there was something nearby to help her down, or she'd be looking at another twenty-story drop once she got there.

After ten minutes of crawling along on her elbows, Tamia came to the end of the vent, which was covered by a heavy grate. As she peered through the grate, she nodded. It led out of the building, just as she'd hoped. A quick glance to the left of the grate also told her she was luckier than she'd ever imagined. The grate opened out less than a yard from a fire escape. About four feet below the grate there was also a small ledge. If she could reach the ledge and find some kind of purchase to hold onto, she might just make it to the fire escape, and freedom.

Using her survival knife, Tamia pried the grate from its moulding and then twisted around to use her feet to kick it out. Slipping down along the wall cautiously, she found the slender ledge with her feet. Easing herself along, her fingers gripping the stonewalls where the mortar had loosened over the years, she inched her way toward the fire escape until her hip bumped the rusty bars. Tamia breathed a thankful sigh for the architecture of pre-Divide buildings as she clambered over the fire escape rail and raced down the iron stairs. If she could make it to street level, blending in would take no effort.

Two minutes later, Tamia was threading her way down Second Avenue, away from the Military Headquarters complex. By the time she reached East Fifty-Seventh Street, she felt safe enough to slow her pace to a casual walk. She was less than ten blocks from the compound, and she forced herself to move nonchalantly. Turning off onto East Forty-ninth, she feigned interests in the shop displays and building logos, looking every bit the out-of-town shopper. By the time she hit Park Avenue, she knew

she was home free. Two blocks down, and she was casually strolling through a miniature mall. Then, with a bored glance, telling her that no one was paying her the slightest bit of attention, she rounded the corner and slipped her access card from her pocket, sliding it through the slot and plate beside an elevator marked "Private Apartments - Key required." Then, pressing her hand to the plate, she breathed a small sigh of relief. Seconds later, the elevator door slid open, and Tamia stepped inside.

"Back so soon?" An Australian-accented voice teased over the internal speaker, and Tamia grinned toward the surveillance camera hidden in the panel above the door.

"Yeah. Rough ride, though. Hey, Hood, you did second story work before, right?"

A laugh answered her. "Mor'n me own share, sheila. You run into trouble?"

Tamia recalled her precarious situation in the elevator shaft and grinned wryly. "Just a bad elevator ride."

Kelly chuckled. "Well, we'll try to make this one smooth for you, then."

A moment later, the elevator door opened again, and Tamia stepped into the quiet corridor. Reaching to smooth her dishevelled hair, Tamia walked the short distance to the command center. As the door slid open, she saw Kelly Blake emerge from Comms., a grin on her dark face.

"Ah, now there's a sheila who's seen some action! Find anything? Or did you just crawl around in the ventilation all day?"

Tamia laughed at the accuracy of Kelly's jibe as she dumped the contents of her jacket pockets on the table. "A little of both. I did something dumb, and almost got caught in the process. You on console duty?"

Kelly nodded. "They left me guardin' the bloody machines today."

"Here," Tamia said, sliding minicam, transmitters, and discs across the table to Kelly. "That's everything I could get access to. You get the coded transmissions earlier?"

"Yeah." Kelly gave her a worried look when she pulled off her jacket, grabbed up her survival knife, and headed for the door. "Where're you off to, then?"

Tamia flashed her a grin. "I'm going to go pick up my gun and head for the Arena. I've still got a lot of adrenaline to work off!"

Thirty minutes later, Tamia stood facing a line of paper targets, her faithful old Glock picking holes in them in rapid succession. She was so intent on what she was doing that she never heard the Arena door open.

"Pretty impressive shooting. Must've been one hell of a day!"

Startled by the sound of another voice, Tamia whipped about, gun aimed to fire a lethal round to the chest. Rick, standing just inside the door, threw up his hands and laughed.

"Whoa! Stand down, Marine! Before you shoot me, at least hear what I have to say!"

She grinned then, lowering her weapon. "Waste of a perfectly good bullet. What's up?"

He plopped down on one of the benches bracketing the door. "You did a good job out there today, Tamia. Kelly said you ran into some trouble, though, and it seems she was right. What happened?"

Tamia shrugged. "Guess reality was a little more nerve-wracking than I expected. I punched the wrong code to get out of the security wing, and nearly got myself killed

playing hide-n-seek in the elevator shaft."

He nodded. "Any of them see you clear enough to make positive ID?"

"Are you asking me if I jeopardized the team's safety?" she countered heatedly. Bad enough she'd bungled her first time out without him interrogating her about it!

To her disbelief, he shook his head. "I'm asking if anyone figured out who you were, Tamia. You put yourself at double risk going in there, and I don't want to find a communiqué from Headquarters or JAG demanding your arrest."

She gaped at him. "How'd you...?"

He sighed. "I found the blackmail letter, Tamia. You forgot it the night you went through the files. You put yourself at high risk with what you did, and I don't want to see it causing you any problems. Now, did they see you clearly?"

Numbly, she shook her head. He'd seen the letter. No wonder he'd thought she was a spy!

"Good," Rick answered, a relieved grin flickering at his lips. "Well, I'll let you get back to your practice and..."

At his sudden halt, Tamia looked at him in worry, to find his gaze on her gun, his jaw slack in amazement.

"Here, want to check it out for yourself?" she asked, grinning, as she held the Glock out to him.

Rick took the gun and turned it over in his hands, letting out a short whistle of appreciation as he ran his fingers along the casing.

"Impressive. This is one damn beautiful piece. Where'd you find it?"

Tamia shook her head. "I didn't find it. I rebuilt it."

Rick's eyes were wide in disbelief when they lifted to her face.

"You built this?" he asked quietly. "You assembled all the parts yourself?"

The ghost of a smile tugged at her lips. "Well, not so much built as refitted. It's a Glock, but I replaced all the parts with non-metals as I could find them."

"As a Trooper," he said, nodding.

Tamia shook her head with a laugh. "Hell, no! You think they'd have let a punk kid with my record get her hands on the necessary parts. Nah, I built it in 'Frisco."

Rick's jaw dropped. "You refit this entire gun while you were on the streets? How'd you get your hands on the materials? And how the hell did you get hold of a federal-issue Glock forty-four in the first place?"

Tamia laughed again. "Oh, c'mon, Rick! You ran with some pretty rough crowds yourself, if I remember correctly! Surely, you know how they got their hands on spare parts. Even top-of-the-line polytechs."

Rick hefted the Glock, and shook his head. "Yeah, but the 'tech used in this is a Superlite. Those weren't widely used, even by the military, until the start of the Divide."

Tamia shrugged. "I knew this guy who dealt in black market military 'tech. He might have been a spy, for all I knew, but I didn't give a damn about that at the time. All I cared about was that he could get me just about anything I wanted. Anyway, he swapped me merchandise from time-to-time, and let me buy some of the stuff off of him, too."

Rick realized he was getting into deep water, now. If the letter he'd found was true, she'd been involved in the murder of a federal agent. Her answer to his next question was a burning uncertainty in Rick's chest, but he knew he had to ask. He watched her carefully as he said, "But where did you get the gun in the first place? Even

a fence knows federal weapons when he sees them, and he'll turn the gun and the seller in to save his own hide."

Tamia sighed, and looked away. "I took it off a dead Federal Marshall."

Rick's heart stopped in his chest, and pain clutched him. It was true, then. "Christ, Tamia! You shot a federal agent, and then stole his gun? What were you thinking?"

"It wasn't like that!" Tamia shot back, her dark eyes flashing. "And I didn't kill him; David did. The guy had come with a warrant to arrest David. As soon as David heard, he set up an ambush, and shot the guy. He told me to search the Marshall for papers and money, shit like that. I'd have been a fucking idiot to not do as David said, or he would've shot me, too. But I'd have been worse than that if I'd let David know I'd found the Glock. I hid it from him, clear up until Basic... until it was too late for him to remember where it'd come from."

"So that letter I saw... They can't really make the murder charge stick..."

Tamia snorted a laugh. "Sure they can. The Marshall's dead, David's dead, and you're holding all the evidence they'd ever need. They could lock my ass away for a long time, or even ship me off-world, if they want!"

Rick sighed heavily. "So why didn't you turn spy? Why not do what they asked, and save your own ass? You didn't know any of us from Adam..."

She shrugged, and then let out her breath. "I couldn't. Do you have any idea how long I've worked for this, how much shit I've put up with to get here? I'd have been a damned fool to throw all that away by turning spy once I got here. Then, once I met everyone, I just couldn't bring myself to even consider it. That'd be like turning my grandfather over to the Chinese army."

"Speaking of which," Rick hedged into his next question, "what do you think would happen to him if you got shipped off to Mars or some other hellhole? Have you thought about that at all?"

She snorted a laugh. "Kuron would go on, with little more than a shrug. I've gotten into a lot of trouble in my life, and he doesn't say a word about it unless it impedes or illustrates something he's been trying to teach me." She gave Rick a wary look. "You sound like you want me to spy on the Commandos!"

"I don't," he assured her, then, at the sceptical look she gave him, rolled his eyes. "Aw, hell, Tamia, I don't, really! Why would I? This is my outfit, my only real family. I just want you to be aware of all of the consequences of what you chose. I'm trying to be honest with you, here, and I'm going to tell you one thing that's a guarantee. I'll try my damndest to help you out as much as I can, do what I can to keep them from running you through all that shit, but if Military and Civil Justice want you that bad, there's not a damned thing I can do to stop them."

"I know that," she said quietly, her eyes lowering. "And, thanks, Rick. There haven't been many people who've been willing to help me out in my life. It's good to know I have a friend."

Rick's eyes dropped to the Glock-44 in his hands, and watched his fingers clench hard on it, feeling the plastic casing bite into his palms. Friend. God, he wanted to be so much more. She had no idea how hard it was on him, to look at her and remind himself that he couldn't touch her. He'd thought he could be her friend, when she'd first arrived, and that, once he got to know her better, his desire for her would ebb away. Problem was, it hadn't worked that way. The more he'd gotten to know her, the more he'd wanted her; even when he'd thought she was a spy.

He dreaded every message that came through from the Justice Department, now, expecting the next one to be a warrant for Tamia's arrest. He could fight a blatant kidnapping, or a little blackmail, but a warrant was unquestionable, particularly now that he knew she'd been involved in the shooting. God, she had no idea how sorry he was that she hadn't been a spy. A spy he could've dismissed from the unit, if not his mind. Betrayal would have killed everything he felt for her, given enough time. He could have viewed her every word as a neatly fabricated lie, then.

But Tamia wasn't any of those things. She was as loyal and honest as her life allowed, with an integrity he'd only ever seen once before. Oh, she was as human as the next, but she knew what her goals were, and she wasn't about to let anything stand in her way. Not even her past, or the chance of a future in hell. That was a singular courage, and it drew him unerringly. The better he came to know her, the more desperate he was to be more than just her friend.

Tamia studied the expression on Rick's down-turned face, and the way his hands were clenched on the Glock. It tore her heart, wondering what he struggled so hard against. She longed to reach out to him, to draw out whatever it was that troubled him, but knew she couldn't. Over the past couple of weeks since she'd arrived, they'd travelled a rocky path of mixed emotions and needs, and she knew she had a friend in Rick. But friendship only went so far, and there were things she wanted to tell him that went beyond the bounds of friendship. She wanted to tell him how often she thought of him, and those few, heart-stopping moments she'd spent in his arms. But she couldn't. He was her commanding officer, even before her friend, and for the sake of both her career and their friendship, she wouldn't -- couldn't -- say those words.



Summoning her control, Tamia cleared her throat, breaking the silence and causing his head to raise expectantly. Was that a glimmer of hope she saw in his eyes? She dismissed it as silly fancy. Forcing a smile to her lips, she held out her hand.

"If you don't mind, I'll get back to my practice."

He looked startled for a moment, and then, as if suddenly realising he was still holding her gun, blinked and grinned sheepishly as he handed it back to her. She took it with a grin of her own, and turned back toward the shooting range silhouettes.

Rick watched as she dispatched target after target efficiently. It gave him a new appreciation for her skill, but worried him at the same time. How many years of practice and battle had that perfection cost her? How many times had she taken a bullet for not being fast enough, or accurate enough? Most of the career military he had ever known were range trained, their skills honed on paper or holographic enemies, which, at most, delivered a mild electrical charge if they hit. But Tamia's skills had been learned on the streets, where the enemies and the threat of death were real.

The gravity of their current situation hit him, then. They were both in danger here, in this work. That was why few Special Forces operatives ever got seriously involved. If you didn't get attached to anyone, you never dreaded dying, or being separated for years at a time. Few of the Commandos had ever had any serious relationships, and most of those that existed were from before the team had been formed.

Frank had Calli Malone, but they'd met when he'd been working border patrol for the DEA. She was used to him being in danger, and even though they weren't married, Calli's situation had been improved by Frank's change of job. Kelly had Carrissa Leads, but they'd met before Kelly had joined the Commandos, too. Jen and Matt, of them all,

had the only relationship that had been formed after the team had come together. Theirs was an on-again, off-again relationship, though, and they seemed reluctant to change that, with the danger of their work. Walter kept pretty much to himself, and Rick knew the other man had lost his wife during a base raid in the early part of the Divide. Rick was fairly sure Walter still hadn't finished dealing with that, yet. Chelsea, too, had lost at love. She'd been engaged to Marcos Santiago, a drug lord twice her age who'd been assassinated by COSEC snipers for his opposition to the Divide. The scandal of Santiago's death had been enough to ruin Chelsea's reputation among her father's wealthy business and political associates. To spare the family and further embarrassment, he'd made arrangements to send her to live with a maiden aunt in Columbia. But Baraman Banhauste, a wealthy German philanthropist and activist for the rights of the South American poor, had taken up the cause of Santiago's grieving lover, and spirited her away to the US. Santiago's death was also part of the reason Chelsea had come to the Commandos. She had a score or two to settle, and she made a valuable link to the drug world. Ishmael was escaping from himself, here, and Rick very much doubted the man wanted any more disastrous attachments like the one that had driven him out of Iran in the first place.

Then, there was Kathy. She'd probably been engaged a dozen times, and she went through boyfriends like a Trooper through bullets. Even before she'd joined the Commandos, she hadn't kept a steady relationship very long. Part of the showbiz act, Rick guessed. As long as it didn't interfere with the mission or endanger the team, it wasn't any of his business what his team did with their down time, anyway.

And nor was Tamia's sex life, he reminded himself sternly. Yet, for a reason he couldn't quite name, the thought of another man touching her clouded his mind with blind

rage. Pushing it aside, he decided determinedly that, if friendship were all she wanted from him, he'd respect her wish even if it cost him ever shred of sanity he had left. Anything else, he was going to let her come to him.

\* \* \*

Tamia sat back from the console with a sigh, stretching to loosen the kinks long Comms. shifts always gave her. She'd been replaying the expression on Rick's face as he'd looked at that Glock, earlier, all evening. He'd looked so miserable. Tamia squeezed her eyes shut against the memory. This was what she hated about graveyard Comms. shifts; there was way too much time to think.

She grimaced as she glanced around the mess of papers she had spread out all over the floor, tables, and chairs. There was too much paperwork involved in this, too. God, she hated paperwork!

"Good God! Did someone explode a propaganda bomb in here?"

Tamia spun her chair around to find Rick standing just inside the Comms. room door, a bemused expression on his face. She grinned, as amused by his confusion as by his question. "Nope. This is how I work best."

"In utter chaos?" His wary eyes ran over the scattered paperwork, and he shuddered, before shaking his head. "I don't see how."

"I lived in chaos. For years," she reminded him, shrugging. "I'm used to it."

"And the military never beat it out of you?" A small smile quirked up one side of his mouth. "Amazing. What have you got so far?"

"Not much." She cast a baleful look at the machines that were still periodically spitting out faxes and printouts. "I'd probably think better without all these damned machines, though."

His lopsided grin grew. “I’ve got a deal for you, then. If it gets this mess out of Comms., I’ll let you work this your own way. Keep it stacked up neat in here, and, as long as you don’t receive any Red Code priorities, you can drop this propaganda bomb in your quarters at the end of your shifts, and work it out there. Just bring me the results. File the rest back here.”

Tamia grinned, even as the vid-phone beeped an incoming call. “Works for me.”

He nodded as he turned toward the door. “See you later, then.”

Tamia was still grinning as she pressed the connection button that would allow voice but not picture on the unit. Standard procedure required the caller to identify him or herself and state their business, before they could communicate face-to-face with a Commando. “You’ve reached a restricted number. Please identify yourself.”

“Why did you never call me? Why did I have to learn about this from an outsider?” The stern voice, speaking in Tibetan, caught Tamia by surprise, and she barely stifled a resigned groan.

“How did you get this number, Kuron?”

“America has made you disrespectful, young lady,” he continued, clearly displeased, and just as clearly ignoring her question, like normal.

Sighing, Tamia reached for the headset, used for secure communications, and flipped the circuit over as she adjusted the set on her head.

“All right, Grandfather. What’s got your dander up, today?” She asked in weary resignation. Shaung Ku-ran, her maternal grandfather – whom she’d taken to calling Kuron, much to his displeasure, back in ‘Frisco – had a penchant for long-distance lectures. “And then maybe you can tell me how you found me.”

“I am your grandfather; your only blood relation, Tamiasa. I have a right to know.”

“Kuron, it’s supposed to be classified. How did you find me?”

“It was not difficult,” he said in his brisk, clipped tone. “Your commander contacted me about you, through the Consulate at Lhasa. This was the number he gave me, when I asked how I might contact you.”

Tamia’s heart stalled. Rick had contacted Kuron! She’d never expected him to be so thorough. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him he would do best to ask you those things he asked of me.”

She released her breath in a relieved chuckle, trying to imagine a determined Rick trying to pump Kuron – equally mule-headed when he wanted to be – for information about her. Relief, however, was short-lived as Kuron calmly said, “He asked me of David.”

The fear returned, tenfold. Of all the people in the world who might know something of her turbulent relationship with David Farenas, Kuron was the only one besides herself who knew every sordid detail – both public and private – of her life with David. After David’s death, she’d gone AWOL briefly; her illusion of invincibility shattered, and had fled to Kuron. She’d poured her heart out to the old man, knowing that he’d never betray his own flesh and blood; she’d believed her confidences were safe with him. If he had told Rick... “You didn’t tell him.”

“He was persistent.”

Her heart sank. “You did tell him. Dammit, Kuron, I trusted you!”

“I did not betray your trust, Tamiasa.”

“What did you tell him?” She grated out. Damn it, if Rick had found out what

she'd done...

"I told him only what you would have wished him to know."

"Nothing?" She asked hopefully.

"You wished him to know more than that eight years ago," Kuron said, his tone full of censure. "I told him that you did not mourn David. I told him that David had hurt you. That is all."

Tamia drew a deep breath, counting silently as she tamped down anger. "You had no right..."

"I am your grandfather," he reiterated firmly. "I have every right to do what is best for you."

Tamia's eyes narrowed as what he was talking about registered. Damn it, Kuron was meddling again! But, being Kuron, he wouldn't understand why she saw his help as counterproductive. Sighing, she asked, "All right. Why did you call here, Grandfather?"

He was silent for a long moment, and then, "I wished to know why you have put yourself into danger. Did you not learn your lesson with David?"

Exasperation shot through her. "What lesson would that be?"

"That you must listen with your heart, if you wish to survive in this dangerous world. Is this place you are in a place you have been brought to by your heart, or by your pride and fear?"

The image of Rick, his cobalt eyes alive with desire as he knelt above her slashed through Tamia like a thermal weapon. Her heart? She wasn't so sure about that, but she'd definitely been led here by her hormones.

"I don't know."

His breath sighed over the line, a wash of static. "Then you had best find out,

before your pride causes your death.”

And, before she could answer him, the line clicked dead, leaving Tamia to stare at the console in wary disbelief. Was he actually warning her away from the Commandos, when he knew how hard she'd fought to get here? Or was he warning her away from Rick?

A low whistle drew her attention back to her surroundings, and she turned to find Matt Clipper standing in the doorway. Removing the headset, she cocked one brow at him in question. “What’s up with you?”

“Sounds like family matters’re getting a little hot, huh?”

She started, surprised by Matt’s quick assessment. “You speak Tibetan?”

He hooted a laugh. “Chinagirl, I don’t even speak English, to hear some people around here tell it.”

“So how...?”

“You didn’t look too happy... and that didn’t sound like a friendly chat, from your tone of voice.”

Tamia rolled her neck, groaning in frustration. “You have no idea, Matt. I can’t wait to get off this shift.”

“Stiff?” He smirked knowingly. “Always does that to Jen, too. Want me to help you out?”

She cast him a wary look. “How’s that?”

His grin widened teasingly. “I happen to have the master touch, is how.”

“Yeah, right.” She winced as she rotated her shoulders. Damn, that hurt. “The hands of God, and all that. Heard it before, Clipper. It’s a cheap come-on.”

He snorted a laugh, drawing her attention. “Not if I like my balls where they are,

it's not," he quipped. "Even if you didn't feed 'em to me, Jen would. But I am serious. I know a thing or two about massage."

She eyed him for a moment, then shrugged and winced. "If you think you can help without getting yourself neutered, give it a go, Clipper."

There was too much work to do. That was the excuse Rick gave himself. He made his way toward the command center for the second time in four hours; and it was a damned poor excuse, at that. He was transparent, even to himself.

The truth was, he was awake because his dreams had been filled with erotic images of Tamia that had refused to be banished, and he'd awakened so hard that movement had been painful. Twenty minutes under an ice-cold shower had helped his body subside, but not his mind, which kept reminding him that Tamia was still on Comms. duty. That, of course, had roused images of laying her out, naked, on the conference table and tasting every inch of that honeyed skin of hers.

Rick groaned inwardly as his body reacted to the images in his mind, even as he tapped the door pad to enter the command center. If he was at all lucky, she wouldn't be sitting at that damned table, or he'd probably do something he'd have cause to regret.

She wasn't there, he noted with a surge of relief, just before the sound of voices, from Communications, reached him. One, he recognized as Tamia's, and the other was familiar, and male, but Rick couldn't place it. Brow furrowing as he wondered what was going on; Rick strode across the command center to the open door of Comms, and froze.

Tamia sat at the console, her head bent forward so that her hair fell across her face. Behind her stood Matt Clipper, grinning down at her as his hands massaged her exposed neck and shoulders, wringing a small groan from the woman.



“God, that’s good,” Tamia said, her voice tinged with laughter. “Okay, so I stand corrected. You do have God’s hands.”

A shaft of pure rage avalanched through Rick at sight and words combined. Dammit, if he couldn’t touch her, he sure as Hell didn’t want anyone else pawing her, either! His eyes narrowed. Matt and Tamia were both products of the streets; they probably had more in common than he and Tamia did. Just how close were these two, anyway?

“I keep tellin’ ya, Chinagirl. Black is be—“ Matt stopped as his gaze flicked over, and met Rick’s scowl. Rick watched with dark humor as the other man’s eyes widened, just before his hands fell away from Tamia and he muttered, “Oh, shit.”

“Why’d you stop?” Tamia asked from behind the curtain of her hair, then straightened to look around. “What’s the mat—? Rick!”

Matt swallowed hard, stepping away as his eyes moved nervously to the outside door of Comms. “I’m outta here. See ya later, Blade.”

With that, he beat a hasty exit, Rick’s glare following him into the corridor. As soon as Matt was gone, Rick turned his frustrated rage on Tamia.

“What the hell was going on in here?”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” she said tightly, her posture defensive, “but Matt just stopped in to drop off his mission notes. He was helping me work the kinks out of my neck and shoulders.”

“Damn it, Tamia,” he stalked over to her, yanking her seat around as he bent over her and let her see the frustration that burned in him. “What is it with you? Do you get some kind of rise out of tormenting people, or something?”

She jerked away, her expression angry as she rose to her feet and grabbed up a

file, heading for the command center. “I don’t recall doing anything of the kind. Just who am I supposedly torturing, anyway?”

“Me,” he growled, catching her just inside the doorway as he dropped his head to cover her lips in a punishing kiss.

She gasped against his mouth, and the sound of paper hitting the concrete floor filtered through his consciousness, only to be swept away by a raging flood of hunger as he drank in her sweet response. Grasping her hips, he backed her up against the doorframe, shuddering with need as he felt her softness cradle him. He groaned at the contact, pressing her tighter against his clamoring body. God, he needed her.

The image of laying her out on the table came back to him as she whimpered and shifted even closer, her hands clutching his backside as her fingers dug into cloth, and the flesh beneath. But that image was overlaid with a savage lust, and the need to stake his claim to this woman. That thought doused his ardor as effectively as a bucket of ice water. Backing off with a sharp gasp, he stared down at her, fighting for control of his body.

That hard-won control nearly splintered as her hazy, mahogany eyes met his, and the flecks of red-gold desire there shot through his system. Her tongue darted out, swiping over lush, well-kissed lips, and he tore himself away with a groan, before his control broke completely.

“Rick?” Her confused query came out in a husky whisper, and he clenched his hands against reaching for her again. Latching onto a lifeline, he registered a sound from inside Comms., rasping, “Someone’s on the line. Best get back to work.”

And then, taking his own advice before he could make another stupid mistake, he turned on his heel and fled.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Try it again, Frank.” The engine compartment door muffled Rick’s voice as he torqued an electrical plug a little tighter. Stepping back, he swiped a grease-darkened hand across his already-smudged face and listened intently as Frank turned over the Rover’s Chameleon system.

Designed to make the transport gunship silent and invisible, Chameleon engines were state-of-the-art technology comprised of sophisticated electrical systems, holotechnology, and hydro engines that ran on superheated water. So far, only the Commandos’ Rover was equipped with the prototype system. Lately, though, the damned thing had been anything but silent.

Rick frowned as he heard the low-pitched whine of the engine on rotation. “Cut it, Frank! It’s still whining.”

The whine died, and Rick sighed as he bent over into the engine compartment again. He’d been at this ever since he’d left Tamia in Comms last night. Knowing sleep was beyond him, at that point, he’d decided to get something productive accomplished, so he’d pored through the manuals that had been sent over from Science and Research for the sophisticated Chameleon. Those manuals might as well have been printed in Greek, for all the good, they did him. He wasn’t much of a mechanic, when it came to heavy-duty machinery. So he’d been glad when Frank had come to help out at 0600 this morning, until the other man had admitted that the technology had him stumped as well.

Rick sighed. What they really needed around this place was a damned mechanic...

Rick nearly cracked his skull open on the compartment casing as a hand suddenly ran over his rear, becoming fingertips as it traced up his spine, causing him to jerk upright in shock. He withdrew his head from the engine, rubbing it and muttering curses, until he glanced up to find Tamia standing beside him, an impish grin on her face that caused his heart to stall.

“Sorry,” she said, looking totally unrepentant,” but I couldn’t resist. You’ve got a great ass, you know.”

He gave her a mock scowl as he rubbed his still-aching head again. He knew what this was all about, now. She was getting even for his alpha-male stunt in Comms. last night. “You’re late.”

Her grin widened. “I had a lot to weed through. Besides, you weren’t in your quarters when I got there. I had to come track you down.” She glanced over his grease-spattered coveralls and skin, and one dark eyebrow rose. “You need a shower.”

Those words sent a spike of lust through him as his mind conjured images of her in that shower with him. He let his eyes trail over her skin-tight bodysuit beneath the open shirt she wore, and smiled languidly. “You planning to join me?”

Her eyes widened a fraction, and he swore he saw hunger, before she swept it all away with a cocky grin. “Depends on what’s in it for me.”

He laughed, but shook his head, as he pushed his libido firmly away. “As much as I’d love to take you up on that dare, Blade, I’ve got too much to do, right now.”

“What’s the matter?” She asked curiously, leaning against the Rover’s fuselage.

He shrugged as he retrieved his calibrator and turned back to the panel. “The Chameleon’s out.”

She leaned forward, her eyes alight with interest. “I’ve read about those. They wanted to upgrade the Tanks’ polar deflectors with those, about a year ago. They’re really not that much different, except that the reflectors only reduce glare and muffle sound. The Chameleon’s supposed to erase sight and sound completely.”

Rick backed up a step, looking toward her again in surprise. “You mean you know something about this shit?”

She shrugged. “Sure. The engines are essentially the same in a Tank, and the Chameleon was supposed to be an upgrade on existing Tank systems once it was properly tested and debugged.” She glanced at him. “Crank it up, and I’ll give it a listen-to.”

Rick nodded, wondering why he was stunned that Tamia, after three years around Mobile Armored Flight Tanks, knew more about machinery than he did. She probably knew a hell of a lot of things that would stagger him.

“Give it a go, Red!” He called to Frank, and caught Tamia’s startled glance, and the slight flush of her cheeks. So, she’d thought they were alone when she’d pulled that little finger-walking stunt, had she? He nearly chuckled.

As Frank started up the engine, Tamia cocked her head to one side and chewed her bottom lip in concentration as she listened. She looked adorable, like that, and he was tempted to lean forward and relieve her teeth of that lush lip with his mouth. But she wouldn’t appreciate him breaking her concentration like that.

Finally, with a smile, Tamia nodded. “Shut it down, Frank!” She turned to Rick, then. “I know what that is. You’ve got a loose filter in the hydro release system. Tanks get them all the time,” she explained to his surprised look. “If you’ll lend me some coveralls, I can have it fixed in no time.”

“Over there.” He indicated a locker bank along the wall, a wry grin on his face.

“Am I going to have to start paying you for mechanic duties, too?”

She laughed. “All part of the job.”

Rick swallowed hard and forced his gaze elsewhere as she stripped off her loose over-shirt and stepped into the coveralls.

“Anything interesting in Comms.?” God, was that husky croak really his voice?

“Not a lot,” she said, and he heard the soft hiss of the suit’s static lock closing.

He swallowed hard at the sound, and forced himself to concentrate on her tone of voice, rather than the mental image of her in those coveralls and nothing else. God, he was getting pathetic. “But?”

“I went back over those acquisitions files I downloaded at the War Department. Rick, there’s something not right, there.”

He shot her a troubled look as she strode past him, pulling her hair back into the clip she always carried in her shirt pocket. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted, frowning, as she picked up a torque wrench and bent into the engine compartment. “But there’s a damned lot of stuff going missing that isn’t showing up as flagged in the databanks.”

Rick stared at her protruding rear end as it wriggled with whatever she was doing in there. He nearly choked, his throat dry as dust. And she thought he had a nice ass? Hers was pure Heaven, and it was driving him mad, moving around like that. He was having trouble concentrating as images of that tight little ass pressed against him assaulted his senses, making him wince as his erection pressed painfully against his fly.

“Rick?” Her voice, muffled in the compartment, reached through the lust, making him blink.

“Yeah?”

“Can you hand me the socket wrench and three-sixteenths socket?”

Socket wrench? She had him so turned on, he was lucky he could remember his name at the moment, let alone what a socket wrench was. Blinking again, he located the appropriate parts. As he stepped forward to hand it to her, she suddenly backed up fast, swearing. “God damn it; that’s hot!”

Her soft rear collided with his groin, and Rick nearly swore himself, his eyes rolling back as he battled down the burst of a totally different kind of heat that careened through him. Through his lustful haze, he heard her chuckle. “Interesting.”

Okay, so his concentration had already suffered terminal meltdown about the time she bent over in that engine compartment. He could still be a gentleman about this. Gritting his teeth, he managed, “Unless you’re ready for things to get a lot more interesting, Captain, just take the damned wrench and go back to work.”

She shot him an impish look over her shoulder that nearly felled him, slowly sliding her hand down the wrench’s handle until she covered his hand. Damn; his hands were trembling, and she had to feel it, with hers covering his. Her wink, as she stepped away, confirmed that, and he wanted to groan with frustration. Instead, he drew a shuddering breath as she returned to her work, and turned away from the appealing sight of her rear as he commanded his body to subside. As the painful need ebbed away, he closed his eyes in relief. If Tamia was going to hang around, this was going to be one hell of a long day.

“So what’s up with the acquisitions?” He asked when he finally had his body under control again. He vaguely remembered her mentioning a discrepancy.

“I don’t know,” she said, and he heard the grunt of effort as she applied her strength to the wrench. “But I’ll find out this afternoon. I’m going to do some more

digging.”

He blinked. Had he missed something? “You’re not on Comms. this afternoon. Jen is.”

“She’s got a meeting at IA at fifteen-hundred. I told her that I’d cover for her, if she’d take my graveyard shift tomorrow. I hate graveyard Comms.”

Rick mentally calculated, and frowned. “Shift starts at fourteen-hundred. You should get some rack time before then.”

She stepped back, shooting him a grin. “That sounded dangerously like a proposition, Commander.”

He groaned. “Tamia…”

“Don’t worry,” she said lightly as she wiped her hands on her coveralls. “I’ll hit the rack as soon as I leave here. I’ll stop by your quarters at twenty-one-hundred tonight with whatever I pull in on Comms.” She snagged a grease rag, frowning as she scrubbed at a particularly annoying spot on her hand and called out to Frank, “Give it a crank now!”

The engine whined for a second, and then went totally silent. Only the shivering of the open engine compartment gave any indicated that the vehicle was running at all. Tamia grinned as she turned to Rick. “Am I good or what?”

And, as she discarded her coveralls and headed for the door, Rick watched her go with hungry eyes, and murmured, “Oh, yeah.”

It was going to be a long day, all right.

It was almost 2100, Tamia saw as she glanced at the clock near the door of her quarters that night. She sighed heavily and stretched, attempting to loosen the tension in



her neck and shoulders. A wry grin filtered across her features as she ran her eyes over the papers and discs scattered across the sofa and floor around her. It hadn't taken her long – only one Communications shift – to realize that she thought much better when a dozen or more beeping machines didn't surround her. Nor had it taken long for Rick to realize she created a disaster area when given paperwork. So they'd reached an arrangement of sorts, last night. At the end of her Comms. shift, Tamia brought all the data she'd collected back to her quarters, and went through it thoroughly, highlighting the important information, summarising her theories and observations, and making notes for crosschecking data. Then she gathered up whatever was important and took it directly to Rick. So far, they'd fallen into this pattern of working together naturally, and it was working well. They were working well. Together.

A small smile touched Tamia's face, then, softening her mouth. It amazed her how easily "she" and "he" had become "they." She'd never trusted anyone quite the way she did Rick. Oh, she trusted Kuron right enough. He was her only family, and he'd always known her deepest fears and memories, so she'd never had a choice but to trust him. If Shaung Ku-ran decided he had a right to know something, then, by God, he would have the answer. She'd learned that when she'd gone running to him after David's death, a disillusioned kid without a clue where to go with her life. Somehow – Tamia hadn't dared to ask – Kuron had known about those years in 'Frisco. She hadn't been able to lie to him.

Tamia shook her head and smiled. Rick was different. It just felt so natural to trust him, to include him in her life, as if he'd always been a part of it. She remembered the heat that had flared between them in the launch pad. She'd never had that kind of easy connection with another person before. Her eyes took on a dreamy, far-away glaze.

Rick had a wonderful sense of humor, a dry wit, and an amazing depth of understanding and compassion. She felt like she could tell him anything, and he would never think bad of her for it. They came from opposite ends of both the world and the country, and yet it appeared they had been living the same life all along.

Tamia came back to her surroundings with a blink, and sighed heavily. She, of all people, ought to have recognized the warning signs by now. She had fallen for him, big time. She was as besotted as a schoolgirl with her first crush. Only she wasn't a schoolgirl, and this went way beyond a crush. She was head-over-heels in love. That the fall has started even before she'd come to the Commandos was a fact she only grudgingly acknowledged. That she was on dangerously unstable ground was the far more pressing concern, at the moment.

With another impatient sigh, Tamia began gathering up papers from the floor. Whatever her infatuation with Rick, she would not, could not, act on it. It was as plain to her as if he'd said it to her face that Rick wanted nothing more from her than her friendship, for all the passion in his kisses. Grimly, Tamia hardened her heart against any expectations. She was going to see to it that she didn't cause either one of them any shame or hurt, by keeping a lid on her untamed libido.

Five minutes later, Tamia was standing before the door the Rick's quarters, reaching for the doorpad. Surprise, and concern, creased her brow when the door slid open at her touch. Usually, it was locked, whether he was in or not, and triggered the door signal.

“Rick?” she called quietly as she stepped into the front room. She heard a jet of water, then silence.

“Be right there!” Rick’s voice startled her, almost causing her to drop her armload. Her heart tripped over itself and her pulse skipped for a moment before she slammed a lid shut on her emotions. His next words, however threw the lid clean off them. “Make yourself at home.”

Tamia shook herself sternly, then grinned as she slipped her shoes off and made her way to the sofa. Amusement wound through her as she shifted a neatly stacked pile of discs from the sofa to the floor before she sat. Apparently, Rick had been working, too. But, unlike her, he worked best in complete order. It struck her as funny when she looked at all the carefully organized information. Where years of running with the gangs had taught Tamia to work amidst chaos, Rick’s lifetime in the system had taught him to abhor chaos. That difference brought home, with startling swiftness, how unsuited they were. Tamia stiffened her spine, and her resolve, and promised herself that she wouldn’t let Rick breach her defences again. If she did, she would only end up hurting them both.

Tamia jerked when she felt hands suddenly fall on her shoulders, and suppressed a shiver as they slowly kneaded her tensed muscles.

“God, woman, you’re tense! Tell me the news isn’t that bad!” Rick’s teasing voice said quietly from behind her, the banter of his words tinged with concern.

Tamia quashed the jolt of awareness and pulled away, turning to look at him as she shook her head. He was dressed, as usual, in jeans and a flannel shirt, the sleeves rolled, casually, to his elbows and the top of a pack of cigarettes peeping from the breast pocket. Belatedly, she realized that his hair was damp, and there was a towel draped over one of his broad shoulders. Carefully measuring her response, she raised one eyebrow in

question. “Should I come back later?”

He grinned, looking at her with a teasing challenge in his eyes as he massaged her shoulders again. “Afraid of me? Or just that I might do something to shock you?”

She grinned wryly. “You could strip down right here and do a rain dance and it wouldn’t shock me.”

She felt his hands stop on her shoulders and, her heart lodging in her throat, Tamia wished she could bite her words back. Dear God, what was she doing? She couldn’t flirt with him! She’d promised herself she’d behave. But somehow, as soon as she was near him, she forgot whatever promises she had made about maintaining distance. She looked up into Rick’s face, expecting to see disgust, or at least shocked anger. Instead, his eyes were dark and hot, piercing all her walls. She shivered, feeling as if Rick could see right into her heart, and read what she was feeling. Slowly, he drew a breath and, in a soft voice, asked, “What would shock you?”

Tamia felt her breath stop in her throat. This was dangerous ground she was treading. It was a pity that the more dangerous the ground, the bolder she always got. Nervously, she wet her lips, unable to tear her gaze from his, her heart beating like a triphammer. She told herself she wasn’t going to say it. There was nothing in the world that could compel her to say what her hungry heart desired, what she knew would shock her to the core. Nothing could force her mouth to form those words...

“If you kissed me.” The words tumbled from her lips without further thought as the heat of his gaze consumed the last of her will.

If you kissed me. The words shot through Rick like an electric charge, bringing with them the memories of her hungry mouth, her smooth, honeyed skin, her willing

embrace. God, he was a man starved, standing before a feast that wasn't his, aware that he couldn't have it, but wanting it anyway. He'd lain awake nights, plagued by images of her, of them, and risen well before dawn to a hard-paced workout and an icy shower, neither of which ever did much to cool his burning desire. When he'd entered the room to find her sitting there as if ready to bolt at the slightest provocation, his heart had rebelled at the thought of her leaving. He'd had to touch her, to soothe away the tension in her and keep her there with him. Then she'd flirted with him. Oh, dear God, even the image of that silly little comment she'd made had fuelled his lust. He'd wanted to do just what she'd said, to see if it really would leave her unaffected.

But then she'd brought the image of kissing to him, of tasting her warm, honeyed lips again, and he was lost. Her wide, doe eyes, the color of rich mahogany, compelled him, and he couldn't fight their call. All his promises, all his forced distance, could not have kept him from her in that moment. With a groan of surrender, he pulled her to her knees, his mouth finding hers, his kiss avid, starving. He heard her moan, and drew it in as he deepened the kiss, plundering her. Her body slid down like silk, pulling him over the low back of the sofa as she sank into the cushions, returning his kiss with an ardor that enflamed him. As he felt the supple warmth of her body pressed between his own and the couch, need and greedy desire swept through him and he groaned, grinding the hard evidence of his arousal against her. Her sudden gasp, however, lanced through him like a knife, slicing through the haze of desire clouding his mind. God, what was he doing, assaulting her like this? He'd always despised men who couldn't control their passions. Was he any better than them, now? Guiltily, Rick drew away, moving to sit in the chair opposite the sofa, forcing distance between them.

"Sorry," he apologized softly, his voice imploring her forgiveness, even as his

body fought to transgress upon her again. He quelled it harshly, reminding himself sharply that she didn't really want him. The way she'd responded to him was training. According to her grandfather's tight-lipped explanation, Tamia's life with David Farenes had taught her to be compliant in a way Shaung Ku-ran had clearly believed contrary to his granddaughter's nature. Rick had to agree. Farenes had probably taught her that sex was about force, and to let the man get his lust over with, so he'd go away and leave her alone. Rick winced inwardly at the thought of an ice-sculpted Tamia in his bed. That wasn't what he wanted. He wanted the fire he'd held in his arms.

Tamia had been shaken to the core when he'd actually taken up her dare, and even more shaken when he'd kissed her as if he were a man dying of thirst and she was the water of life. She flushed slightly, ashamed of her own behavior. She wanted him too much; she'd sought to take what she could get, however she could get it. Eagerly, she'd pulled him over to join her, hoping that once his body was close enough to hers, he'd go the whole way. When he'd pressed the hard ridge of his erection against her, she'd gasped her own need, and then... She flushed again. And then he'd pulled away, as if burnt. And now he was apologising, as if it hadn't been her fault at all. Her head lowered as tears sprang to her eyes, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to cry, or laugh.

He cleared his throat, then, and she looked up, dreading what she might see. His expression was studiously blank. "Did you find anything?"

Her heart broke. But, shoving the shards aside, Tamia drew herself together and nodded. "I think so, but I'm not sure." She reached for a stack of papers. "Remember how I said that acquisitions file we got from Intel's computer was bothering me?"

Rick nodded, taking the pages she held out to him as she continued, "Well, I

decided to go back over it after some info came in during my shift. I got a drop about sixteen hundred hours this afternoon. CIA's bird over Brazil just picked up a really large surge in activity around the compound near Porto Alegre."

"Surge?" Rick's gaze dropped swiftly over the pages. "What kind of 'surge,' exactly?"

Tamia pulled a file from her stack and handed it to him. "Apparently the kind that usually spells war. The communiqué from CIA and Headquarters was joint, and urgent." She shook her head in disgust, then. "They aren't taking any chances of misinterpretation, either. Their orders couldn't be more clear."

Rick stared at the top sheet in the file. "Assassination? That is not normally something we're called on to do. What's all this got to do with the Intel file?"

She smiled grimly. "I did some checking. All the weapons listed in the Intel file have matching serials to the weapons that have gone missing, including the Dallas munitions drop. Kathy left me note to check what she had filed on that. Apparently, the EP turned up a crate of contraband weapons three days ago. The serial numbers match those of some of the weapons lifted from the Dallas drop."

Rick's eyes snapped up to her face. "You think this is the Mole at work?"

Tamia nodded. "Rick, I think he's been selling equipment to the new South American Council of States. And if he's selling weapons..."

"He could be selling intelligence, too," Rick finished the thought quietly. "Sweet Jesus, Tamia! This is turning into more of a nightmare than the Divide!"

She nodded sombrely. "So, what do you want to do? We've got the orders, but we can still turn them down, at this point."

Rick sighed heavily.

“I was hoping this would never come up,” he admitted, a trace of regret entering his voice. “Tamia, part of the reason I chose you was your marksmanship. I can play sharpshooter or assassin. God knows I did it enough during my military career. I also need to monitor my team’s progress, though. That’s why I needed someone with your skills. I can’t do both jobs at the same time. Assassination requires complete focus, no distractions. I can’t do that and monitor my team at the same time. Some of the rest of the team are good shots, some of them damned good, but none of them have the combat nerves required to make this kind of shot. You have both. So, when it comes down to it, this is your call. Do you think you can handle the job?”

She looked at his grim expression for a long moment, weighing her choices, before she answered.

“You’re asking me if I’m willing to play assassin?” At his nod, she sighed. “I don’t know. I’ve never actually done it before. But it doesn’t look like I have too many options in this. If it will prevent another war like the Divide, someone has to stop SACS.” Grimly, her face set, and she met Rick’s eyes steadily as she nodded. “I’ll do it.”



## CHAPTER TEN

No three words should have filled Rick with greater satisfaction than the ones which told him a member of his team was willing to take the responsibility he'd chosen them for. For some reason, however, those same three words, from Tamia's mouth, filled him with dread. I'll do it. God, had he just signed her death warrant?

Rick's mind raced back to a warm, ghastly night in Montreal. Silverberg and Weiss had been the team sharpshooters, and their mission, that night, had called for the best aim they could muster. The target had been less than a centimetre long - a bomb trigger - and their mission had been to disarm it without harming or alerting the politicians wining and dining in the same building. Problem was, the bomb had been plastered to the ceiling, and the only way to disarm it had been to shoot out the activation coil on the trigger. Rick had known, somewhere in the back of his mind, that it had been an impossible shot. But he'd had faith in his men; more faith in flesh-and-blood human beings than he should have had.

The CIA had sent in the spooks and the FBI had security agents and bomb experts in the building, thirty-three agents, between the two departments. Rick had sent his team in through the roof, to sweep the building for intruders and any clues CIA or FBI might have missed. Silverberg was to take the shot, with Weiss covering him. Thirty-five SEALs in that building. Thirty-five men and women he would come to trust, and would never see, alive, again. The shot had been suicide for Silverberg; the triggering

mechanism had been better than anyone had suspected, but Silverberg had been a professional, and he'd trusted that his commander knew what he was doing. Rick had thought he did, too. That hadn't mattered much, in the end. There had been over four hundred casualties that night, and thirty-five of them had screamed in his ears, never to be truly silent again. Rick felt his stomach heave and clench at the memory. His heart joined it as his mind overlaid all those screams with one more. Tamia's. He had nightmares already. What would happen if he lost her the same way?

"Rick?" Tamia's worried voice reached through the haze of terror in his mind, dispersing it like sunlight through mist. "Rick, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied, his voice a hoarse mutter. "Just thinking about something."

She gave him a searching look, but didn't press the issue.

"Okay," he continued in a more normal voice. "So we go in, do the dirty work, and get the hell out, right?"

She nodded. "That's the gist of the orders, yes."

He thought for a moment. "We should only need a window of a few hours for each one. Four should be good."

She nodded. "The cartels aren't a problem. Easy access. But getting into the SACS presidential compound isn't going to be easy at all. Where do you think we should place the DZ?"

Rick frowned then, and reached for a disc, flipping it into the tabletop holomachine. The surface lit up a second later, displaying a topographical map of Brazil. Rick studied it silently for a moment, and then sighed.

"Much as I hate the idea of humping through that much jungle at night, our Drop Zone will have to be here," he said, indicating an opening in the trees nearly three miles

from the compound.

Tamia shook her head. “We’ll never slip past them, then. The Rover’s silent. We could move our position up about two miles if we come in from the front, here,” she suggested, indicating the western region of the jungle, where a significantly larger clearing lay under a mile from the compound. “They’ll never see us coming if we hit them head-on, at night. They’re probably already aware of the satellite tracking on them, and they may even have a patrol out, expecting trouble of some kind from outside the border. If we put down so far from the compound, they might find us, and they’ll definitely suspect the attack to have been from outside their own borders. But they wouldn’t believe that an attack could be launched from this point,” she indicated the closer clearing again, “by anyone outside their own borders. Most transports are too noisy for that kind of drop; they’d draw instant attention. But, like I said, the Rover’s silent...”

He grinned at her, impressed. “That’s some head you’ve got, Blade. Why didn’t you ever put in for SEAL training when they opened slots for women?”

She laughed. “I couldn’t stand the pressure.”

He smirked. “Right. Like I believe that.”

She sobered. “No, actually, I didn’t want the SEALs bad enough. With my past, I would have ended up a scandal, sooner or later, and disgraced the SEALs, as well as myself, if what they could only *try* to blackmail me with here had come up there.” She shook her head. “It was just too risky. For me, and for everyone else.”

He nodded somberly. “You’re right. It would have been a disaster.”

She offered him a wry grin. “So, fearless leader, what’s the verdict? What’re you going to do?”

Rick frowned at the map again for a moment. "I think your assessment is good. We'll designate Drop Zone coordinates and I'll figure out how we're going to get through the perimeters. While I do that, you go to Comms and tell Frank to page everyone and tell them I want a command meeting at nineteen-thirty hours. We're on mission, now."

She nodded, heading for the door. "I'm on my way."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The atmosphere in the conference room was grim as Rick outlined the mission for his team. Tamia watched him silently, a resigned look in her eyes, for all that her expression remained blank. Jen's eyes fixed on Tamia, openly worried, and even Matt shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Rick finished talking, then studied each person around the table pointedly before he asked, "Does anyone have any questions or objections? If you have doubts, now's the time to lay them all out."

No one spoke, looking at one another as if gauging reactions, or waiting for someone else to ask the one question Rick knew was on all their minds. Who got the hot seat? It was clear to Rick that none of them were thrilled with the mission as it was given to them. None of them had come here to play hired hit man, and he knew them all well enough to know the idea made them uncomfortable.

Finally, as Rick had expected, Frank was the first one to speak. With a sigh, the redhead looked at Rick levelly. "I've known you long enough to know you wouldn't even be asking us to do this if it wasn't extremely important, Rick. Why don't you lay out all the cards for us? What happens if we don't do it?"

Rick gave the other man a weary grimace. "I don't know. Another war-like the Divide, most likely. With the stolen arms that're being funneled south, we can only assume that the cartels are expanding and gaining a foothold in the government. The

South American Council of States is powering up for something big. Details are sketchy, at best, as to what that is, but CIA is convinced it isn't just another internal power struggle. Our job is to force them to restructure. We make four hits over three days, and get the hell out before we're discovered, and we prevent millions of deaths."

"How?" Kelly wanted to know. "How will these four assassinations force them to restructure?"

Rick sighed. "SACS is barely holding onto what power they do have. Their outside support will dry up and they'll fall apart if the current president is dead. The cartels will take time to grieve and then to find a new head honcho. They'll likely do some low-level bickering and feuding amongst themselves, too. That's time our government needs to push a Protest of Arms through the proper EP channels."

There was silence as the team digested this information, then nods from around the table. Rick drew a breath, running a hand through his hair. "So, I want a vote on this. Frank?"

Harlin nodded shortly. "I'm for it."

"Tamia?"

She looked at him, and he could see the grim determination in her eyes.

"Definitely."

Rick turned to the man on his left. "Walter?"

Chips nodded silently, his expression hard. Rick moved on.

"Kathy?"

"Got my vote, hon."

"Kelly?"

"Yeah. I'm in."

“Matt?”

Watchdog looked up at the sound of his name. His expression was sullen, and even a little frightened. “Hell, I don’t know... Yeah, I guess so...”

“Jen?”

She nodded sadly. “As much as I wish I could say no... Yes.”

“Chelsea?”

The small woman’s face was veiled in tortured memory, and Rick belatedly remembered that her fiancé had been killed in an operation too much like this. Wincing, he watched as Jen laid a hand gently on the Latina’s arm and whispered something to her. Slowly, Chelsea looked up at Rick. “If it must be done, it must be done, amigo.”

“I’ll give you a post outside of the main operation, Chels. If it’s too much, you can stay here, even,” he said gently.

She shook her head. “It must be done.”

Rick heard the determination in her tone, and nodded slowly. This was something she felt she had to do, and he wouldn’t stand in her way. Looking around the table at his team, the men and women he came the closest to calling family, Rick silently prayed this mission wouldn’t take one of them from him. As that thought settled, his eyes fell on Tamia, and his heart clenched in need and fear. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing her, and, suddenly, his joking words to her the day she’d arrived rang like a curse in his mind. *The Siege Perilous*. The perilous seat. Before the implications of those words could fully sink in, Rick pushed them away and drew a breath to speak.

“Thank you, everyone. Mission Command, fifteen hundred hours tomorrow. I’ll assign duties and finalize our base of operations and DZs then. That’s everything, folks. Dismissed.”

Everyone began to rise and filter out of the command center, some talking quietly, but most silent. Rick couldn't help but notice the resignation on Tamia's face as she left. She looked as if she were going to her doom, not just on a mission. That thought was like a bad blow to the gut for Rick. He just couldn't shake the feeling he was handing her a death sentence. He hoped she planned to go out somewhere tonight, even if only to find someone to help her relieve her tension. That thought brought back, with vivid clarity, the memory of her warm body beneath his, her bared breasts spilling over the top of her bodysuit like the sweetest honey and her face engulfed in raw passion. Rick's throat went dry at the memory, and lust slammed through him. He knew he'd gladly die, if she'd just let him... He checked that inappropriate thought harshly, and forced himself to wish her into the arms of another man, even though those same images made him want to howl with rage. With an audible curse, he closed his eyes to the sight of her, before he lost the battle against his own raging libido, and went after her. He just had to keep reminding himself that she wasn't the least bit interested in that part of him.

Tamia felt Rick's eyes burning into her as she left the command center, and didn't have to see his face to know what he was thinking. She knew him too well. Every time he'd looked at her with those guilty eyes, during the briefing, it had taken all her willpower to remain in her seat and keep her face blank. She'd wanted so badly to step into his arms and tell him it wasn't his fault, that she was doing this to keep him safe, because she loved him. She'd been biting her tongue, every time she was in the same room with him, to keep those three damning words from errantly flying from her lips. She'd been biting it so often, lately, that she was wryly surprised she hadn't bitten it clean off, yet.



Now, as she moved through the corridors of the Underground, Tamia told herself that these thoughts and feelings were distractions, and she couldn't afford them with the job she had coming up. It was time she cleansed them all from her mind.

Yeah, right, she answered herself sarcastically. Like she hadn't been trying to accomplish that all along. But every time she was in the same room with Rick, she was aware of nothing else. She smirked to herself. She must be one of those hopeless romantic types, after all. Every real relationship she'd ever had was with someone either unacceptable or inaccessible. She snorted then. Not like, she'd had many real relationships, anyway.

Tamia sighed, shaking her head. This wasn't doing her focus or concentration any good. Looked like it was high time for some serious meditation, to clear her mind for battle.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Jen poked her head in through the command center's doorway, and shook her head as she saw Rick. "Somehow, I knew I'd find you here. You really are a creature of habit, Rick. Don't you ever have fun?"

Rick eyed the pile of mission-planning files stacked neatly around him. "Who has time for that? I've got work to do." He looked up, and caught her worried glance. "Trust me, Jen; this is best for me, at the moment. But why are you still here?"

"I'm waiting on Matt; he's finishing up weapons checks. And I wanted to drop these off with you." She held out a stack of files. "I thought the top one would really interest you."

His eyes narrowed. "Why's that? What are they?"

"IA sealed profiles on your three new suspects." She studied him carefully as she laid the files on the table beside him, and then laid her hand firmly on top of the stack. "Do you want to explain this to me, Rick?"

He knew what she was talking about. He shook his head. "I can't."

"You sent her in to gather sensitive information. Now you're sending her in as point. If she's a suspect..."

"Not anymore," Rick said shortly, turning his attention back to the file he was already studying.

"So why did you want her sealed file?" Jen's voice was suspicious.

Rick sighed. There was no getting around this one, apparently. “Because there’s something about her that I can’t put my finger on, but her file seems... incomplete.”

She laughed incredulously. “So is your file, Rick.”

“Yeah. But I know my past. I don’t know hers.”

She was silent for a long moment, and when he finally looked up, he saw she was regarding him with knowing eyes. “And that’s important to you.”

It wasn’t a question, so he didn’t bother to answer it. “Thanks for the files, Jen.”

Jen started to say something, but the door slid open just then, admitting a grinning Watchdog. “Hey, Catwoman. You ready to go?”

Rick heard her sigh, before she backed off. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

“Hey, man, we’re outta here,” Watchdog told Rick as he stepped up beside Jen. “It’s time to get down ‘n’ dirty.”

Rick glanced up at the black man, and then shot his companion a wry grin. “Keep him out of trouble, huh, Jen? Last thing we need is him in stir on a mission day.”

She snorted a laugh as she dug a teasing elbow into Matt’s gut. “You do have a rich fantasy life, Rick. Matt lives to get into trouble!”

Watchdog snuggled an arm around Jen’s waist and planted his lips against the side of her neck as he muttered a response that only she could hear. She shrugged him away with a mock glare, and then gave Rick an apologetic smile. “As you can see, giving Watchdog an excuse to party is a bad idea.”

“You know you love it,” Watchdog shot back, grinning, and they left, still bickering affectionately. Rick watched them go with a wry grin. Apparently, their relationship was once again “on,” and he couldn’t say he was surprised. Those two had a strange relationship. Where most couples tended to break up under crisis, Matt and Jen

seemed less able to handle the downtime between missions than the high stress of mission time. They got close and lovey-dovey shortly before dangerous missions – which, surprisingly enough made them a highly-effective combat unit – and then usually broke up sometime within the month following mission conclusion. Rick didn't claim to understand it, but since it worked for them, and provided them with better focus on mission, he didn't pay it much attention.

Rick turned back to his work, sorting through timetables and sign-offs. Jen had checked over the Rover's medbay, and certified that it was fully stocked and ready for use, if they needed it. Frank had retested the Chameleon system, and signed off on it as one hundred percent operational. Walter had checked and rechecked all their Comms capabilities and given them a go, Kelly and Chelsea had prepared a mission staging plan for the Cali hit, and Tamia had signed off on it...

His eyes strayed to the stack of files Jen had deposited on the table as his thoughts drifted to Tamia, and his heart kicked up a notch. Jen had seemed reluctant to relinquish that information to him. Why? What was in there that she felt he shouldn't see?

Rick went back to his mission planning, but his eyes kept returning to the files, and he was consciously aware of them, like Adam facing the temptation of forbidden knowledge. His need to know was killing him.

Finally, with a sigh of surrender, Rick shoved aside the mission plans and reached for the top file of the stack of IA profiles. There was no way he was going to be able to properly concentrate on this mission until he'd satisfied his need to understand one very intriguing, and elusive, woman.

Two hours later, Rick tossed the file down on the table with a sigh, rubbing a

hand wearily across his face. It was shortly past midnight, and suddenly, he felt old. The night before a mission was a night to party, or to be with family and lovers. It was a Commando tradition, had been since the Divide days. "There might not be a tomorrow, so to Hell with war tonight" had become their mission motto. Only Rick never joined in. He knew the silence of an empty compound well; it matched the burning emptiness inside of him. He'd never had a family. For as far back as he could remember he'd been a shelter kid. He'd joined the military at the age of sixteen to escape from both his anger, and the endless string of halfway houses and shelters. He'd been decorated beyond his class of service because he'd been an obsessed, one-man army; the military's dream warrior. He'd been a goddamned machine! He grimaced in disgust. More than once, he'd planned suicide missions, missions on which he'd fully intended to die - missions that had only resulted in the deaths of friends. Hell, he hadn't cared. All for the greater glory of war. The military had been his life, for too many years. He'd thought he'd finally get away from that emptiness when he'd formed this team, but he hadn't. He'd been called fearless more times than he cared to remember - which was patently not true - and heartless by a few, among whom had been the only long-term lover he'd ever had. She'd left him because she said he had no soul. Hell, maybe she'd been right. He certainly hadn't given a damn whether she was gone or not.

Rick sighed again, rising from his chair to pace restlessly. He couldn't afford to let anyone close enough to really know him, or to see his dreams. He yearned for the family he'd never had, a wife and children to love. He craved the love and laughter he'd missed as a child, and the chance to prove that he could still be a man. Those were secrets he'd never shared, with anyone. Depressed now, he opened the command center's door and stepped out into the hallway.

God, this place seemed so empty on pre-mission and post-mission nights. Not a soul in the entire compound but him, no one in the place except ... Rick stopped as he passed the Arena door. Light seeped around the door edges. Who the hell...?

Senses honed in the heat of battle prickled, though for what reason he could barely say. Surely, there was no danger of an intruder here. Silently, he pushed the manual release on the door, and pulled it slowly apart, slipping inside. There, he stopped, mesmerized.

Tamia Kuan was sitting in the center of the Arena floor, cross-legged, with an unsheathed tanto clasped tightly in her hands. Her eyes were closed, and she looked entirely removed from everything around her, like a statue in an empty hall. How appropriate.

From what he'd read in her file, she'd led a pretty solitary life. Her parents and siblings, one brother and two sisters, had been executed when she was still a kid. Her grandfather, some kind of hermit from the way he'd talked, had sent her to the US for her safety. She'd gotten mixed up in some pretty nasty business with the street gangs of Old Frisco back in '05. She and her lover, David Farennes, had been drafted for the Divide together, and managed to end up on the Trooper list. Only, Farennes had died at Rio Bantos, a miserable failure as a soldier.

But not Tamia. She'd been the epitome of a Trooper from day one; she was a perfectly calibrated, living weapon. Since Farennes' death, she'd led a fairly secluded life, tying herself to battles and battle training. Hell, her psych. report referred to her as a walking military machine. The words were disturbingly familiar. Evaluations said she had developed a fascination with the SEALs after Rio Bantos. That obsession had quickly switched to the Commandos in 2114. Fascination with the unit, his ass. Her

name had never appeared on the training rosters for the SEALs when they'd opened their ranks to women after Altura.

He remembered the passionate way she responded to his kisses, and his jeans grew uncomfortably tight. If only she wasn't so dangerous to him.

"Planning to sit there all night, Blade?" He winced at the echo of his voice in the stillness. "Shouldn't you be out with friends, or family, or a lover?"

Her eyes had snapped open at the sound of his voice, but fell at his last question. Pain flashed over her face as she sheathed the *tanto*.

"No friends," she muttered, her eyes fixed on what she was doing, though he'd have bet a year's pay that she could do it blindfolded.

"No boyfriend?"

Her head shook. "Not anymore."

His eyes narrowed. No. He wasn't going to let this happen to her; he couldn't let her become a machine. There was still hope for her, a heart too near the surface to be anything less than human. He'd already had a glimpse of it, and it had stirred something almost dead in him. "How long has it been since you had a real date?"

Her eyes snapped up again, defensive. "Since when was that any of your fucking business?"

"Just answer the question."

She rose gracefully from the floor, and gave every indication of ignoring his comment.

"Damn it, Tamia, answer the question!"

She shot him a scathing look. "What difference does it make? A year, maybe two."

"Try *six*," he said firmly, causing her eyes to widen in shock. "That's right, Tamia. I know your history pretty damned well. Now, I want you to go out."

She eyed him warily. "Is that a request, or an order?"

His brow furrowed. Why was she suddenly being so prickly? "Since you won't pay any attention to a request, I'm making that an order, Captain."

She scowled. "And who, *sir*, is going to be my date? Or are you going to conjure one of those up on 'order' too?"

He heard the distaste in her voice, saw the resignation on her face, and swore. "Damn it, Tamia, if it gets you out of here for even a little while tonight, I'll do it!"

Her eyes widened, and she looked shell-shocked. Rick cursed himself as an utter fool. He'd done it now. It was hard enough to remember that he'd sworn to leave her alone when he was working with her. If he went out with her, if he kissed her again, he'd never be able to keep his distance.

Too late now. Drawing a deep breath, he pressed, "Now, put away the blade and let's go. That's an order."

She moved slowly, as though she didn't want to comply. Finally, however, he managed to get her out of the Underground, and into a booth at Walsh's Pub.



### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Walsh's Pub had been a popular hangout for off-duty military personnel since the Reaver War, when the need for something reminiscent of a pre-war world had eaten at people who saw the ugly side of life and death far too often. Housed in a pre-World War III brick building in Manhattan's Rockefeller Center, Walsh's had a nostalgic air of innocence that drew the war-weary. Its interior was done in hardwood and leather, like it'd been pulled straight from the London of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, even if the patrons were a reminder that the modern era existed even here. But it was a pleasant combination of old and new, and it made Walsh's one of Rick's favorite places.

But never as meaningful as it was tonight, Rick acknowledged as he glanced across the table at his dark-haired companion. Tamia's eyes were wide, her expression a blend of awe and enchantment as she gazed around. Her eyes came back to him then, and a shy smile that kicked him in the ribs spread over her lush lips.

"Thanks for bringing me here," she said in the silence between songs. "This place is amazing."

He smiled knowingly.

"Hey, sailor! What can I get you? The usual?" The waitress, a middle-aged woman with bleach-blonde hair and a high, Brooklyn-bred voice asked as she stopped at their table.

“Yeah. Thanks, Ginny.” He glanced at Tamia. “What do you want?”

Tamia grinned at the waitress. “Anything in a bottle’ll do.”

Ginny laughed at that, her dark eyes crinkling in her fleshy face as she cast Rick a wink. “First time you ever brought the Corps in with you, Ace!”

She was still cackling as she walked off, and Tamia turned to look at Rick curiously. “Who was that? And how does she know I’m a Marine?”

He grinned. “It’s a running joke around here, since all the Troopers that dropped in here during the Divide were so glad to see booze that they didn’t care what they were drinking. And that,” his grin widened, “was Ginny Robards. She and I go way back.” He gave Tamia a wink. “Ginny was my first.”

Her eyes widened, going to the buxom, fleshy blonde, before coming back to Rick. Tamia’s incredulity made him want to laugh. “You’re kidding!”

“Nope.” He chuckled at the memory. “I was sixteen, and getting ready to be shipped out for my very first sea duty. I was scared shitless. My buddies got up this idea that, as a gag, they would bring me here on Liberty and get me plastered. Ginny was waitressing. She read them the riot act, until someone let it slip that the little Mick from Boston was a still a cherry.” He grinned. “Ginny took it upon herself to give me something to remember New York by.”

She smiled, and Rick felt his heart clench as he watched the soft humor bloom in her eyes. God, she was beautiful.

“Did you keep in touch?”

He blinked, snapped back from his randy thoughts by her question. He shrugged in response. “Not really. Ginny didn’t want a relationship, and by the time I came back, I was a lot wiser to the world, and too wrapped up in my career.” He shot her a curious

look. He'd read very little about her personal history in her IA file, and her grandfather hadn't been very forthcoming, either. "What about you?"

Tamia's eyes fell, even as Ginny returned with a Guinness draft for Rick and a bottle of Killian's for Tamia. Rick felt his heart clench as he watched her give Ginny a half-hearted smile of thanks. He'd always assumed that Farenes had been her first; she'd certainly been young enough when the two of them had hooked up. As Tamia wrapped her fingers around the cool, damp neck of her beer bottle, as if searching for strength, worry shot through Rick.

"Tamia?"

"I don't know," she finally managed in a hoarse mutter.

"Don't know what?" His gut knotted with concern. She'd been with Farenes since she was thirteen years old, for Christ's sake. He knew their relationship had been up and down, and that she'd contracted syphilis at fifteen, from an unknown source. That had been in her Detox records. What was she trying to tell him?

She looked up at him, her eyes pained. "I was twelve years old when I came to the US. I had no relatives here, and the woman I was supposed to live with – Lao Turing's mother – died the day before I arrived. I ended up on the streets. Two days after I got here, I got nabbed by the Chicanos, who decided to have a little fun with the terrified Chinese girl."

Rick felt the blood drain from his face. She was talking about gang rape! She'd been... "Oh, God, Tamia..."

She lifted her beer bottle, taking a long swing. "So I don't know who was first. We weren't introduced."

She was trembling. Rick reached out, taking one of her cool, damp hands in his

own. "I'm sorry, Tamia. I didn't know. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She met his eyes, and a small smile flickered on her lips. "You didn't."

He withdrew his hand, before the situation got out of control. Already, he wanted to crush her to him and soothe away her pain. Clearing his throat, he sought a neutral subject, and smiled as he said, "Tell me about your grandfather."

She shot him a look. "You talked to him. Why didn't you ask him yourself?"

He blinked, stunned. "How did you know?"

"He called me." She laughed. "In Comms, of all places. Kuron thrives on long-distance lectures."

"He's a hermit, right? What's he like in person?"

Wry humor crossed her eyes, even as her mouth twisted in an ironic smile. "You have a few hours? Explaining Kuron could take all night."

He chuckled, remembering the terse, but perceptive, old man he'd spoken with. Taking a swig of beer, he leaned back and grinned at Tamia. "Lay it on me."

Over the next two hours, Tamia relaxed, a small smile on her face as she talked about Kuron, and her early years in Tibet. The beer in her hands was still her first, and she didn't appear in any hurry to finish it. It wasn't hard to see how much she'd loved her family, or how much she missed them all. He wished he could say the same for himself. And then, when he couldn't avoid the subject any longer, he drew a deep breath and said, "Tell me about David Farenas."

Tamia nearly choked on her beer. Coughing, she croaked, "Why?"

He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "Because you spent five years with a man you didn't even shed one tear for when he died. I'd like to know why."

She glanced away, sighing, and seemed to be trying to ignore him.

“Tamia,” he laid a hand over hers, drawing her attention back to him. “Don’t dodge me on this. Your grandfather said Farenas hurt you. Your IA file says you two had a pretty rocky relationship. Why’d you stay with him?”

She laughed bleakly. “Rocky. Yeah, right. That doesn’t even begin to describe my life with David. But he was all I knew; being David’s bitch gave me a kind of immunity from the rest of the guys. I had to let them use me.”

Rick’s throat closed, and anger swelled in him. He knew how gangs worked, knew how some of them treated women; but to know that Tamia viewed herself as saleable goods, rather than a human being, sickened him. “Tell me. Please?”

She sighed, and met his eyes. The terrible pain there slapped Rick hard, nearly rocking him backward in his seat. “I met David in October of ‘oh-five. I was looking for the safety a gang’s protection would give me, so I never had to go through what I’d just been through, again. David must’ve liked what he saw, even in a thirteen-year-old girl, because he immediately took me under his wing. I was so grateful, and I thought he really cared. I was an idiot to fall for him, but there was something dangerous about David that drew women. I learned too late that he was abusive and controlling. He wanted a wind-up sex doll, not a person. And that’s how he used me.”

Rick tightened his hand on hers when she would have withdrawn. “He raped you?”

She laughed bitterly. “Hell, no. David didn’t have to rape anyone especially not me. He just looked at me and told me what he wanted me to do, and I knew I didn’t have a choice. I’d agreed to be his bitch, and I’d seen what was expected of me.”

“And the others?”

She glanced away. “You mean the STDs.”

He nodded.

She shrugged awkwardly. “Whenever David and I had a fight, he’d beat the shit out of me, and then I wouldn’t see him for days on end. I used to get so pissed; I’d go out and find one of his rivals to sleep with, just to piss him off. And I was gang property if David said I was. And he did, more than once.”

Rick fought back a swell of rage, listening to her. He wanted to hunt Farenas down and beat him to a pulp. But Farenas was already dead.

“So why’d you stay with him, once you got drafted?”

She cast him an incredulous look. “You saw the battlefields in the Divide. They’d scare anyone shitless. David was an evil I at least knew; he was the Devil I understood.”

“He was safe.” Rick muttered the words. “Even when he was beating you to a pulp and degrading you. God, Tamia...”

“Yeah, I know,” she muttered, pulling her hand loose from his. “It’s pretty pathetic, and so am I.”

“No,” he murmured, capturing her hand again. “You had a right to be scared; hell, you had a right to be downright terrified. And I think you’re the bravest woman I’ve ever met.”

Tamia’s eyes went soft, a sheen of moisture sparkling like a veil across her mahogany gaze. She looked like she wanted to say something, but stopped, looking away as she blinked hard. As he watched her, Rick saw her expression suddenly change, with the music. A steady rhythm pounded through the speakers. Late 21st Century music was popular in some circles, and particularly at Walsh’s. That was part of why

Rick came here. Sure, there were the techno-jammers as well, like W.P.O. and WarChilde, and even a few early technotics, like Captain Crookstone and 2ndExtreme. Now, however, someone had plugged into some hard rock. Tamia was listening intently, her eyes closed, as the first words of "Turn Around" blared from the speakers around the room. That song had become an anthem of sorts during the Divide. As the singer, Sandra Keily, wailed so much life lost in this short time, Rick saw tears on Tamia's face, and knew that she was remembering more than the friends she'd lost on the battlefields of the Divide. She ached for her family, lost during the Reaver War. Her hands were trembling around her beer, and her lashes were damp. Yes, there was definitely a heart in there, and a lot nearer to the surface than he'd thought. This song had once, long ago, brought similar memories to the surface of his mind. Not anymore. He had numbed himself to loss, regarded it as inevitable.

As the last chords of the song faded away, Rick extinguished his cigarette in the table's ashtray, and stood, holding a hand out to her. "We've sat long enough, I think. Let's dance."

She hesitated for a second, wavered, then nodded and slid from the booth. The dance floor was fairly empty - hell, the pub was fairly empty by now. Rick went to the Discmachine and punched in a request. He turned to grin at Tamia as the first beats of music played. It was an early 21st century favorite of his; slow enough to dance to, and good, solid rock. As he watched Tamia begin to unconsciously sway with the beat, however, his grin disappeared and his mouth went dry. He'd been aching to get her in his arms all evening, and now his hands itched to run over that smooth, honey-tinted body beneath her sweater and jeans. Desire hummed in his body, and he moved slowly toward her, a cat stalking prey. As he reached her, he slid his hands around her waist, pulling her

against himself.

Tamia nearly jerked away in surprise, her eyes flying to his. Then, as he drew her closer, letting her feel how aroused he was, heat flared in those mahogany depths, and she melted against him with a sigh.

Feeling Tamia's trusting warmth settle comfortably against him, as if she'd been made for him alone, Rick felt his heart turn over in his chest. Without quite knowing how, he found himself closing his eyes, his face buried in her thick, sweet-smelling hair. God, she smelled so good. The memory of tasting her soft, sweet skin taunted him, heightening his desire to painful proportions. Sensations and emotions he hadn't felt in years rocketed through him as they moved to the music, and he knew that this song would always remind him of her.

Tamia, her cheek resting against Rick's chest and her eyes closed, was trembling inside. She recognized the song - common to the classic rock stations - but she'd never really listened to it before tonight. The lyrics seeped through her now, with far more meaning than any she'd ever heard before.

It's been a long time, baby,

since I felt this pain,

It's been a long time, now,

since I held on to this dream.

Been livin' on the run,

hidin' from the sun,

in this dark, dark night of mine.

Gotta reach out, gotta hold on, just one more time...



She understood why Rick had chosen it, above the hundreds of other slow songs. This one had meaning, to both of them. She felt safe and warm there in his arms, in a way she'd never felt before. Rick had been a hero, a legend to be admired from afar, for so many years. For the past few weeks, he'd been her commander and, lately, friend. Tonight, he was a man, a warm, caring individual. She'd come to understand him, to see his story, the secret dreams. How many times had she reached out before, only to find doors slammed shut in her face? How many nights, cold and alone, had she forced herself to go on, even for just one more day? Just one more mission? Too many. But tonight, she had reached out and found welcoming arms. Tonight she was holding on to more than a dream. She felt his hands at her waist, and sighed softly in surrender. She was tired of fighting wars she couldn't win.

Rick felt the change in Tamia, heard her sigh, and understood. It was instinctive, which stunned him. He reached to tilt her face up, and his mouth came down on hers in a kiss that defied sanity with its sweetness. She pressed closer, and he sensed the hunger in her, stirring his blood to boiling. He drew away slightly, and smiled at her as the music ended. "Let's get out of here."

She nodded, and drew away from him a step, then two, and Rick fought down his irritation as he realized she'd imposed that space deliberately. Why was she always setting borders between them?

Rick glanced at Tamia a few moments later, as they stepped out into the artificial light of New York City's night. "You okay?"

She nodded, but her eyes were sad as they met his, and then bounced away to take

in what had once been Rockefeller Center. “Everything changes so quick, doesn’t it? It’s kind of sad that nothing means enough to preserve.”

“Not everything,” he said huskily as he took her hand, giving it a soft squeeze. “The important things no one can take away. They’re indestructible.”

She stopped at the edge of the plaza, half-hidden in the shadows of a streetlight, making her soft smile mysterious.

“What?” He felt his heart trip as he watched her. She was so lovely, and the feel of her warm hand in his was making him crave what he knew he couldn’t have. Her.

“Does anyone else know what a romantic you really are?” She asked, soft humor coloring her voice.

The open understanding and compassion in her bottomless mahogany eyes hit Rick square in the chest, and his heart constricted in need as he admitted the truth to himself at last. There was no staying away from her. The line he’d drawn – and promised himself he’d never cross – when she’d first arrived at the Underground had eroded beneath his feet the more he got to know her. Now, the swell of need in his heart washed that line away completely.

Pulling lightly on her hand, he brought her into the circle of his arms and lowered his head, feasting on her ripe, sensual lips. She tasted of heat and alcohol, and the sweet, spicy scent of her sent his mind spinning dizzily away as need and want overtook reason. Slipping his hands down over her back, he grasped her rear through the skin-tight jeans and dragged her close against his body as he broke their kiss to mutter, “Do you know what you do to me?”

Her lips curved seductively, and she rubbed herself against him, nearly causing Rick’s eyes to roll back in need. “Are you sure it’s me? Or just too many years alone?”

Maybe Ginny..."

"I don't want Ginny," he growled into her ear, nipping gently at the lobe and the soft flesh beneath, until she loosed a shivering whimper. "I want you, Tamia. I can't get you out of my mind."

And, as she had back at Walsh's, Tamia suddenly drew away from him again, imposing a space that made Rick want to grind his teeth in frustration. But her hungry eyes told him she was far from unaffected by their embrace. He suppressed a frustrated oath, knowing there was a very good reason she would only go so far. After what she'd told him about 'Frisco, and David Farennes, he understood her hesitance and fear. But damn it, he wasn't Farennes. Couldn't she see that?

Apparently not, he mused as she started to move away. Sighing, he caught up with her, taking her hand and, when she moved to slip loose, squeezing it gently in silent challenge. She shot him a look, but didn't fight him. He took that as a good sign. After a long moment of silence, Rick finally forced a smile and said, "You know something Ginny once told me? She said people only run from the things they want most. If they don't really want it, they aren't afraid of losing it, and they won't run from something they're not afraid of losing."

She shot him another look. "Deep thoughts, for a cocktail waitress."

"Don't be sarcastic," he cautioned her grimly. "It's not a healthy way to deal with the truth."

She wouldn't look at him, but he saw her swallow hard, her throat moving nervously. "What are you saying?"

"Ginny was right." He glanced away as he recalled all the running he'd done, and then turned back to Tamia with a sad half-smile. "I did a lot of running away when I was

younger, because I was afraid to let anyone matter enough to hurt me. I thought I'd be better off alone. But being alone does something horrible to your soul, and makes you afraid to even live." He looked into her mahogany eyes, and saw compassion flare. Smiling softly, he murmured, "I'm not afraid anymore. So why are you running?"

She shot him a startled glance. "I'm not running."

He squeezed her hand lightly. "Yeah, you are."

She cast him a wry, mysterious look as they neared the twenty-four-hour shopping mall that was the Underground's entrance cover. Watching that smile curve on Tamia's lips, Rick wondered what she was thinking. At the special elevator marked "Private apartments - key required" he inserted his access card and pressed his hand to the ID plate.

A moment later, as they stepped off of the elevator, Tamia turned to smile at him again, and his heart stumbled as his blood heated. "Thanks."

She turned to walk away, and his gut clenched in protest. She wasn't going to leave him now, was she? He caught her arm. "Where are you going?"

"To my quarters."

"I'll walk you there."

She looked as if she might protest, then subsided with a sigh. "All right."

They walked silently down the corridor, side by side. Unconsciously, they fell into step, and hands that brushed near one another soon joined. When they came to stand before her door, Tamia disengaged her hand from his with a small smile. "Thanks again."

She leaned up to kiss him good-night, with all intentions of retreating into the haven of her quarters ASAP. As soon as their lips met, however, she was again swamped with the desire to stay there. She didn't pull away as she felt his arms enfold her, even though her brain screamed at her to stop while she still could.

Too late, she thought as she wrapped her arms around him. She felt herself pressed between the wall and his body as his tongue tangled with hers and familiar heat poured through her. Something hard jabbed against her side then, and she heard the swish of the door sliding open. Must've leaned on the door pad. Rick broke off their kiss then, to murmur in her ear, "Are you going to let me come in?"

Tamia shivered pleasantly, deep inside, as the double meaning in that question washed through her. The answer she should have given him was most definitely no, but she couldn't. Her desire was greater than her reason; so she told herself that it wouldn't get out of hand - she was in control of herself. Besides, even if it did, it was only for one night, right?

They moved together, lost themselves in another kiss, even before the door slid shut behind them. She felt his hands sliding up under her sweater and pushed closer with a shiver of expectation, the memory of the feel of his mouth against her breasts tingling through her. Her hands pulled his shirt out of his jeans, finding familiar, heated skin beneath, even as his hands worked up under the band of her bra. She felt his fingers against the sensitive skin of her breasts and the sensation shot through her like lightning. She slipped her arms free of the sweater sleeves, then drew away from him and pulled it over her head, letting it land in a heap on the floor.

Meeting Rick's eyes, she saw the heat flare there, turning cobalt to indigo as hunger threaded through his gaze. Emboldened by his blatant appreciation, Tamia slowly

slid her hands up her exposed flesh, and watched Rick swallow hard. His eyes glued to her motion, he groaned. "Tamia..."

He reached out then, and she saw and felt the fine tremor in his hands as he placed them over hers. Ever so slowly, he drew her hands away from her body, even as he pulled her gently toward him. Then, still holding her wrists in a light grasp, he bent his head to taste the sensitive skin at her collarbone.

Dizzying sensation danced along Tamia's every nerve, and she felt her control unravelling quickly. The feeling terrified her, and she pulled away, her head screaming, too fast! With a small smile, she kicked off her shoes and moved across the room to the sofa. She curled herself onto the cool faux-leather and patted the spot beside her.

"C'mon. Sit down."

He did as she requested, looking suddenly ill at ease. He drew a deep breath, then said, "Tamia, I..."

"Shh." She smoothed her fingertips over his cheek, feeling the roughness of stubble tingle through her. "It's okay, Rick. I want it, too."

She watched the tension drain from him, and scooted closer, until she could lay her head against his chest. Hearing the steady beat of his heart, she snuggled closer with a small sigh. God, she'd never done anything like this before. She'd been as faithful as she possibly could to David when they'd been together, but consensual sex had seldom entered the picture, and cuddling had been a completely foreign concept. They hadn't been close enough.

Hell, she hadn't really had sex, by choice, since she'd been in 'Frisco, years ago. Then, it'd seemed like the only sanity around her. She'd screwed more guys than she cared to remember, back then. Sure, she'd had a few one-night-stands since David had

died, to relieve the stresses of war, mostly. But nothing that had felt this important, or this special. She felt the warmth of Rick's hand against her shoulder, and looked up at him with a smile. He returned it, kissing her lightly.

They sat in companionable silence for a while. It didn't seem right, almost, to break that silence. Slowly, with light fingers, Tamia played with the buttons of Rick's flannel shirt. As the shirt slipped open, she laid her cheek against his warm skin, feeling the roughness of hair tickle her cheek. She turned her head to kiss his skin, hungry for the taste of him that she'd denied herself for so long. He smelled of tobacco and gunpowder, like an enigmatic privateer of some distant era. He tasted of salt and spice, his skin hot beneath her lips. She heard him groan, and felt his arm tighten slightly. Her heart thrilled to the knowledge that her mere kiss affected him so deeply.

As she looked up, she was drawn in and held captive by his hungry indigo eyes. He leaned slowly toward her, and her heart screamed yes! Her eyelids fluttered and closed against her impatient desire to reach out and drag him forward. Then, his lips touched hers, and all thought scattered. She was aware of nothing except the taste of his lips – deep and dark, and as seductive as sin – and the feel of his hands as they skimmed lightly over her hot flesh. She felt his fingers find the clasp of her bra, then the sudden looseness as it slipped free. With a shift of her shoulders, she let the bra slide to the sofa as she moved closer to him, desperate to feel the warmth of his skin against hers. But he pulled away, and his hands came up, grasping her shoulders lightly. She felt herself melting as his avid gaze devoured her. Then, just when she thought she might go mad from need, his hands slid down from her shoulders. She watched his every movement, her breath bated. Her eyes closed on a soft moan as his hands cupped her breasts, his fingers teasing her aching nipples. God, she wanted this so badly. She'd never

experienced anything like this, even when David had been alive, and certainly not since he'd died.

She gasped, arching her neck, as she felt his lips there, moving over sensitive nerves. She touched a hand to his head, buried her fingers in his hair as she pulled him closer. God, she wanted this so much, almost too much.

Rick felt her hands on him, and the press of her body against his, and groaned. The brush of her skin, the hunger of her kiss, was driving him insane with need. His mind had been taunting him since their first kiss that night in the gym, filling his dreams with fantasies of what he had never hoped to have. Since she'd first settled into his arms at Walsh's, tonight, his body had been on fire, and he'd known he had to have her, or he'd die. Hell, it had been years since he'd even gone for the whole sex thing. A machine didn't need human contact. Now, holding Tamia's warm body, kissing her soft skin, and listening to the little sounds she made, he had a revelation. He needed her, more than anything. They fit so damned well together - they were like two pieces of the same person.

He moved his lips to her breasts, and heard her soft cry, felt her warm fingers dig into his shoulders. God, she was beautiful. When had he last thought of a woman as beautiful? He couldn't remember. He slid his hands down over her stomach, found the fastening to her jeans. His hands slipped inside, and around, grasping her firm rear, pressing her close against his own body as he drank her in, feeling her toned muscles shift and tighten under his touch. She was so open, so responsive, and it was driving him nuts. He felt her hands on his chest and back, exploring frantically as her breathing grew faster. He savored the sensation of her smooth, toned flesh as he slid his hands down the



back of her thighs, pushing her jeans down. Soon, they landed in a crumpled heap on the floor.

He returned his attention to her neck and breasts, feeling her press close and hearing her gasping breath as his hands stripped away her panties. Then, pulling away slightly, he lowered her gently to the sofa. His eyes trailed over her honey-smooth skin, flaring as he admired her perfectly sculptured body. Her dark hair fell against her shoulders in silky cascades, curling in feathery waves against a neck that seemed almost fragile in its soft contours. He knew the strength any such frailty in her masked. Her arms were deceptively soft to his touch, but housed the strength to carry over twice her weight, and speed enough to administer a killing blow in an instant. Her hands were small and delicate-looking, but held power few men could equal. Tenderly, he kissed her palms, feeling the smoothness of war-calloused hands against his lips, before tracing the length of the inside of her arm with his lips and tongue. He stopped at the bend of her left elbow, closing his eyes against the grief that tugged at him as he saw the dark, carbon lines of track marks. They were scars of a different kind of battle. A battle she could only win one day at a time, but never hope to see ended. Thinking of the cruelty that had driven her to dependency, leaving scars on her body, mind, and soul, made him want to weep for this woman who had never mourned the violent loss of her innocence.

“Rick?” her voice was soft with longing and worry. “Rick, what’s wrong?”

He lifted his gaze to her face, her dark eyes, so full of need and... His breath hitched. The tenderness he read in those mahogany wells could only be love. Gently, he touched the scars she wore which would never heal, and felt humbled and unworthy to know this woman who had embraced her life, while he had run from his. Softly, he kissed her lips, whispering, “You’re safe here. I won’t let anything hurt you ever again.”

Even as he spoke the words, Rick prayed he could live up to them. All he knew, at that moment, was that he would willingly die to keep her safe from harm. He saw her soft smile, the trust in her eyes, and felt his heart catch.

“I know,” she returned in a whisper. Then, taking his hands in her own, she laid them gently on her own body. “Hold me.”

Feeling his heart swell to bursting, Rick kissed her again, his mouth claiming hers with a promise of shared life and renewal. As he moved his mouth down over her soft skin, he admired the flex of smooth muscles and the sculptured perfection of her body. Her breasts were firm and full, thrusting with the rosy buds of nipples hard and jutting in anticipation of his touch. Her stomach was flat and sinewy from long hours of hard, rigorous training. Her thighs were firm and shapely, flowing like gently-sculpted clay from perfectly-molded hips to the smooth rounds of her knees. Her cheeks and neck were awash with sensual blush, and her dark eyes were deep and hungry.

As he claimed her mouth in a slow, exploratory kiss, he felt her fingers on his skin, stripping his shirt away, before moving to the zipper of his jeans. Her fingers pushed his pants away, touching bare, burning skin. He didn't wear underwear – a throwback to his Special Forces days, when wetsuits and jungle gear meant no skivvies. Rick felt her smile, and broke their kiss then, quickly removing boots and jeans and adding them to the pile of clothes on the floor. He saw the appreciative flicker of her eyes, and the small smile that touched her lips.

He reached to take her face in his hands, kissing her mouth, his tongue probing - a promise of future probing. She moaned against his lips, then gasped his name as he moved to her breasts. She pressed closer as he slid to his knees on the floor, his mouth moving down over her body. With hands and mouth, he teased her, hearing her soft cries

and feeling her warm hands kneading his skin, exploring him. Then, as she clutched at his shoulders, his name torn from her in a cry that pierced his heart with its tenderness and need, he knew he could wait no longer. Moving up along her body, he braced himself over her, watching her face. Softly, he whispered, "Tamia, look at me."

She opened her eyes then, limpid with an ache he knew he would give his soul to cleanse. His body throbbed insistently. Dear God, he could hardly wait. Still, he held back an instant, staring into her eyes, watching the smouldering need spark and burst into flame under his gaze. Tamia whimpered softly, arching her hips toward him as her hands tugged at his waist, her eyes closing again.

"No," he whispered against her throat as he kissed it softly. "I want to see you. Look at me, Tamia."

Her eyes opened again, and her voice was a soft plea, "Rick..."

Slowly, he entered her, holding her eyes with his own, hearing her soft moan of pleasure, his name leaving her in a breathless gasp as he slid home.

Tamia's eyes closed and she moaned again as he moved slowly in her, and she felt the welcoming rush of sensation. She clung to him, gasping, as he rocked slowly in and out, tightening the string of need inside of her until she feared she would break apart. She felt his lips brushing against her face and ear, before his breathless voice whispered, "Move for me, love."

The words, spoken so tenderly, caught at Tamia's heart, even as they tightened a knot of memory in her mind and stomach. Lay still, you stupid bitch! No one can hear you anyway! She had learned, a long time ago, that when it came to the actual act, it was quickest and least painful to let the man simply rut it out. Now, as Rick's murmured

encouragements sank into her, she drew together her courage, and tentatively moved her hips as he slid into her. The motion jolted through her, causing Tamia to gasp as the sensations of pleasure wound through her, even as she heard Rick's soft groan against her ear. Seeking proof that it wasn't a fluke, and craving the sensation she had felt, Tamia moved again, and again, matching Rick's slow thrusts.

Rick muttered something unintelligible through clenched teeth as they moved together - faster, harder - seeking a release that seemed impossible to grasp. Tamia heard his harsh breathing, mingling with her own breathless gasps. Then, in a moment of blinding ecstasy, she felt the convulsive ripple of release spiral through her, even as Rick ground against her with a shuddering groan.

It took a while to come down off that high, and they moved together lazily, until the last ripples subsided. His forehead pressed into her soft shoulder, Rick breathed the musky scent of sex on Tamia's skin, and watched the sheen of sweat on her breasts glow as they heaved in the soft light of the dim floor strips. God, he'd never had sex like that before. Now, he understood the term "making love." He felt the soft, lazy movement of her hands as they caressed his head and back. He kissed her skin lightly, nuzzling his lips against her neck. He didn't want to let her go. In that fiery embrace, he had lost his soul to her. He'd fallen in love - him, the supposed soulless machine. This woman in his arms now knew him more intimately than anyone else in the world. With her, everything came so naturally, from conversation to silence, from a smile to sex. All those emotions that he'd thought he'd lost years ago. The realisation that the fall had started the instant he'd first seen her made his heart do a slow roll in his chest.

"God, Rick," she whispered against his ear, "I ... I ..."

He chuckled against her neck. "Speechless?"

She ran a hand lightly down his back.

"I've never felt so good." She sounded amazed.

"I'm glad." He kissed her skin again, and raised himself on his elbows to look at her. He pushed in a little, and felt her body clench around him, watched the doe-like expression of surprise cross her face at the sensation. God, how she turned him inside out with those big, dark eyes.

Tamia felt the shift of him in the very core of her, and wished they were just beginning again, not ending. She didn't want tonight to ever end. She'd never made love like that. She'd been half-afraid, at the beginning, to have sex with him at all. Hell, she'd already been in love with him - sex made things like that all too real for comfort, sometimes. But she hadn't been able to stop him, to stop herself, and she'd sold her heart to him in that. He was an amazing man, an amazing lover. She closed her eyes as she realized the truth in that. She wasn't going to be able to end this, to let it pass and go on to someone new. Even if he did, she wouldn't be able to just let go of him. For some reason she couldn't explain, she found herself wondering what it would be like to have his baby. She couldn't, of course. She was still under the Fertility Code - she couldn't have children. But she wondered anyway, with a delightful shiver.

Rick saw her shiver, and the deep look in her mahogany eyes, and something turned over in his heart. He wondered what she'd look like pregnant. What would it be like to hold her child in his arms, and know that they had created that precious life together? God, he wished he could make her pregnant. The look in her eyes was a

hunger that spoke directly to his soul - of love and laughter and family, of children. He realized then, too late, how dangerous it had been to fall in love with this woman. She wanted a baby, and he wished desperately to give her one, but they couldn't, by law, have a child. They were still bound by the codes of a military that was afraid to allow its soldiers to have families.

They snuggled together, there on the sofa, and lay silently for a while. Finally, Tamia rose up and smiled down at him.

"Some date," she murmured teasingly as she bent to kiss him.

"Hell, Tamia, I didn't mean to..."

"I know," she assured him in a whisper, pressing her hand to his cheek. Her eyes shone as she looked down at him. "I love you, Rick."

Rick's heart turned over several times in rapid succession, and he knew that, if it stopped completely, he would die a happy man.

"I love you, too, babe," he returned, pulling her down to kiss her gently. She settled against him with a sigh, and he held her close, her head against his heart, and knew he'd do whatever it took, to keep on holding her, forever.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They made love again that night, and dawn found them curled close together on the sofa, with a blanket from her bed curled around them. When the alarm went off at six-thirty, Tamia drew away from Rick with a small sigh, and stretched. Rick looked at her with a sleep-tousled grin, and then reached to tickle one dusky nipple with his tongue. She cast him a mock severe look, then grinned impishly as she sat up and swung her legs to the floor. He lay still, watching her as she pulled a shirt from the floor – his – and slipped her arms into the sleeves. He moved to kiss the bare skin of her hip that peeped through the shirt's edge, and saw her smile. She bent to kiss him lightly, then rose and moved across the room, out of his line of sight. He heard water running, and smiled to himself. Rising, he pulled on his jeans and made his way to the bathroom.

As he entered the bathroom, he saw her silhouette against the frosted, steamy glass of the shower. He relieved himself, then turned to watch her, his mind returning to the night before. God, she turned him on so quickly. He'd never imagined that he could want someone so much, that he could actually love someone at all, until the day Tamia had walked into his life and turned his world upside-down. He'd thought his own life had been tough, so much neglect and lack of care, and it had made him cold, careless about death, and almost inhuman. She'd shown him another side to life. Her past made his own look like a pampered one, and yet she had never given up, never treated anything with the dispassionate attitude that had been his lifeline, before her. He was finally

beginning to understand the primal urges that had led other men to lay down their arms and marry, while he had scoffed at their weakness. Tamia was his strength. Love was a strength he was only beginning to realize the power of. To protect her, he would fight, and gladly die. The thought of her coming to harm was a physical pain in him.

As the realisation that he would soon be sending her into that very danger clutched at him, Rick fled back into the living room. His eyes cast wildly around for something to latch onto instead of the panic clawing at him. With a small groan of regret that he had already submitted an acceptance to Headquarters, Rick sank onto the sofa and buried his face in his hands.

“Rick?” Tamia’s voice brought him sharply back to his surroundings. Turning, he saw her standing in the bathroom doorway, running a brush through her damp hair. She was clad only in a big, fluffy white towel that exposed the swell of her breasts and a generous length of thigh. Rick swallowed hard, feeling his throat go dry as he watched her. With a small smile, he met her gaze.

“Yeah?”

“What’s wrong? When I came in, you looked miserable.” From the tone of her voice, she still wasn’t convinced that wasn’t true.

He rose slowly to his feet, uncertain what to tell her. Finally, he settled for the truth. With a small shake of his head, he ambled over to her, sliding his arms around her waist and giving her a mind-numbing kiss before he softly admitted, “I was just thinking what a damned fool I was to sign us on this mission. I don’t want to lose you.”

She smiled tenderly, laying one hand on his cheek. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve no intentions of doing anything stupid. We already discussed this, Rick. We have to do this.”



Rick nodded slowly. He might not like it, but he knew she was right.

"I love you," he whispered, before claiming her mouth in a hungry kiss. A moment later, he released her, a smile on his face. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Before she could ask him where he was going, he was gone, heading for the kitchen, and the coffee machine that, if Tamia was like any other Trooper he'd ever known, would probably already be filled and programmed. He smiled when he saw the machine just finishing its cycle. Tamia was as predictable in some things as he was.

Rick returned to Tamia's room a few minutes later, two mugs of hot coffee in his hands. He stood near the bedroom door, watching with admiration as she pulled on a tight-fitting bodysuit and loose, low-cut shirt. Tying the shirt at her waist, she studied herself for a moment in the full-length mirror on her closet door, and then turned to him.

"How do I look?"

"Gorgeous," he replied as she came over to him, before handing her one of the steaming mugs.

She smiled her thanks, and took a sip of the coffee. She looked up at him then, her eyes wide. "How'd you know how I take my coffee?"

He grinned slyly. "I'm full of surprises."

She gave him a look of mock exasperation. "You're going to have to do better than that, sailor."

He grinned lazily at her, giving her slow wink. "All right, then. You really think I haven't been watching you since you first got here? I know a lot about you, Tamia."

Thankfully, she didn't ask how much, merely raising one eyebrow at him before moving into the living room, where she settled herself on the sofa, one leg curled up under her, and sipped her coffee. Rick sat next to her, his mind in a jungle far away,

wondering what fate awaited them beyond the equatorial border. He told himself it wasn't just putting Tamia in danger that worried him; it was putting his whole team in danger. That was true, at least. All through the last half of the Divide, he'd worried about his team. He'd made a vow to himself that he would never repeat the mistake he'd made in Montreal. It had cost too much. It had even cost him Jean. A fence he couldn't mend, a bridge he couldn't rebuild, lives he couldn't resurrect; all because he'd thought his super-human ability to avoid death had extended to cover the lives of everyone around him. He'd been a fool, Rick decided grimly as he finished his coffee, and he was done being one. No more pointless deaths. His hand, he realized as he reached for the cigarettes in his shirt pocket, was shaking.

Tamia's brow wrinkled in worry as she watched him pull a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and light one, taking a long drag. She turned her eyes away quickly, hoping he hadn't seen the worry on her face. She didn't know why, but it bothered her to watch him smoke. It felt like watching someone commit suicide to her.

Not that she knew why she was being so irrational. Hell, she'd taken worse drugs when she was younger - she knew how horrible withdrawal was from cocaine, PCP, heroin, and LSD. She'd never smoked, though. Not even marijuana, when it'd been passed around. Kuron's teaching, probably. He'd always said when one drew smoke into one's body; one became smoke - blown by the winds around one, with no control. Cocaine and PCP had been something she could just inhale, without smoking - no smoke, no problem, right? Heroin - Hell, heroine went right into the bloodstream. She still had a few tracks, on her left arm. LSD'd seemed harmless enough, too. A little drop. Like water. No big deal, right? Only, she hadn't been prepared for what it'd done to her head.

She was lucky she hadn't fried her brain. Still, none of them had required smoking. She'd always felt uncomfortable around smokers, and it hurt to watch Rick.

"Why do you smoke?" she asked at last, quietly.

He gave her a look. "Bothers you that much? Hell, I don't know. I started as a kid. Smokes were cheap, and smoking was something I could control. I don't smoke as much as I used to; Commando missions don't leave room for it."

"So why not just quit?"

"Like you quit drugs? Like the Hell you went through over this?" he asked softly, as his finger traced the dark track on the inside of her left arm. "I don't know. Be a helluva lot easier for me, I guess. But what reason do I have to quit?"

"Me," she whispered sadly, already knowing his answer as she watched him extinguish the cigarette in his now-empty coffee cup.

He reached for her hand then. "I love you, babe. You know that. But," and his voice dropped to a soft murmur, "that's not always enough."

Tamia nodded slowly. She understood what he was saying. Smoking was something he could count on for the rest of his life - she wasn't necessarily. Either one of them was free to walk out, and either one could die in a mission, at any time. She had to learn to accept - at least for now.

"All right, Rick. I guess I don't mind so much. It only hurts because I love you, and I don't want to see you die 'cause of those damned things."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Mission Command gathered later that day, Rick gave them all a collective greeting, and slid files to each person around the table.

"In your files, you'll find maps of the SACS complex, and case histories of the Big Six. They're the funding for SACS, as long as Miguel Coramaz remains in control of the Council. Once he's gone, so is the money. Central Intelligence seems to think the Big Six've got some kind of hold over Coramaz, so we're to assume that we're dealing with a puppet figurehead here. The CIA has reason to believe that Coramaz and his cronies are stockpiling an arsenal, preparing military take-over of Rioado and the Chilean State – the only two hold-outs against the Council. It's also possible that this is only the beginning, and that our Mole is selling SACS classified information as well as weaponry. Our job is, as you know, to stop those weapons from being put into play."

"No problem," Watchdog drawled, clasping his dark hands behind his head.

"This is gonna be a cakewalk."

Cat rolled her eyes and looked as if she might say something, but Rick beat her to it.

"Matt, we've got a job to do. Do your part, and don't fuck up. Anyone gets hurt 'cause of your being an asshole and I'll personally put you on lockdown."

Watchdog subsided then, and Red spoke up in the gap. "What do our teams look like?"

Rick turned and pulled a map from the floor, spreading it across the table. "We go in by twos..."

"Like Jehovah's Witnesses!" Watchdog crowed, snickering.

"Or wild animals," Cat muttered.

Rick ignored them both. "That's safest. We'll go in here, through the jungle. That'll be our front gate. Back gate will be here, near the power station."

Red nodded, but his brow furrowed. "What about the bunker, Rick? Any chance of a sniper in this place?"

"My sources say no, but I'm not taking any chances. And you're right, if they're going to be anywhere, it'd be in the bunker. Fortunately, that's enough out of the way that we can skirt it if we have to." He tapped one larger form on the map. "This central building's where the main man is. It's sealed with an energy barrier around the outside. No windows, no doors into the building from the outside. The CIA seems to think there're passages underground between the buildings."

"Rick," Tamia spoke up, her voice concerned, "if there aren't any entrances, how the hell are we supposed to get in?"

He pulled a second map from the floor, a diagram of the building. "There are air ducts here and here," he said, pointing, "that lead into the building. We get past the energy picket, and we're home free. Those ducts lead into the main room, and there's just enough of an opening to fire through. I figure we get one shot before the guards will be alerted, and about ten minutes to get out. We only get one chance to make this work."

She nodded, and sat back. Rick turned to look at Harlin. "Frank, you and Kathy take the front gate. We'll need your cover for the entry team. Your call sign is Scarlet. You'll have some heavy firepower - don't be afraid to use it if you have to. Everything's

silenced." Red nodded, and Rick turned to look around the table. "Hood, I want you and Chips on the back gate, with the power station. There's a scrambling system on the energy picket. You cover Walter's ass good - he'll be working on getting us through those pickets."

A white grin flashed in the woman's dark face as she turned to look at Chips. "Be a pleasure, mate. What's our code to lower?"

"For the exterior picket, the curtain. For the inner seals, blinds."

She grinned again. "Curtains and blinds. Easy. Our 'sign?"

"Healing Hand."

They both nodded. Rick turned his gaze to Cat, next. "Jen, I'm assigning you the madman. Keep his ass in line. You two're our cover team, for the bunker, and the perimeter, signature Hornet's Nest. You'll have the thermchems. As first in, you're also the most vulnerable. Remember, we don't know what kind of firepower we're up against. Keep low, and don't let him," Rick gestured to Watchdog, "do anything stupid. Check out the bunker, and then cover the grounds. We don't want any surprises."

She nodded. "Understood."

"Watchdog?"

"Yeah," he replied sullenly, "yeah, I got it, man."

"No cute stuff."

"Yeah, okay."

Rick turned to Chelsea. "Once we're near the DZ, Gypsy, you have the Rover and call sign Angel. We'll need a quick out. Rover guns'll be loaded, and you'll have thermchem torps, should things get too heavy. Stay out of sight, if you can. It's a long walk home."

The petite woman nodded solemnly. "I will do my best."

"All right. Now, Blade is going to be point for this..."

"Hey man," Watchdog piped up, "why you lettin' the rookie crack at the main man? We got no guarantee she won't crack!"

Rick's expression hardened as he looked at Matt. "Yes we do. She's got more hours in a battle zone than any of you do. She won't crack, and she's also got the best damn aim in this whole unit. Besides, I'll be keeping an eye on her."

Rick's eyes slid to Tamia as he spoke, and he saw the slight softening of her eyes. She'd heard what he hadn't said, as if he'd known she would. He didn't like the idea of sending her into that building, and he sure as hell wasn't going to let anything happen to her. Rick looked across the table then, saw Watchdog's skeptical look, and reached for a file – Tamia's file - and flipped it open to her military record. He slid it across the table to Matt then, without a word. The other man picked it up, looked at her scores, and whistled appreciatively. "You got some awesome scores here, chinagirl. How'd you ever do that?"

She shrugged. "I learned to duck shirken when I was five. I learned to throw them when I was six. Guns are a lot easier to handle."

Watchdog closed the file and slid it back across the table. "Shit, I'm convinced, man. Go for it."

"Now that we're all agreed," Rick said, flipping a page in the file in front of him. "We've got three more hits to cover. First up, we drop two teams at Hacienda Palo, in Columbia."

"Who's our mark?" Frank wanted to know.

"Hector Alonzio Cali. He's the reigning South American kingpin of cocaine, and

one of the most prominent of the Big Six. Hacienda Palo is one of his legitimate business ventures – a furniture manufacturing facility.”

“And who’s going in?”

Rick glanced up. “Hood, you’re our second-story expert. I want you to memorise the blueprints of the factory before we get down there. Gypsy, you know how the drug trade works, and you have the connections to get Cali into our optimum kill box. Coordinate with Hood. You two are Team One.” As they nodded, Rick’s eyes moved to Tamia. “You’re going in solo on this one, Blade. You’ll have constant communication with Hood and Gypsy, should you need it, but there’s no way to give you back-up; it’s going to be tight, as it is.” His gaze burned into hers. “Can you handle it?”

She nodded, before her eyes fell again. Rick flinched from the grim determination that hovered over her. She might be able to handle her job, but he wasn’t sure he could. Drawing a deep breath, he pushed past his tangled feelings and pressed on.

“If we time things right, our other two contestants should be easy pickings. Vincente Gonzales and Manuel Cordoban, aside from being drug lords, are highly involved in their Church. The two men are allies, but there’s a history of bad blood between their families, and if we play this right, we can make it look like the feud is responsible. They’ll both be at the Dias de Nueva parade in Lima, two days from now. I want one team – myself and Blade – in the shooter’s box on this one; no back-up. It’s going to be very public, and there’s going to be a lot of panic on the streets when this goes down. I want as few people on the ground as possible.” He let his eyes travel around the table. “Any questions?”

No one spoke, and a few heads shook. Rick closed his file and stood. "All right,



people. Be suited up and at the Rover at eighteen-thirty hours. We move out tonight."

There was a rustle of movement as they all rose and left. All except Tamia. Rick looked at her in worry, then sat down again. Her eyes were fixed on the map and she'd been silent most of the briefing.

"Tamia? What's wrong, babe?"

She looked up at him. "What if Matt's right, Rick? I've never played assassin before. What if I do freeze?"

Rick sighed heavily, and took her hand, squeezing it. "All right, I admit I don't like your going in point, either. But, we've already been over this, honey. You're the best we've got, and we only get one chance. I'll never be far away. If you freeze, I'll talk you through it. Hell, Tamia, you've shot people at point blank range before - this isn't any different."

Her eyes lowered. "Except that they won't be trying to kill me. They won't even know I'm there."

Rick drew her against him. "Don't think about it, sweetheart. Just do it. And don't let Matt rattle your confidence. He's full of hot air. You know that." He released her, rising. "Now, c'mon. There's not much time left. Go suit up."

She rose and, giving him a last, wan smile, left the room. As he watched her go, an uneasy feeling clenched in Rick's gut. When the door slid silently shut behind Tamia, it jarred through him like a lid slamming closed on her coffin. What had he done to her?

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tamia lay in the rafters of the old Columbian factory, her weapon resting against her chest and belly as she stared at the ceiling, waiting for Gypsy's signal that she and Cali were arriving. Closing her eyes, Tamia drew a deep breath and mouthed a prayer chant from her childhood, seeking strength. Kuron would probably skin her as a blasphemer if he'd heard it. He'd be scandalized that she'd use a Buddhist chant – words of peace and life – as weapons of war and destruction. But she'd use whatever she had at her disposal to get this done right. The world was at stake.

A tiny series of beeps sounded in her ear – Morse code never seemed to fade out of war completely – and rolled swiftly onto her stomach in the loft, resting the barrel of her rifle against the wooden ledge. Peering through the gun's sight, she drew shallow breaths, even behind her soundproof mask, and steadied herself as she watched and waited.

The door below opened, and Tamia tensed. This was it. She heard Gypsy's soft voice floating through the air, and then the deeper voice of a man, just before Hector Cali stepped through the door and into Tamia's sights. Training her weapon on his head, she squeezed the trigger and felt the sniper rifle kick against her shoulder, even as Cali jerked and fell, a red dot in the center of his forehead.

Gypsy stepped forward and stooped to place two fingers against the side of the downed man's neck. After a moment, she sketched a cross in the air above his body, and then rose to her feet and gave Tamia a thumbs-up.

Releasing her breath in a sigh of relief, Tamia rolled to her back again tapped the COM link on her belt.

"Striker to Tin Roof. Dinner's over; come and get us."

"Affirmative," came Frank's voice over the 'link. "Rendezvous LZ. We'll be waiting."

Tamia acknowledged him, and slid forward, feet first. Pushing over the edge, she dropped the ten feet from the loft to the concrete factory floor, landing in a crouch. Swiftly, she rose to her feet and signalled Gypsy, who didn't have the advantage of a COM link or any protection in that peasant dress, as she turned toward the loading dock. One down, three to go, including Coramaz.

La Dias de Nueva. The New Day. Lima's premiere celebration of the end of the Divide was in full swing, below the soaring bell tower of Santa Maria Cathedral. Peruvians didn't care that COSEC had lost the war; they'd just been overjoyed that the fighting was over. Peru and Lima in particular, had suffered horribly during the Divide.

Now, secluded in the shadows of the bell tower, Tamia watched the people who thronged the streets below, and felt guilt stab through her. They looked so happy to be alive, and so relieved that blood and death had finally left them in peace. None of them had a clue of the havoc about to be unleashed on them. Glancing at the man crouched barely two feet from her, scoping out the kill box, Tamia sighed, and tapped her COM link.

“Do you ever feel like what you do might be worse than what you’re trying to prevent?”

His gaze never wavered from his task. “No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Not even Montreal?” She watched him stiffen, and knew that she’d hit a raw nerve. “God, Ace, I’m sorry—“

“Montreal was a goat fuck, a set up,” he rasped, his voice hard and cold. “It’s like comparing apples and oranges.”

“Look at them, Ace,” she said quietly, nodding to the people below. “They’re celebrating peace, and we’re about to start a bloodbath that’ll tear Peru apart. That’s got to tear you apart; it does me.”

He did turn toward her, then. “Don’t, Blade. Don’t think about that. Concentrate on the mission, not the consequences, or you’ll drive yourself nuts.”

She drew a deep breath, stilling the sadness and guilt in her mind as she nodded. Rick turned back to his scope, and, a moment later, tensed again. “Get ready. Package is six hundred yards to delivery.”

Tamia mobilized, making sure her weapon was set. She might not be able to spare the people below the trauma of witnessing more death, but she could – and would – see to it that no one died who didn’t have to.

“And game.” Rick marked off the target as the vehicle reached the target entry zone.

Bringing the sniper rifle into tracking position, Tamia nodded. “Set.”

Rick ticked off the yards silently with his free hand as the vehicle drew closer to

the kill box. Through her scope, Tamia saw two men, both a little older than herself, riding in the rear of an open-air stretch limousine. They were laughing at something. One was handsome, with curling dark hair and the look of a Latin Lothario; the other's was slashed with a long, ugly scar, and his shoulder-length straight hair was pulled back sharply from a hawkish face.

Tamia's gaze narrowed on the two men, and then shifted slightly, until the Lothario – Cordoban – filled her gun sight completely. As Rick's final finger fell, she squeezed the trigger, and shifted like lightning to fire the second shot – this one at Gonzales – before the first had even hit its mark.

Cordoban jerked upright, then slumped and rolled over the edge of the limo and into the street, where the vehicle's rear wheel caught his body. Gonzales, having shifted in shock at his friend's sudden collapse, caught the second bullet just behind his right ear and tipped over sideways as the white seat exploded with red.

Screams erupted from the crowd of onlookers as people swarmed toward the fallen men. Unable to watch, Tamia withdrew, leaning against the bell tower wall to stave off a sudden wave of nausea. Dimly, she was aware of Rick's voice as he tapped his COM link and said, "The match is over. Pick us up at the ringside."

As someone – Kathy, probably – confirmed the pick-up, Tamia felt Rick's hand on her back. "You okay?"

She turned into his arms, shuddering. "That was awful."

"Well, get over it, Blade, because the next one's going to be pure Hell." His tone was gruff, and she read the concern underneath as he said, "Now ditch that rifle and let's go. They'll be waiting for us. We still have to see to the king."

Coramaz. Sickness welled in Tamia and she closed her eyes as she fought back a

wave of nausea. Why did she feel like she was about to come face-to-face with death? It wasn't a comforting thought.

Night's heavy drape hung over the jungle, turning greens and browns to greys and blacks. Recent rains, combined with the chill of shadowy darkness, had raised a light mist which swirled amongst the trees like a grey shroud, hiding predator and savior alike. The hushed chirps and hums of the Brazilian rainforest's resident night foragers was disturbed only by the occasional growl of a triumphant hunter, or the indignant squawk of canopy denizens protesting their noisy surface neighbors.

In a clearing of tall grass, silence lay heavily. Only the sporadic rustles and squeaks of tiny creatures burrowing into the damp earth disturbed the tranquil clearing. Then, like a black sea, the grass began to roll and pitch, rustling as if some invisible creature thrashed through the grass. From a hovering darkness that blocked out the stars, smaller shapes tumbled into the waiting darkness. Eight of them, each linked to the inky blackness above by an umbilical cord of black nylon. Within seconds, both the black cloud and the cords had vanished, leaving eight dark shapes cutting through the grass toward the shelter of the jungle canopy as thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance.

As they moved cautiously through the jungle's dense undergrowth, the eight Commandos switched on their motion scanners and nightsight gear. The gear allowed drops on even the darkest of nights, providing even more masking for Special Operations units. Unfortunately, the advance had come too late for the Divide, and the Commandos were, in fact, the test group for the new, highly sophisticated masks. Equipped not only with scanners for both heat and light sources, infrared signatures and radar, but also with

distance binoculars which automatically compensated for vision and distance and the newly-developed flareguards, to prevent blinding in case of sudden light, the eyesights alone were state-of-the-art. The whole unit was more like a full-face helmet than anything, however; half cloth mask, half wiring and gadgetry. An earpiece attached to one side of the head covering and a microphone piece in the facemask allowed communications and radio monitoring, when combined with the range-distanced radio unit built into their mission utility belts. A gas mask, rigged for silent filtration, was designed to leech most foreign matter, whether chemical, biological, or thermal, from the air being breathed in. Unfortunately, there'd been little chance to test it under combat conditions, yet, so no one was sure how well it would work. Covered in black cloth, the mask also aided in night-masking, and had the added attraction of making even a scream silent to the unaided ear. All in all, it was a perfect device for Special Forces.

Rick flinched away from those thoughts, knowing that nothing, man or machine, was that perfect. He'd learned that lesson well since the Divide. However, focusing on the machine allowed him a momentary mental distraction from the urgent sense of unease which had gripped him since the Rover had lifted off in New York. He'd relaxed slightly after the first assassination, that of drug lord Hector Alonzio Cali, had gone off beautifully. Tamia had been calm, cool, and thoroughly professional; almost as if she was an assassin by trade. The second, a double hit on Vincente Gonzales and Manuel Luis Cordoban, had gone nearly as well, though the reaction of the crowd had unsettled Tamia a bit. However, the success of those two hits had only served to bring Rick's fear and tension back with a vengeance. They only had one target left, now, and it was the most sensitive one yet. Since that fateful night in Buenos Aires that had started the bloodiest war Rick had ever seen, he'd been a firm believer in Murphy's Law as it

applied to missions. One thing had to go wrong every mission. Usually, it was something minor, often something that merely delayed lift-off or drop time at the start of the mission. The later that bad thing happened, however, the worse it always was. Montreal had been one of those missions, much like Buenos Aires.

Rick cast a nervous glance toward where Tamia walked, her eyes sweeping the surrounding trees. She looked calmer than any of the rest of them, her body posture relaxed, her stride confident as well as cautious, and her hands loosely cradling her weapon. With a small sigh, Rick forced himself to relax. The tenser he was, the more likely something was to go drastically wrong.

“Something wrong, Skipper?” Walter, on Rick’s right, asked. “You’re as tense as a cherry on his first night manoeuvre.”

That was an understatement, Rick decided, even as he touched his COM link to answer the other man. “Just keep your eyes open for trouble, Chips. We should be at the tree line soon.”

Walter voiced his assent and returned to his own surveillance. Rick’s eyes swept over the surrounding foliage, checking for any unusual motions or patches. Finding nothing, he relaxed a little more. He’d had his doubts about Tamia’s suggestion to drop down almost on top of the compound, even when he’d agreed with her assessment. The whole ride out, he’d mentally played over all the pros and cons to this drop. Now, it appeared that misgiving had been ungrounded. Her plan had been more rational than it had sounded to him. Their drop, even so close to the SACS compound, had gone undetected, if the current indicators were solid. Rick smiled grimly to himself. Maybe his luck was finally changing.

As the Commandos reached the edge of the jungle, they dropped, as one, to the



ground, crouching just inside the tree line, their eyes on the glowing wall beyond them. Touching his hand to the group communicator on his COM link, he said, “This is it, everyone. Stick with your teams, and don’t break radio silence on group frequency unless it’s an emergency. They can’t pick up the scrambled frequency on the individual Comms, but the group frequency is standard.”

They all nodded, and Rick signalled Matt and Jen out. With parting nods, they slipped off along the trees, then dropped closer to the ground, masking their movement with the wind patterns blowing across the tall jungle grass as a storm headed in over them all. Within moments, the duo had disappeared.

The next few moments passed in tense silence for the rest of the group, listening for the sounds of gunfire over the distant rolling of thunder, and watching for flashes of light that indicated a weapon’s discharge. Either would mean that the cover team had been discovered. Rick watched his timer anxiously. As it hit the three minute mark without any signs of disturbance within the compound, he smiled grimly. Matt and Jen made a damn fine entry team. Looking up, he nodded to Chips and Hood, then watched them slip off into the trees, heading eastward, toward the rear of the compound. Rick’s gaze fell to his timer almost immediately. This whole operation rested on perfect timing. One minute, one second could mean the difference between success and death for any one of them. It only took one alerted guard to terminate their mission, one glimpse of their faces to blow their cover and start a war.

Finally, after an agonisingly long period of ten minutes, Rick signalled to Frank and Kathy, his cover team. Inwardly, he breathed a small sigh of relief as they disappeared into the grass. The mission was almost half finished now. All that was left was to get Tamia inside the main building and back out before the storm brewing on the

horizon hit. Seconds after Frank and Kathy left, Rick nodded to Tamia, then plunged into the inky blackness once again.

Less than three yards from the front gates, Rick held up his hand, gesturing Tamia to stop. Tensely, he fixed his gaze on the gate guards, lounging nonchalantly in a lighted guardhouse. He kept his eyes on them, watching for any sign that they realized anyone was out in the grass. Seconds ticked by, before Rick felt a hand touch his arm. Turning, he looked at Tamia, then followed the direction of her gesture in time to see Frank and Kathy slip through a patch of deactivated laserline. Nodding, Rick hurried through the grass, Tamia hot on his heels, toward the downed line. They could only hold it for so long before it melted through their reflectors, or sounded an alarm. Once he and Tamia were both through the line, he watched Red and Diamond release the reflectors and duck off into the shadow of a nearby building, heading for their surveillance positions.

In the shadows of an auxiliary building, Rick and Tamia crept toward the central dome. It was a huge octagon of concrete and metal, darkly imposing under the shifting storm clouds.

Checking to make sure the coast was clear, Rick beckoned Tamia to go ahead, then fell back into the shadows of the nearest building to monitor her progress. He breathed a small, thankful sigh as she scrambled noiselessly through the unsealed duct and into the bowels of the building. Rick's primary attention was focused on Tamia when he opened a small palm-sized console and watched her location tracker move through a blueprint of the building. As point and assassin for this mission, its ultimate success or failure rested on her. In a corner of his mind, however, he wondered how the rest of his team was faring. Tamia'd had no problems getting into the building so far, which mean Walter and Kelly were on top of their end of things, and he'd gotten the one

tap beep on his headset when Frank and Diamond had taken up their positions. As for Jen and Matt, all he could say was that no news was hopefully good news. All he could do now was pray the rest of the mission went so smoothly.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As he and Jen moved through the trees on the south side of the complex, a bullet ricocheted off a tree next to Watchdog's head, barely missing his ear.

"Shit!" He swore as he dropped down behind the cover of the bushes. Then, in a whisper, he said, "We've been made, Cat! Some motherfucker's shooting at us." She didn't respond, and he turned to see why. His blood congealed as he saw her, lying half-propped against a tree, dark blood soaking her sleeve, her hand clamped to her shoulder. "Cat!"

She reached to touch her 'link as he crawled to her. "Damn bullet winged me, Watchdog. Wasn't fast enough. I'll be all right in a minute..."

"Like Hell you will!" He muttered savagely, tapping his hand to the group COM link on his belt. "Angel, this is the Hornet's Nest. We're down one. Meet you at the front gate. Watch out, the ghost is walking. Repeat, the ghost is walking."

"I am on the way."

Rick swore under his breath. Damn, what was going on? He glanced again at the outside duct's grate. What was taking so long? Tamia should have called in by now. The COM link didn't bear good news, either. The ghost is walking. Code - meant there was a sniper. Damn place was probably crawling with them. Who had been hit? Why hadn't Walter released the internal energy pickets, opened the grates? Where the Hell was Tamia? Then, suddenly, his earphone came alive.

"Blind Man is at the window," Tamia said. "When're we gonna pull up the blinds?"

"Thank God," Rick breathed to himself.

He heard her soft chuckle, and realized that his mouthpiece was on when she said, "Thought I'd ran away, huh?"

He couldn't respond. He'd thought he'd lost her. The force of how much he loved her was only just beginning to sink in. In the next moment, Walter's voice cleared his mind. "Healing Hand here. Can the Blind Man see?"

"Oh, yeah," Tamia's voice answered. "Sun's nice and bright, too. Good view."

The COM link went silent, and Rick tensed. The next few moments would make or break their entire mission. Tamia had only one bullet in her sniper rifle - a highly lethal, very illegal Kriomite bullet. The kind of thing only a terrorist would use. Just the cover their undercover operation needed.

Time stretched, and Rick found himself holding his breath. What was taking so long? Then, suddenly, Tamia's voice came to him, concerned. "I can't do it, Ace. I can't draw a bead on him."

God, was she cracking?

"Try," he murmured into his mouthpiece. "Just try."

"I am trying," her whisper turned frustrated. "The motherfucker's playin' hide'n'seek. Every time I get my sights on him, he moves out of my line of sight."

She wasn't freezing. She had a worse problem than that. He swore under his breath. "Blade, listen to me. There should be a port in the duct, a little ways to your left. Can you see it?"

He heard her intake of breath. "Yeah, I see it."

"Can you make it there?"

A pause. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good. Listen carefully. That port will give you access to the panels above the room. There's a gap there, in the center panel. Go slowly, and don't touch the glowing ones. They're pressure-sensitive glass. You'll be in his lap if you do."

"Right."

Rick held his breath for a long moment, hearing the sounds of movement from the COM link. Then, Tamia's voice again. "Hey, not bad! I've got a clear window here."

There was the hissing pop of a silenced weapon, followed by a sudden wail of an alarm. Tamia's voice came then. "Shit! What the Hell's that?"

Rick's blood congealed. The room had been pressurized. That was why there were no exterior openings. Now, the whole damned building was getting ready to blow. In that instant, he forgot protocol completely. All that mattered was her life. "Tamia, get the Hell out of there!" He ordered. "That place is going to—!"

A loud explosion cut him off, and his heart lurched into his throat. No!

"Blade! Tamia! Damn it, answer me!" He shouted as he lurched from his concealment behind the barracks. Not her. Not now. Silence hovered over the COM link, broken only by the sound of settling shrapnel and the crackling of flames. Then, there was a wheezing cough.

"Tamia!"

"Ace, I'm...what happened?"

"Are you hurt? Can you move at all?"

"I think I'm... I'm bleeding, but that's it. Shrapnel must've winged me."

"Dear God, Tamia," he was already near the ruined building, his eyes frantically

searching the burning wreckage. "I shouldn't have sent..."

"I'm fine. Really. Could use some help getting these damned plaster blocks off of me, but I'll manage." Her voice was too light, too casual. Something was wrong. He heard her heavy breathing, her struggling sounds.

"Where are you?"

She drew a sharp breath. "Southwest corner. Only side of the damn building that wasn't burning. Guess I'm one lucky bitch, huh?"

He could have cried at the forced lightness in her voice, if he'd been that in touch with his emotions. Right now, he wasn't even in touch with his sanity. He was standing in the wide open, and the ghost was walking.

"Angel standing by, request go-ahead," came Gypsy's voice over the COM link.

Without even an awareness of it, Rick found himself answering, "Negative, Angel. The ghost is walking. Palace gate is closed."

He had reached the area Tamia had designated, without even realizing he'd been moving. He saw her then, laying a few feet from the main ruins. Either she'd crawled there in the last few minutes, or she'd been thrown there by the explosion. Judging from the lack of rubble around her, he'd say it was the former. She'd proven it beyond doubt - she was one tough lady.

"Tamia!" He rushed over, pulling off his mask as he fell to his knees next to her. She'd obviously removed her mask recently, as it was lying beside her. Her face was contorted in pain, and her hands gripped her side, where dark blood ran, black in the firelight, through her fingers. She was bleeding heavily, and had been since the explosion, judging from the amount of blood on her clothes. She was pale, and her dark suit had been ripped open in several places. Blood trickled from lacerations on her arms

and legs. Her eyes opened at the sound of his voice, her pupils dilated in pain, and she looked up into his frightened face.

"Guess it looks pretty bad, huh?" She whispered, her breathing labored.

"Dear God, Tamia," his voice nearly cracked as he reached out to touch her face. He choked on the emotions that surged to life in him. Re-asserting control of himself quickly, he picked up his radio piece and touched his COM link. "Hornet's Nest, how's the ghost?"

"Restin' in peace," came Watchdog's voice. "Which was a helluva lot nicer than I wanted to be?"

"Angel, we need an assist, pronto. Blade's down, and in need of immediate medical attention. Healing Hand, Scarlet, fall in. The King is dead. Open up and center at the Palace. Make it quick, people. We've only got maybe three minutes to get the hell out of here before the whole compound comes running."

There were affirmations, which Rick barely heard as he turned back to Tamia. He pulled off his parka, wadding it up and pressing it against her side. She hissed and jerked in pain, and Rick's brow furrowed deeper. God, how bad was she hurt? Carefully, he lifted the material away, and his face paled. Her suit had been burned away across her entire midriff, and burned flesh hung blackly around the wound. Blood pumped from the wound to the beat of her heart, and he feared for an instant that a major artery had been severed. Torn muscle gushed blood, telling him that most of the bleeding was from there. Once the Rover got there, they'd hopefully be able to stabilize her. At least stop most of the bleeding...

"Angel coming in."

He looked up as he heard the whisper of the silent craft settling down behind him,



just as figures formed out of the darkness around them. Gypsy and Watchdog sprang from the Rover with a folded stretcher as Red, Diamond, Hood and Chips moved to help lift Tamia. The woman's jaw muscles tightened in pain, but she didn't make a sound as they rushed her to the waiting Rover. Rick claimed the seat beside the medbay as the stretcher was secured into place. As they lifted off again, a hypo-sedative was quickly pressed to Tamia's arm, and a coagulant patch secured over her side. A few seconds later, Tamia's body relaxed, telling them all that the sedative was working. She opened drug-glazed eyes, and Rick smiled down at her as she looked at him.

"You did A-OK, kiddo," he said quietly, smoothing dark hair from her face. "Just rest now."

Her head lulled, and she slipped away with a sigh, as if that had been all she'd needed to hear.

Rick was silent for a while, his eyes fixed on Tamia. Every so often, his fingers moved to her neck, checking for a pulse. Blood loss like she'd suffered could bring on sudden heart failure. They'd managed to stop the bleeding, but she'd need a hospital, and fast. Nearest military trauma hospital was in Dallas. Damn. Too far away. He wasn't sure she'd last that long. At least she wasn't in pain right now. Damn it, he should never have let her go in there alone...

"How's she doing?"

Rick looked up at Cat, and shook his head. "Not good, but she's alive. She needs a hospital, bad."

She nodded. "Kathy's already been on the horn to Winslow. They've got an emergency team on stand-by at the landing pad."

Rick breathed a sigh, nodding. "Good. Thanks." He noticed her bandaged shoulder, then. "You the other one hit?"

"Yeah, sniper got me. Just barely missed Matt's head, too - though I can't see how he bloody well missed a target that big. I'll live. I got worse than this during the Divide. Hurts like hell right now, but the bullet's out. Shoulder'll be sore for a while, and stiff, but if there's no more immediate missions, there's no reason to take me off actives."

He nodded, and his eyes fell to Tamia again. "I shouldn't have let her go in there alone," he said, half to himself. "I should've been there."

Cat shook her head in wonder. "Lady's one helluva trooper, Rick. I heard that com. She never even cracked."

Rick brushed his hand softly across Tamia's forehead, and felt the fever there. Damn. She'd need Detox, too. To cover his worry, he answered Cat. "She was a Trooper during the Divide. Lost her family in 'ninety-six, during the Reaver War. She doesn't have anyone, except her grandfather, and I couldn't tell you if they speak to one another anymore. I imagine they do, since he's all she's got."

"And you," Cat said quietly, causing Rick to look up, amazed at her perceptiveness. "You were talking in the clear after the explosion, Rick. You've never cracked like that before. She's special, isn't she?"

Rick's eyes were troubled as he looked back at Tamia. "Yeah, she's special."

Cat reached her good hand to squeeze his shoulder. "Take some advice from a friend, Rick. Tell her that, when she's back on her feet."

Cat moved back to her seat then, leaning toward the forward cabin to say something to Diamond. Rick didn't hear much of the conversation, his eyes focused on Tamia's face, silently pleading with her to hang on for just a little while longer.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rick paced a wide circle in Mount Sinai Medical Center's Operating Room waiting lounge, a worried frown creasing his face. Damn it, what was taking so long? He glanced at the clock again, noting that it was 2350. Tamia had been in surgery since 0800 this morning, and he'd seen no one. No nurse with a progress report, no doctor to say if Tamia had lived or died. He ploughed his shaking hands through his hair, wishing he could smoke, to calm his nerves. But he'd have to go outside the hospital to do that, and he wouldn't leave until he knew Tamia was going to make it.

You finally found a way to stop me smoking, babe, he told her silently, and laughed bleakly as he realized he'd already started talking to her as if she was dead. The laugh cracked, and he pressed his hands to his stinging eyes as tears slipped silently loose. God damn it, he needed to do something, or he was going to totally break down! He couldn't just stand around, waiting for someone who had no idea what Tamia meant to him to determine her fate, and their future.

Rick drew a shuddering breath, his hands clenching in trembling fists. He needed to see her, to hold her, so bad. Last time he'd seen her had been through the glass partition of the Isolation Room, and his heart had nearly shattered at the sight. She'd looked like Snow White in her damned glass coffin, her skin so pale it was translucent,

and her body wreathed in vine-like tubes. He'd wanted to pound down those walls and carry her off to somewhere far away from the taunting machines she hated so much and the white-clad wraiths that hovered over her, so that they couldn't take her away from him. Instead, he'd stood there, helpless, as he'd watched the only thing he'd ever really wanted in life slip away from him.

“Commander Carinson?”

Rick whirled at the sound of a voice addressing him, to find a blonde woman in blood covered scrubs standing just inside the lounge. That was Tamia's blood on her clothes, his mind registered as his heart clenched, and he felt sick with fear.

“How is she?” He demanded, surging across the space toward her.

The woman frowned in concern as she studied his face. “Commander, I think you'd better have a seat.”

Ice plunged through Rick, and his heart stopped beating altogether. No. Tamia wasn't dead. She couldn't be dead, damn it!

“Just tell me,” he begged the woman, his voice a croaking whisper. “Please.”

“Let's sit.” She took his arm, steering him toward a cluster of chairs.

Rick slumped into a seat as his eyes stung and his heart splintered. Oh, god. He'd been right. Nothing had ever hurt this bad before. He couldn't do it; if Tamia was dead, he didn't want to go on.

“Please, Nurse. Can I...” he swallowed hard, battling his pain, and steadily losing ground. “Can I at least see her?”

“I'm not a nurse. I'm Dr. Maria Matnes, Captain Kuan's regenerative therapy surgeon. And you can see her when she comes out of recovery,” she said quietly, laying a hand on his shoulder. “As long as the procedure holds.”

Through the haze of grief in his mind, one word registered, bringing hope bubbling to the surface. Recovery. His heart leapt into his throat.

“She’s alive.”

“At the moment,” Dr. Matnes said, nodding.

“Stable?”

She sighed, and shrugged. “That’s yet to be determined. We’re monitoring her, for now. Regenerative surgery is tricky, and if anything managed to contaminate the wounds, her body might, in fighting that infection, see the regrowth tissue as an infection as well.”

He drew a breath, willing his body to stop shaking. “How bad was it?”

Dr. Matnes frowned as she sat down beside him. “Bad. As you were told at Winslow, she needed a new kidney and spleen. That’s a hazard in itself, since the spleen ultimately determines the acceptance or rejection of regenerative processes. If it tells the body to reject regrowth, it’ll turn on itself, and we’ll have to deal with tissue rot.”

Rick squeezed his eyes closed against the thought. Watching Tamia slowly waste away would be worse than having her suddenly gone. God... “What are the chances of that?”

“Well, she’s a lucky girl, Commander. She has a high metabolism, which typically slows rejection cascades. And she’s been administered an STD Detox regimen within the past ten years. The chemical composition for that Detox regimen quite often keeps the body from rejecting clean cells.”

Rick relaxed a little, feeling an ironic smile building. Tamia would find that funny, to know that what had almost killed her in ‘Frisco might just be what saved her life, now. “Anything else?”

“We were forced to totally remove a section of colon, and flush the surrounding tissue for infection; it was pulverized. And, of course, we had to graft new skin over most of her abdomen.”

Rick sucked in a breath, his heart hurting, as he watched a sadness that had nothing to do with her statement flicker across the doctor’s face. Around the pain eating his heart, he managed, “What aren’t you telling me, Doc?”

Her pale blue eyes met his, searching. “How close are you to the captain?”

His throat closed. He loved Tamia. What was Matnes getting at? “Close.”

She nodded slightly. “An hour into surgery, Tamia’s body underwent a spontaneous abortion. Probably due to the stress of her injuries.”

Those words rocked through Rick like a bomb’s blast. “She wasn’t pregnant!”

Matnes sighed. “According to the records that came with her from Winslow Medical, Tamia had probably been pregnant for about a week, prior to her wounding.”

A week. They’d been in South America for nearly that long, and he and Tamia had... Rick felt the blood drain from him as chilling weakness spread through his body. She’d been pregnant, with his baby.

“Oh god,” he muttered as his world spun, the pain striking him hard in the heart. They’d been going to have a child; and now... the stinging pain returned to his eyes as he dropped his head into his hands with a low groan of pain.

“Commander?” Dr. Matnes’ voice reached him from a distance, concerned. “Commander, are you all right?”

He ignored her, barely heard her above the roar of pain and grief through his light head. He’d wanted a family so bad, and he’d wanted it with Tamia. He ached, to the core, for the life his stupidity had cost them all. Oh, god, if only he’d known!

A week later, Rick stood looking down at Tamia's pale face, a worried frown darkening his own features. She'd been in this damned hospital for three weeks already. His eyes closed painfully as he remembered why.

They'd had to grow her a new kidney and spleen. Tamia's left kidney had taken shrapnel fragments in the explosion, severing it from the blood vessels. Dr. Matnes estimated that it had died sometime during the flight out of Brazil. Her spleen had been pulverized, explaining why infection and toxicity had set in so quickly. There had been other damage as well, some so shattering that Rick dared not consider it himself, or he knew he'd break down again. It had taken him a week to work through enough of the pain that he didn't feel half-numb anymore. He still didn't have a clue how he was ever going to explain it to Tamia, though if she ever woke up.

It'd taken a team of four doctors three days to stabilize her enough to even perform the extraction of kidney and spleen cells for the regrowth treatment, and then another five days to grow the necessary organs. When they'd finally gotten her into the OR, it'd taken them fifteen hours to do the transplant, carefully removing remaining shrapnel and dead tissue. It'd been nightmare enough to know all of that. He'd spent the first week and a half at the hospital, watching her through the Isoroom glass, wishing he could take her place, or just die so that he wouldn't be able to cause her any more pain.

After the surgery, he'd thought she would be out of the kill-zone and he could rest a little. He'd been wrong. Secondary infection and chemical poisoning from her wounds had set in, and she'd been placed directly back into the Isoroom from recovery. He hadn't even been able to see her, except through the glass partition. Fortunately, she'd remained unconscious through most of it; though Matnes had cautioned him that Tamia's

“coma,” as she’d termed it, could simply mean that her system was shutting down. But Rick hadn’t believed that, not even for an instant. Tamia had fought tooth and nail for life for too long to give up now.

He’d been vindicated, too. Two days ago, her toxin levels had dropped to minimal, and her pulse had gone back up to near normal. Dr. Matnes had declared her off the isolation-critical lists and moved her to ICU. Yesterday, she’d been upgraded to stable and transferred to a private room. And yet, she was still unconscious. Matnes and the other doctors wanted to monitor Tamia for a while, once she woke up, and Rick was desperate for her to do just that. He had to tell her what a goddamned idiot he was, and beg her to forgive him for putting her through all of this. Feeling weary tears prick his eyes, Rick reached for her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Tamia’s eyelids flickered and she sighed, her fingers curling lightly around his, and Rick’s heart turned over. Was she finally waking?

“Tamia? Tamia, can you hear me?” he murmured near her ear.

“Mom...mouth...feels d-dry,” she mumbled thickly, before her eyes squinted open.

Rick’s heart forgot to beat for a second as joy, guilt, and fear mingled in him. Then, mobilising himself, he reached for the glass on the bedside table and used the straw to dribble a little water on her parched lips. She gave him a wan smile of thanks.

“Where...?”

“You’re at Mount Sinai. We stopped over at Winslow Medical in Dallas to get you stabilized enough to bring you the rest of the way. It was better to have you staying in a civilian facility, though, than transferring you directly to the military hospital. Whoever has it in for you over at the War Department will have a harder time getting at you here.”



She looked bewildered. “How long...?”

Rick swallowed hard. “Almost a month. There was a lot of damage. You must have been lying right against the panelling when that room blew. Tamia, I...”

She looked up at him, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Rick...I’m sorry,” she whispered, reaching to stroke his stubbly cheek.

Rick’s control nearly broke at those soft words, coming from her. She had nothing to be sorry for. She’d done what he’d told her, and she was paying the price for his idiocy. He reached to close his own hand over hers, clasping it to his face in a fiercely tender grasp.

“You’re not to blame, Tamia. Not for anything. It’s all my damn fault. I should have --”

“I ...made you worry,” she managed weakly, then winced as she shifted. “God, that hurts!”

“Don’t move!” Rick commanded sharply, the fear in that simple command evident even to himself. He softened his tone at the surprised look that crossed her face. “You were hurt pretty bad, Tamia. You need to rest, and let yourself heal.”

She looked at him sharply, and he could see the suspicion in her eyes. “How bad?”

Rick turned his eyes away, swallowing hard against grief. He couldn’t tell her how badly she’d been injured, or about the baby, while she was still so fragile. Besides the regrowth, she’d lost sections of her body that couldn’t be replaced or regrown. And she’d lost her child, their child. That final sacrifice had been the cruellest one, and Rick knew that, had he known she was pregnant at the time, he would never have sent her into that building. He couldn’t tell her what she’d lost, could barely bring himself to think

about it without feeling that hollow ache return. Rick couldn't look her in the eye for a long moment, knowing that, if he did, he would break down completely. So, instead, he studied the scarred skin of her hand and gave her the only answer he could force past his too-tight throat.

“Bad. The doctor will tell you when you're strong enough.”

Tamia was frowning at him, and he turned his eyes away, unable to force the truth past his tight throat. He'd seen all manner of wounding during his years as a SEAL, but nothing had ripped his heart out like this, before.

“Rick, what is it?”

“Get some rest, sweetheart. That's what you need most, at the moment,” he said quietly, leaning over the bed to kiss her forehead before he turned and walked out the door. He didn't dare stay a moment longer, or he might tell her what he knew she wasn't strong enough to handle, yet. What she might never be strong enough to handle.

Tamia lay in bed, frowning, after Rick left. That something had been bothering him had been clear as day to her. She also knew that it had something to do with her, with how badly she'd been wounded. Tentatively, she tested her body movement, starting with her toes. Ten toes wiggled, two ankles rotated, both knees flexed, albeit a little painfully. The ache in the region of her hip joints told her that everything was still connected and functioning at least marginally. She ran the same test of both arms, noting visually that all her fingers were intact and mobile. Nothing wrong there, except for the plaster cast on her left forearm, telling her what she'd known since she'd come to after the explosion. Her left arm was broken. That was nothing earth-shattering, either; it would heal. She took an experimental breath, and a sharp twinge to the lower left side of

her chest told her that she might have a couple of cracked ribs. She already knew that she had a sutured and probably grafted-over hole in her mid-to-lower abdomen. She'd probably lost some of her colon, and she'd be greatly astounded if her left kidney had escaped damage. But none of those were horrible wounds, with regrowth treatments available. She could think of no reason for Rick to have been so hesitant and upset.

The door opened then, pulling Tamia from her thoughts, and she looked up to find a smiling blonde woman dressed in a white lab coat at the foot of her bed.

"Awake at last?" The woman asked, her kind smile taking any bite out of the query.

"Who are you?"

The woman checked the computerized chart at the foot of the bed, glancing briefly up at Tamia as she said, and "I'm Dr. Maria Matnes, Ms. Kuan. I'm your primary physician."

Tamia blinked. Dr. Maria Matnes didn't look anything like the fifty-odd years she'd have to be to have so much tenure. She didn't look much older than Tamia herself.

Dr. Matnes smiled at Tamia's stunned expression. "I assure you, Ms. Kuan, that I am a fully qualified regenerative surgeon. I'm also older than I look. Now," she moved around to Tamia's left side, moving the sheet aside to check the bandaging, "how do you feel?"

Tamia shrugged as the doctor checked her pulse and respiration, next. "I've been better, but I imagine I've been worse, too."

The other woman laughed. "That's the spirit!" She sobered then, reaching into her coat pocket. "I'm going to take some blood samples now. We had to graft on new skin across most of your left side and upper abdomen and I need to check that it's holding

without infection. Are you aware of the severity of your injuries?”

Tamia shook her head. “Not entirely, but I have a few guesses. Can you tell me how bad it was?”

Dr. Matnes nodded as she drew blood through the IV catheter in Tamia’s arm and labelled the vials. “We make it a policy to tell regenerative therapy patients the extent of their injuries as soon as they are mentally and emotionally stable enough to hear. The patient usually knows before we do, after all, if their body isn’t accepting a treatment.”

Tamia swallowed. “What did you have to do?”

The doctor sat down in the chair beside Tamia’s bed, consulting her computer chart briefly. “You were brought here from Winslow Medical Center in Dallas, Texas. At the time of admittance, you had a body temperature of one hundred and three point nine degrees, and your blood pressure was eighty over fifty-three. You were very lucky to still be alive, Tamia.”

Tamia swallowed hard.

“I know,” she whispered after a moment.

“Trauma reports from Winslow were sketchy, but the ER doctor who brought you in noted that your wounds were consistent with a level-three explosion; something equivalent to a building exploding. After we stabilized you enough that we were no longer afraid of you going into cardiac arrest, we ran you through the MRI to see what internal damage you had. You sustained multiple concussive fractures to the skull, but fortunately nothing that caused any cranial bleeding or severe brain trauma. You damaged three ribs on your left side; one bruised and the other two cracked. You had second and third degree burns across the entire left side of your abdomen, and first degree burns across the rest of your abdomen, thigh, and chest, and charred entry and exit

wounds in your left side, consistent with impact by large debris. Examination found that your spleen and ten inches of colon were pulverized, and your left kidney was dead and severed from any connective tissue or blood vessels. Fragments of building materials, primarily glass and metal shards, were found scattered in the surrounding tissue. We extracted what few healthy spleen cells we could find and some kidney tissue from your right kidney and regrew the organs for transplant. We also had to remove your left ovary due to severe infection.”

Tamia’s eyes snapped up to the doctor’s, full of fear and shock. “Can I still...?”

“Have children?” Dr. Matnes finished for her, then nodded. “It will be more difficult, but it is still possible. There was very little actual damage to the uterus itself.” She fell silent for a moment, then, pinning the Commando with her level green gaze, she quietly said, “Tamia, there’s something else you should know.”

Tamia bit the inside of her cheek, drawing a deep, painful breath before she summoned enough courage to ask, “What?”

“The attending physician at Winslow noted in the file sent on to us that at time of arrival there, you were a little over a week pregnant. Your body spontaneously aborted the foetus an hour after you entered surgery here.”

Tamia gasped, then swallowed hard against tears as what Dr. Matnes was saying sank in. At last, she understood why Rick had hesitated, and why his eyes had been so stricken.

“I’m sorry, Tamia,” Maria said softly, laying her steady hand over Tamia’s trembling one. “There aren’t ever the right words to console that kind of loss.”

Tamia nodded slowly. Around a voice thick with emotion, she managed, “Thanks for telling me. I know you didn’t have to.”

Maria gave her hand a small squeeze. “Yes, I did. It was your right to know, and I wouldn’t be much of a doctor if I withheld that information from you. Now,” she rose smoothly from her seat, “you really need to try and get some rest. I can arrange to have one of the hospital counsellors stop by to see you later, if you’d like.”

Tamia shook her head. “I’ll be okay. I just need time to think, right now.”

Dr. Matnes nodded. “Don’t think too hard. You have to finish healing first.”

With that, she turned and left the room, leaving Tamia alone with her thoughts.

\* \* \*

“I see that reports of your death were greatly exaggerated.”

Tamia glanced toward the door at the sound of a mild, masculine voice, to find Carey Feldar standing inside the door to her hospital room. A wry grin spread across her face as she raised one brow. “Why would anyone think that?”

He loosed a disbelieving laugh. “My source at the War Department says Panfild’s practically dancing with glee. You show up at a military trauma facility two steps shy of terminal, and they barely get you halfway to stabilized and you’re suddenly whisked off, never to show up on military radar again.” He smirked. “Congratulations, Captain. You’re a ghost.”

“Great,” she quipped, closing her eyes. “Maybe now I can get some rest.”

“Uh-uh, Marine. No sleeping on the job.” Feldar strode to her bedside, holding out his hand to display the portable disc viewer he held. “For you.”

She blinked innocently up at him, but couldn’t contain her wry grin as she asked, “What? No flowers?”

“You’re hardly the type of girl a guy gives flowers to, if he enjoys breathing.”

She arched one brow, but her grin widened. “You’ve been researching me!”

“And I have to say, I like a mysterious woman, but don’t you think you’re overdoing it, Kuan?” He grumbled good-naturedly. “When do I get an exclusive tour of your head?”

“Never,” she shot back with a grin, reaching for the viewer. “I’m spoken for. Now, what’s this for?”

“When I found out where you were, I thought you might need some entertainment for that sharp-as-tacks mind of yours.”

“Which brings up an interesting point. How, exactly, did you find me?”

“Me,” Maria Matnes stood in the doorway, smiling. “Carey’s my neighbor and friend. I should have known that keeping a mystery patient’s identity secret from a man like him wouldn’t work long.”

“I’ll forgive you this time, Doc, if you’re here to spring me from this place.”

Dr. Matnes chuckled as she retrieved Tamia’s chart and began taking vitals. “You’ve only been awake forty-eight hours, Tamia. Don’t go angling for a release yet, or I’ll have you strapped down on the psych. floor.”

“You’re a hardass,” Tamia grumbled without malice, then looked at Feldar again as he laughed. “So, what’s on the disc?”

“Remember that letter you faxed me a copy of?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes widened, then, and flew to the viewer. “You found out who sent it!”

“Even better,” he answered, grinning. “I took it to a friend of mine at the Justice Department. He said that an official investigation concluded that David Farenese was acting alone when he shot Timothy Malcolm. If anyone else was involved in later events, they’re not interested, because accomplice to murder is a statute crime, since 2052, and

the statute of limitations on an accomplice charge in a thirteen-year-old murder has long since expired. It's a good thing you never caved to the pressure, because treason doesn't have a statute of limitations."

Tamia relaxed, smiling. "So I'm home free. They can't arrest me."

"Nope. And I think Panfild already knew that. He took a pretty big gamble to send you that blackmail, and I think that's why he's glad to believe you're dead."

"All right, Carey, you've done enough pestering for a day," Maria said as she made a final entry in Tamia's chart. "Now get out of here and let my patient rest. And you, Captain," she turned her stern gaze on Tamia. "Rest. No more working or nagging to get released."

"Yes, Ma'am," Tamia quipped. "I won't move a muscle until you say so."

Maria laughed. "Marines! And, since I don't believe one word of that," she said as she shooed a chuckling Feldar from the room, "I'll just leave instructions for the nurses to check on you regularly."

And, as Tamia shot her a mock dark look, Maria laughed again and disappeared through the door, leaving Tamia with the unsettling feeling that the doctor, at least hadn't been joking.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tamia's eyes opened as she heard the hiss of the door sliding open. If it was another nurse, she'd scream. They'd been checking on her every hour, on the hour, for the past four days.

Rick stood in the doorway, looking at her, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She struggled to sit up; before she remembered that the bed was powered for a reason. Damn. Even after a week, she still wasn't used to being invalidated. She smiled at him as he moved to perch on the edge of her bed. "Guess I'm on the inactives for a while, huh?"

"You bet," he responded, reaching for her hand. "Tamia, I'm a real idiot sometimes. I should never have let you go in there alone. I should never have let you go in there at all."

She squeezed his hand. "We all make mistakes, Rick. None of us knew that room was pressurized. Find out why, yet?"

He nodded, looking at her. "Something my source neglected to tell me - said it wasn't important. Seems the old man had severe ephasmal poisoning to his lungs. That's why he never left the building, why there were no doors or windows. He was in a sealed tank, of sorts. Perfectly pressurized, and chemically equalized. Hell, he'd have died had he even stepped outside. He was already in hell - what did we do? I sacrificed an innocent life and risked yours to kill a man who was almost dead anyway. Shit like that makes me wonder why I'm doing this. Doesn't seem right, anymore."

"Rick, don't do this to yourself," Tamia said quietly. "We did it because we had orders to do it. We didn't know what would happen. We didn't know about the baby, either. Hell, anyone could have done the same thing."

"Orders." The word was dull, and sounded as if he'd tasted something foul. "Orders that sentenced an old man and an unborn child to death, and nearly got you killed as well. What the hell kind of orders are those?" He pressed her hand to his cheek. "Dear God, Tamia. Can you ever forgive me?"

She smiled at him. "I never blamed you, Rick. I knew the stakes going in. I could have been shot before I even got to that duct. I could have been killed anywhere between the time we left the Underground, and the time we got here. You saved me by having me go into the panelling. I would've died for sure if I'd been in that duct when the place went up. I was lucky. Lucky enough that I'll be out of here soon."

She saw the doubt that lurked in his cobalt eyes, even as his lips smiled at her, and sighed.

"Look, if it makes everything easier, don't think about what happened to me. Think about the billions of people we saved in that raid." She studied him carefully as she asked, "What's the deal with those weapons, now?"

His answering smile was tight, but satisfied. "We got them. Shortly after we left for the trip down, the Executive Center lodged an official Protest of Arms and Subterfuge against SACS. The Patrol was enroute by the time we hit Cali. They got to Porto Alegre about an hour after our hit – just in time to mop up and confiscate the hijacked gear."

A worried frown crossed her face. "Do they suspect anything?"

"Nope." Rick shook his head. "In fact, it was from the Patrol report that I learned about the pressurisation in the building. Everyone believes the building spontaneously

exploded. Apparently, the construction was old, and the modifications necessary to pressurize it properly were shoddily done. Even the people at the SACS compound that night believe it was a freak accident. They've already buried Coramaz, with no autopsy."

Tamia shook her head slowly. "It almost seems like our mission was unnecessary. If the building was so close to exploding anyway..."

He was watching her silently. Then, with a small shake of his head, he rose and paced across the room. He stood there for a moment, his back to her, then turned to regard her as he said, "It's all damned strange. Most of my life, I've never questioned orders. They were given, and I took them as scripture, to be carried through to the letter. But I've been doing some heavy thinking since this last mission. I did a lot of stupid, half-assed things with the SEALs, planned a lot of suicide runs for myself. Always ended up with someone else dying, though. They called me bullet-proof." He laughed hollowly. "Yeah. Bullet-proof enough to not die when I fucking should have, bullet-proof enough to watch friends get killed around me, and not give a shit. Orders were orders, no matter who got hurt, no matter who died. Shit, we were all crazy bastards - but I was the worst. I didn't care if anyone died. Hell, people die in war - I was a machine. I just kept pushin'..."

Tamia's eyes misted as she watched him. He'd mentioned a lot of this to her before, but not this way. She knew now why he hadn't wanted her to be point. He had been afraid he would get her killed - he blamed himself for her having been wounded and for the loss of the baby. Now he was telling her why. She focused on him again as he shuddered, moving to the window. "Never felt so damned helpless, so afraid, before this mission. I was holding my breath the whole time you were in that duct. I did more than that when you went into the panelling. When the place went up..." He stopped, drawing

a deep breath, then turned to face her. "Tamia, I realized back there exactly how much you mean to me. I've never loved anyone before - not like that. Cat told me afterward that I cracked when the building went up - hell, I guess I did, but I don't much remember. Haven't blanked like that since my very first mission as a SEAL." He moved back to her bedside, reaching for her hand. "Then, when I found out how badly you'd been hurt...Dear God, Tamia!" His voice was raw with anguish. "To put you in such danger made me question my sanity, and our orders, for the first time. I promise you, you won't get hurt again because of my stupidity."

Tamia watched him silently for a moment, then said, "I want to go home, Rick."

He looked at her, and his brow furrowed in confusion. "To China?"

"No." She squeezed his hand, and a small smile crossed her face. "Back to the Underground. I want to be in my own bed, be able to move around without some white-smocked, bitchy blonde standing over me. When can I get out of here?"

He grinned at her description of Dr. Maria Matnes, but shook his head. "When they say so. Dr. Matnes says you have to be monitored until they're sure the last round of Detox worked. You took in a helluva lot of poison back there and your body's been too weak to fight it for a while."

She sighed dejectedly, letting her head fall back against the pillow. "Damn. I'd hoped..." She looked at him. "You know, I've never been an invalid before. Never been sick, really. Kuron always taught me that hard work and proper food kept your mind off illness or injury, and let your body heal itself. A cut, scrape, cold, hell - even the measles, were ignored for normal life, and they all went away. Never slowed me down, at least. Even the bullets and thermchem I took during the Divide didn't slow me down long. Dug out the bullet, drank a lot of water, patched up the wound best I could, and

kept on going - stayed on the actives. I learned to live with the pain - reminded me that I was still alive."

Rick shook his head in wonder. "Really worked, huh?"

"Yeah, most of the time." She shrugged. "There was no time to think about how much it hurt, at least. Now, I just lay here and think about it, and it hurts like hell when I do. I've got to get out of here and back on my own two feet."

Rick squeezed her hand. "I'll see what I can do."

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Rick."

He gave her a wry smile. "That's what I'm here for." He rose to his feet, then. "Be back soon, babe."

As true to his word as always, Rick was back ten minutes later, Maria Matnes in tow. The blonde woman smiled as she looked at Tamia.

"I hear you've been calling me names again, Captain."

Tamia cast an amused look at Rick, then grinned at the doctor. "Nothing personal, Doc."

Maria laughed at that. "Probably nothing I haven't been called before, either. I was also told you're angling to go home, again."

Tamia nodded. "I'm not going to heal any better here than there. I want out of this place."

Dr. Matnes' mouth curved in another wry smile, and she glanced over at Rick. "She's not an award-winning patient, Commander. She's been angling to go home almost since she woke up." She scanned Tamia's chart for a moment, then looked up at her patient with a smile. "You might just get your wish, Tamia. I was consulting with

the rest of your case surgeons this morning, and they all agreed that if the toxicology report this afternoon was satisfactory, you could be discharged today.”

Tamia grinned. That was the best news she'd heard in days.

“According to these charts, the toxin levels in your bloodstream are normal,” Maria continued. “I'll go down and sign the discharge forms, and you can go. If,” she added severely at Tamia's widening grin, “you can promise to stay off your feet. No excessive movement, no lifting, no muscular stress for at least another week. And I want to see you back in outpatient care in three weeks to have the cast on your arm removed.”

Rick looked sombrely at the doctor. “I can guarantee she won't do anything you don't expressly allow, even if it requires tying her into bed and posting an armed guard.”

Dr. Matnes grinned wryly at Tamia's mutinous scowl. “Looks like I'll be leaving you in good hands, then, Captain. Good luck!”

Tamia smirked at Rick. “We'll see. Thanks for everything, Doc.”

Twenty minutes later, Tamia was safely ensconced in the passenger seat of Rick's jeep, heading toward the Underground. With a contented sigh, she leaned her head back against the headrest. It would be lovely to get back to life.

Rick glanced at her in worry. “You okay, babe?”

She smiled wearily. “Yeah. Just worried.”

He frowned. “About what?”

“Carey Feldar came to see me, last week.”

“I heard. What did he want?”

She turned her head to study him as she said, “He traced the blackmail letter for me.”

Even expected, Rick's grim concern made her want to smile. He worried so much about her; it was nice to have someone who cared. "And?"

"It was Panfild."

He nodded, his expression severe. "I can't say I'm surprised. So far, a lot of things seem to be leading back to that bastard."

"He thinks I'm dead, you know."

Rick's smile was grimly satisfied. "Good. That's exactly what I was hoping for."

She blinked. She hadn't expected this. "Why?"

"Because I want you safe," he said tightly, his expression unrepentant. "I want you off of the War Department's radar completely."

"Eventually, they're going to figure out that I'm not dead, Rick," she pointed out.

"And the later that happens, the better."

"Rick..."

He pulled off to the side of the road and jammed the jeep into park as he slapped on his emergency flashers before turning to look at her. Tamia nearly gasped at the wildness, and fear, there. "Look, Tamia, it's really simple. If Panfild finds out you're alive, he's going to know that you didn't knuckle under to his bullshit tactic. He's going to want your head on a pike, and I can't do it. I can't give you up, sweetheart."

She smiled softly at the raw love and fear in his eyes. Reaching to cover his hand on the gearshift, she murmured, "Don't worry, Rick. Carey said he checked the legality of that letter, too. He says they can't force my arrest, even if they wanted to try. Since the official investigation determined that David was the shooter, I could only be listed as an accomplice, at most. As an accomplice, the statute on my charge would have long since expired, even if it wasn't bullshit."

Relief splashed across his face as he turned his hand up to engulf hers in a tender squeeze. “Thank God.”

They sat that way for a long moment, drawing strength and sharing relief between them. Then, with a sigh, Rick released her hand and pulled back into traffic.

Tamia cast him a curious glance. “So, what’s our next move?”

“We dig deeper into the War Department, looking for the Mole. I’ve already got most of the team out working different angles. Our Mole’s getting braver, or more desperate. He’s hijacking military networks now, even though those are restricted access; it limits our list some more. As long as we keep heading him off, he’s going to slip up big-time, because he’s going to run out of places to sell what he’s stealing.” He flashed a small grin. “Dallas was glad to get its munitions back, once the EP cleared it for transport, though.”

Tamia laughed, and settled back into her seat, letting her mind drift. As her mind wandered ahead to the coming weeks, she considered how much they all had left to do. Some of the weapons had been confiscated, sure; but they still had a Mole to find, and Tamia had a feeling that their troubles with that were only just beginning. Still, there was one thing that gave her peace. No matter what lay ahead, she and Rick were finally a team. Together, she was sure they could handle anything life threw at them. With a small, satisfied smile, she let herself drift off to sleep, aware that she’d finally found her home.

THE END