



Mind Killer

Part 2 of The Underground
series

Esther Mitchell

MIND KILLER

by

Esther Mitchell

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CHAPTER ONE

Damn, she hated this. Impatiently, the woman shoved a fall of midnight hair from her softly featured face with one fine-boned, honey-toned hand. Tamia “Blade” Kuan, former Captain of the United States Marine Corps’ pride and joy, the 103rd Mobile Armored Flight Tank Division, hated only one thing more than paperwork, and that was seeing the word “inactive” attached to her mission status. Now, she sat at the round conference table of Commando Headquarters, nicknamed “the Underground” both because its location was unknown to anyone outside the team and because it was quite literally buried deep under lower Manhattan, and cursed her luck for ending up with the only two things she hated most in the world. Her long fingers drummed restlessly on the lacquered wooden tabletop as she pored through the stack of files scattered haphazardly in front of her. Every now and then she straightened, a twinge of pain in her left side reminding her that there was a reason she was still officially on the inactives. She was still recuperating from being a near-casualty. She’d been point man on the last mission, quite literally the assassin in the rafters. She’d been badly wounded when the building had exploded seconds after she’d made her kill, nearly killing her as well. Over a month in the hospital, and five separate surgical procedures, had finally given her back enough strength to get back to the Underground, with strict orders from the doctors that she wasn’t to do anything strenuous until cleared.

Tamia smirked to herself, again reaching to push a silky fall of hair from her face

as she considered the irony of that order. Going straight back to her training and normal work routine was Tamia's idea of easy, but apparently not one shared by her commander. Rick belabored the point of bed rest to breaking, until she'd snapped at him that she didn't need him to be her damned nanny. Tamia's eyes fell as she remembered the hurt look that had entered his eyes when she said that. At the time, she'd been too angry to care, but now, she wished she could take every single word of it back. She, of all people, should have been able to understand the worry behind his actions. Richard Carinson had only two things of any importance left in his life; his unit, and the woman he loved. Unfortunately for his peace of mind, those two things couldn't be separated, and both involved Tamia. She'd been a Commando for a little more than six months, and Rick's lover for almost half of that time. Nearly losing her at Porto Alegre had torn him to pieces, and there were times she still wondered if he'd ever be the same again. She sighed to herself. Truth be known, anymore she wondered that about as often as she wondered whether or not their becoming lovers had been a wise step for either of them. She worried about that constantly. But then, she would look into his blue eyes, and know she wouldn't have survived Porto Alegre if they hadn't been.

With a sharp shake of her head, Tamia turned her attention back to the files spread out in front of her. The whole team was busy on this one, each in his or her own way. Even before Tamia had been released from the hospital, Rick had sent Frank "Red" Harlin out to tail a commerce executive Internal Affairs had tagged as a possible arms dealer. Kelly "Hood" Blake was hot on the trail of some missing Mob assets, while Matt "Watchdog" Clipper was wringing his gang affiliations for information about their

buyers. Kathy “Diamond” Terrell was keeping the pressure off them by diverting public and press attention toward some scandal she’d cooked up on her talk show. Dr. Jenifer “Cat” LaSaulle and Ishmael “Crimson” Gordon were busily driving Internal Affairs’ filing clerks insane with requests to dig through the databanks on weapons suppliers and terrorist links. Rick had sent Walter “Chips” Maddoc and Chelsea “Gypsy” Perez on an innocent-enough library trip, to find some rather unorthodox reading material on hijackings. That left Rick and Tamia to put everything together and monitor the communications array. A taller order than it had seemed, at first, especially considering their objective.

The Commandos were neck deep in a scramble to catch a Mole in the Intelligence Community before he or she succeeded in starting a war. Part of that, at the moment, meant tracking down several stolen munitions shipments that had gone AWOL over the past several months, only to turn up on Equatorial Patrol contraband lists in Peru shortly after the Commandos had leveled the South American Council of States’ headquarters at Porto Alegre, Brazil. It was getting more difficult with every day that passed, and every lead that went south. Sighing, Tamia glanced at her watch, and wondered for the tenth time what was taking Rick so long. It was a quarter till one. He’d left shortly past eleven, and she’d been expecting him back for the past twenty minutes. She looked up as the door to the command center slid open, then sighed again when she saw who it was.

“You’re sure burning midnight oil!” Frank noted as the door slid shut behind him. “Any idea where Rick is?”

Tamia nodded, looking back to the files spread out on the table. “He went over to

S'n'R. They said they had something he had to see.”

Frank’s gray eyes widened. “Science and Research? Tamia, it’s past midnight!”

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly as she looked up at the brawny redhead again. “Scientists are as crazy as we are, Red. I don’t think they know the meaning of the word ‘sleep’.” She gave him an once-over, taking in his mud-spattered clothes. “Where the hell’ve *you* been?”

He sighed tiredly, plopping himself down in his chair. “Went to check that lead in Jersey.” He shook his head. “Biggest mess o’ mudslides I’ve ever seen!”

“How’d it go?”

The burly redhead snorted. “How’d it go? Nowhere, and no how, that’s how! I spent twelve hours crawling around in mudslide city only to find out I didn’t have a fucking lead after all.”

“But the information...”

He shook his head. “Someone’s pissin’ in the wind. I followed our ‘arms dealer’ for twelve hours. Might as well’ve been following the Avon lady. He’s a commerce executive, all right. No underhanded business. Looked up his address, searched his house, his office, his car, every thing I could find. Came up with *nada*. He’s as clean as snow.”

Her dark eyes focused on him, confused. “But we were told that was a good, solid—”

“Mess,” Rick’s voice drawled from the doorway, and both Tamia and Frank looked over at him in surprise. A hard, cold lump settled in the pit of Tamia’s stomach as

she took in his grim expression. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve been had.”

Tamia’s hands gripped the cool wood of the table, and suddenly, she couldn’t breathe. Her lungs felt leaden.

“Had?” She finally managed, in a whisper. “Rick, what’re you...?”

He dropped his armload of files and discs on the table then shrugged out of his leather jacket. “Mission orders say we’re supposed to be checking out leads on possible guerrilla activity in Peru, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.” She picked up the list she’d spent the past hour compiling. “I’ve just about got the list of leads divvied up...”

“Burn it,” he said grimly, pacing to the far side of the room, and back.

She blinked at him. “*Burn* it? Rick...”

He shook his head. “It’s useless.”

She heaved an exasperated sigh, narrowing her eyes in confusion. “Would you care to explain why?”

He looked at her levelly for a long moment then pulled an old magazine from the stack of stuff he’d brought and flipped it to her. She glanced at the cover, and her blood congealed. It was an issue of *Newsweek*, from the late twentieth century. On the cover, splashed in big black and white letters, were the words *Can We Clone Humans?* She looked up at him again. “So what’re we *really* doing?”

He shook his head again. “Not sure. CIA says the Banhauste Regiment’s behind this, and S’n’R thinks they’ve got their hands on pre-Reaver cloning formulas.”

Frank’s brows shot up. “But weren’t all the formulas destroyed after the Reaver

War?”

Rick shook his head. “Not all of ‘em. No one thought the old formulas were worth anything. Too unpredictable.”

“Perfect for terrorists,” Tamia said quietly, wincing. “So, now what?”

Rick sighed heavily, sinking into his seat as he plowed his hands through his short, dark hair. “Hell, I don’t know, Tamia. I’m going to give Military Headquarters a call first thing in the morning, and see if I can find out exactly what they expect us to do. Too much of this sounds like the CIA fell on its ass again.”

Frank yawned, rising. “Well, I’m gonna get some sack time, for now.”

Rick looked at the other man. “Thanks for going down there, Red. I realize it was a waste of time, but we didn’t know...”

Laughter played through the big man’s eyes. “Don’t thank me! That takes all the fun out of it!”

He turned toward the door with a grin, and was gone. Rick turned to Tamia then, reaching for her hand. Her eyes were fixed bleakly on the magazine cover, and she wanted to scream, or vomit. Something – *anything* – to relieve the building pressure in her chest.

“Sorry ‘bout this, babe. Wish it was some other way.”

She offered him a wan smile. “You didn’t know. I’ll survive.”

He squeezed her hand lightly. “Go get some rest. Hopefully, it’ll be a little easier to accept in the morning.”

She nodded, and rose to her feet. Wearily, she made her way out of the command

center and down the hall toward her quarters. Cloning. God, this was all like some nightmare come true. The Chinese Army was an army of clones, the only one left in the world after the Reaver War. Clones were all identical. They were laboratory-grown, soulless creatures. Only problem was, clones were also mentally unstable because of the drugs needed to keep them emotionally stable. Eventually, it became a moot point, and they became impossible to control. That was how the Reaver War had gotten started. The soldier-clones, called Reavers, had rebelled, worldwide. Naturally born people were pressed into service to fight against the renegade clones.

Only one “Reaver Nation” in the entire world had not been pressed into combat with its cloned soldiers, Socialist China. The military, mostly clones, already had control of most of the country. After all, clones were twice as susceptible to brainwashing as naturally born and raised children, and China had succeeded with the latter as far back as the mid-twentieth century. Cloned children, raised from “birth” in state-run institutions, never realized that they lacked parents. They never learned individuality. And, with psychoactive drugs to control their emotional outbursts, they were a lethal force. So the Chinese Army had found a perfect excuse, through the Reaver War, to crush any rebellions inside its borders and execute all revolutionaries, including Tamia’s family.

The woman leaned heavily against the wall just inside her door, steadying herself, as grief and a wave of illness washed over her. As much as she loathed the Socialist regime, her hatred of that system was eclipsed by her fear and hatred of clones. God, how would she cope if they had to go up against clones? She wasn’t sure she *could* cope. Drawing a shuddering breath, she pushed aside everything she’d learned, determined to

get some sleep.

Five minutes later, she turned off the overhead lights in her quarters and crawled into bed. She tossed and turned for a while, unable to forget what she just learned. Finally, with an exasperated sigh, she closed her eyes and emptied her mind with a monotonous internal chant. Moments later, the blackness of sleep closed over her. Tamia watched in horror as the man stopped before Sarubi, dragging the older girl from the floor and ripping open her blouse. A cruel leer spread across his face, and he looked up toward the small, glass-encased room where Tamia had been taken. He looked like all the others – exactly like them.

A film of tears covered the little girl's eyes, blurring her vision, as she heard Sarubi's sobs and cries to be let go. The older girl clutched her hands over her chest, trying to back away as she begged them to release her. Another man grabbed her from behind, holding her, struggling, as the first drew his survival knife and sliced open Sarubi's bra and skirt. The older girl was screaming now, trying desperately to break away. Tamia wanted to scream as well, wanted to cry and rush to her older sister's aid. She couldn't. She'd been told to sit absolutely still, and learn what happened to naughty girls. If she moved, she would be punished, too. The man dropped his knife on the floor and tore away the rest of Sarubi's clothes. Then, the two men carried the girl, kicking and screaming, to a table and strapped her down to it, spread-eagle. Her screams echoed through the room as they raped her.

Tamia wanted to squeeze her eyes closed, cover her ears, as she heard her sister's screams amplified in the small room, saw her sister thrashing against the table, her face

contorted in pain and fear. Tamia shuddered, and a tear traced down her cheek. She hoped no one saw, but she didn't care if they did. Her tears were angry tears, and she hoped she'd get the chance to kill them all.

The door to the pit-like room opened below, and more men entered, dragging two other women with them, Sarubi's twin, Mikisha and Tamia's mother, Kakiri. All the men looked the same. Tamia watched, horrified, as the men stripped the other two, and strapped them down. The three women were raped, repeatedly, by over thirty men. Tamia covered her ears then, drawing up her knees, and scrunched her eyes closed, screaming...

Tamia awoke with a cry of terror, sitting up in bed. Her heart pounding loudly in her ears, she moved her head wildly, expecting attack. A moment later, she realized where she was and the panic drained away. Then, sobbing, she buried her face against her knees. Dear God, she hadn't had that nightmare in years. She was trembling.

Tamia drew in deep gulps of air, trying to calm herself. It didn't work. She was too nervous, too scared. Her heart was beating like a trip-hammer, and she couldn't think. Still trembling, Tamia slid her feet onto the floor and reached for her robe. Maybe if she got up for a while...

Somehow, she found herself in the corridor. She wasn't sure where she was going, except anywhere to escape the last remnants of her horrible dreams. She was still trembling; she couldn't seem to stop. God, she needed, needed...*what?* She found herself standing at the door to Rick's quarters. Slowly, almost timidly, Tamia touched the door pad, expecting to hear the signal. To her surprise, the door slid open. She frowned. His

quarters were dark, and the door wasn't locked. Where was he?

Making her way carefully, on still-unsteady legs, she passed through the small living room to his bedroom. At the doorway, Tamia stopped, listening. She heard the murmur of his breathing; saw the dark silhouette of him against the dim light of the floor strips. Moving to the bed, she slipped out of her robe and under the covers, curling against Rick. She relaxed as she felt his breath, warm against her. She needed this contact to chase away her demons. She needed to know she wasn't alone. She felt his start, and then heard him mutter, "Wha' th'...Tamia?"

She nodded against him and snuggled closer. She felt his arms move around her and lifted her head to find his sleepy blue eyes fixed on her.

"What are you doing here, Tamia?"

She kissed his skin lightly. "Couldn't sleep."

"You're trembling!"

"Bad dream," she mumbled as she looked away. "That's all."

His hand moved to tilt her face toward his. She saw his concerned expression, shadowed by the dim lights. "What can I do?"

"Just hold me," she whispered, turning her face away as she burrowed into his warmth. She felt him kiss her forehead, and looked at him again. He bent slowly and kissed her mouth, cupping one hand against the side of her neck. They lingered over the kiss, and Tamia sighed against his lips. He broke their kiss then, and rose up to smile at her, brushing tears from her face.

Tamia reached to touch his cheek, playing her fingers lightly over his face. It

amazed her still that a man so haunted by his own past could find so much strength to give. Softly, she smiled at him, feathering her hands down over his neck.

“How do you do it?” She asked quietly, her fingers skimming his shoulders.

One brow arched over tender eyes. “Do what?”

“You always know what I need, even when I don’t.”

“Hey, lady,” he murmured huskily as he bent to brush his lips over her collarbone.

“Don’t go making me out to be some kind of superhero. I just pay attention to what’s important.”

Her smile turned dewy as she teasingly ruffled his hair. “Now I know why I love you.”

He chuckled, and planted a kiss on the point of her collarbone. “That’s good to know. I love you, too.”

Silence settled over them then, and, after a few minutes, Tamia wondered if he’d fallen asleep again. As she craned her head around to see his face, she realized that he wasn’t sleeping. His eyes were fixed on their joined hands, resting warmly on her abdomen, his gaze faraway.

“Hey, sailor, where are you?” She whispered, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

He shook his head after a moment, and looked back to her face. “I was just wondering...”

She waited patiently when he stopped, his eyes turning faraway again. After a moment, he shook himself, and offered her a rueful smile. “I need my head examined.”

“Rick,” her voice was full of gentle warning, “don’t sidestep the question.” She

untangled her fingers from his to brush a wisp of brown hair from his forehead. “You had the strangest look on your face, just now. What were you thinking?”

His hand caressed her abdomen gently for a moment before he admitted, “I was thinking about the baby.”

Tamia’s heart clenched at that softly spoken confession, and her gut and womb twisted simultaneously. *The baby*. That was the one part of her ordeal that Tamia was doing her absolute best to forget. She’d lost their child before she’d even realized she was pregnant. It had been a cruel joke; finding out after she’d lost it, and even crueler when she considered what would have happened if she *hadn’t* lost the baby.

Since shortly before the Reaver War, all U.S. military personnel were required to sign a special agreement at enlistment. That agreement, known as the Fertility Code, stated that the enlistee wouldn’t have children until such time as his or her term of service expired. Commonly referred to by military personnel as “that damned Code,” the Fertility Code provided very specific details regarding pregnancy.

While frowned upon, marriage was permitted; but no male soldier, sailor, or airman was to allow his wife or girlfriend to become pregnant. He was to take all measures necessary to ensure there would be no children, which the brass – wrongly, Tamia believed – thought would cause morale problems in times of war. All female military personnel were required to take every precaution against pregnancy, according to the Code. If a pregnancy should occur, the involved military personnel were to see to it that the pregnancy was terminated without delay. A pregnant soldier was deemed a hazard, and any soldier with a family would be unwilling to follow orders that might

compromise their family's safety. If a pregnancy in progress wasn't terminated as stated in the Code, the punishment handed down from the War Department was harsh, and could range from life imprisonment on one of the Martian mining colonies – a death sentence all its own – to a trip to the electric chamber, and an early grave.

Tamia swallowed hard, realizing how lucky she actually was. She wasn't forced to make that decision, or that betrayal. She should feel glad about that, but instead, all she felt was cheated of her child's precious life. And if *she* felt cheated, she knew how badly it had to be hurting Rick. If it wasn't for the Commandos' need for military Intel, she knew he wouldn't have allowed the brass to enforce the Code here at the Underground.

Now, the unfairness of it all stinging her eyes, Tamia squeezed his hand gently and murmured, "Maybe it was all for the best that we didn't know."

His intense blue eyes bored into hers. "You don't really believe that."

She sighed miserably. She knew he'd see through that; he knew her too well to think she accepted the loss any better than he had.

"No," she admitted wearily. "I wish the baby had survived. If I could go back, I'd sell my soul to keep our child safe, but I can't, Rick, and thinking about it only makes me feel more miserable and guilty. Let it rest."

After a moment, he nodded. His hand slid down her bare skin to her hip, which he squeezed gently.

"We could try again," he started, but her sharp glare stopped him cold.

"Richard Benjamin Carinson, if you think for one instant that I'm going to stop

taking those damned shots just so I can be forced to choose between my life and my child's, you haven't learned a thing about me!"

He looked blank for a moment, before his eyes closed and he swore under his breath.

"You're right," he agreed bitterly. "We were damned lucky." Then, as he absently caressed her hip, setting off sparks of need in Tamia, his expression grew thoughtful again. "You know, I've been thinking. There has to be a way to get out from under that Code without losing our access to military Intel. I've been thinking of having a talk with JAG and Civil Justice about the legalities of a military policy affecting a basically civilian agency."

"How would you do that?" Tamia asked breathlessly, struggling to focus as his stroking hand moved higher.

"I'm not sure. Justice Salvatoir at CJ is pretty approachable, and she's been opposed to the Code ever since the Divide draftees were forced to sign it. And Colonel Barkley at JAG might be willing to run a check on the legalities of it from the military aspect."

"Rick," Tamia laid her hand on his forearm, halting his absent petting so that she could think clearly. "If you do that, we could lose our access to military Intel in a heartbeat; you know how the War Department is about that Code. We could end up on the Subversive Militia list. That would cost us *all* of our Intel."

He sighed. "I know. That's why I'm still just thinking about it."

As he resumed his seductive petting, Tamia slid her hand up his arm to his

shoulder, pulling him closer. It still amazed her, at times, how easily they mixed this passionate fondling with such serious and important matters. It made her feel doubly important to know that he trusted her enough to air his ideas and concerns at such tender moments, allowing her access to his thoughts and feelings, as well as his body.

It hadn't always been this way, she acknowledged inwardly, even as she arched into his gentle teasing, sensation beginning to take over. It'd taken them a while to trust each other, for all the passion that flared between them. She'd been unwilling to jeopardize her career for her unruly hormones, and he'd... Tamia bit back a smile as she recalled Rick's early suspicions that she was a spy.

They'd come a long way since then, Tamia decided, even as a moan escaped her, and her eyes closed as waves of need coursed through her at the feel of Rick's mouth on her overheated skin. This was how it was supposed to be, she acknowledged hazily as she whispered his name, as she slipped gradually under the growing tide of their love.

CHAPTER TWO

The command center was in its usual state of early-morning chaos, as everyone collected his or her task-specific data from the previous night's Comms watch. For everyone except Matt Clipper, this early-morning furor was just the beginning of the day. Matt was just heading in, and usually ready to collapse, by this point.

Tamia glanced across the table at him and surreptitiously tapped Rick's leg beneath the table, drawing his attention. He followed the shift of her eyes across the table, and she caught his concerned frown. So it wasn't just her imagination, after all.

Matt typically stumbled into morning briefings looking like he'd partied hard and hadn't slept. He was bleary-eyed and unresponsive, and sometimes even surly. But this morning he looked nervous, and alert enough to appear almost hyper.

Rick's expression was grim as he put down the file he was reading and looked pointedly at the black man. "Something on your mind, Matt?"

Matt started, and he and Jen LaSaulle shared a quick glance, to which she nodded. Nervously cracking his knuckles, Matt muttered, "Yeah."

Tamia's brow furrowed further. What was making Matt act this way? His "devil may care" attitude was eerily missing. What had he learned that he hadn't encountered before? Matt Clipper was a product of the streets, raised in the tough Chicago neighborhood of Cabrini Green, and his job placed him in the middle of New York City's militant underground. Hell, he should be jaded to anything, by now. That he found something he *couldn't* shrug off bothered Tamia more than she wanted to admit.

Rick was waiting patiently, his eyes fixed silently on Matt. Finally, with a

grimace, Matt said, "I'm not sure, but I think I found something, last night." He met Rick's gaze soberly. "Something bad."

This hesitation and evasiveness was so totally *not* Matt that it caused Tamia's stomach to knot in dread. One look at the grim faces around the table told her that she wasn't alone in her uneasiness. Matt was working undercover with the East Siders, a gang who specialized in hard to come by designer drugs. 'Something bad' in that crowd spelled major trouble.

"Understood," Rick acknowledged quietly. "What is it?"

"I was working the Kitchen with the Siders. Someone mentioned that Carson Meilin's getting ready to make a big score. Somethin' about a special drug, straight from China." His gaze shot to Tamia. "You ever hear of somethin' called *Jaosantai*, Blade?"

Tamia sucked in a sharp breath as she felt every ounce of warmth leach from her body, leaving her shivering. *Jaosantai!*

"Tamia?" Rick's concerned voice reached her, breaking through the chill. "Are you okay?"

She swallowed hard, and met Rick's blue eyes, knowing he'd find terror in hers. "Rick, if that drug hits the streets, all hell is going to break loose."

"What is it, anyway?" Frank Harlin wanted to know, leaning forward with a frown. "In all my years with the DEA, I've never heard of this stuff."

Tamia stared down at her hands, twisting anxiously together in her lap. "It was listed in the Tokyo Accords as a contraband substance; illegal to make, use, distribute, or stockpile. Only no one thought to check China for illegal stockpiles, because we weren't

actively involved in the Reaver War. To this day, the Chinese government produces and stockpiles *Jaosantai*. They even use it, still, on their army.”

Rick frowned. “The Tokyo Accords banned the use of cloned armies, and the exploitative use of cloning. What does that have to do with this stuff?”

“The Accords also banned the use of any psychoactive drugs or physical enhancers that were used to promote troop strength over quality of life,” she reminded him quietly. “*Jaosantai* is both psychoactive and an enhancement. I believe the US refers to them as ‘Reaver Teas’.”

“Oh my God,” Jen said, slumping into her seat. “Super-soldier drugs.”

Matt nodded. “Yeah, that’s kinda what I figured, from what the Siders were sayin’.”

“So how’s Carson Meilin getting his hands on these *Jaosantai* stockpiles if they’re in China and he’s here?” Kathy Terrell wanted to know.

“My guess? The Chinese government is delivering it directly,” Tamia said darkly. “The Divide hit China hard; harder than most, because the war nearly split the country in half with all the fighting. There wasn’t much left of either the economical or physical structure of China by the end of the war, and they spent so much on developing Tech during the war that there’s been no money left to rebuild with. They’ve even taken to hiring out their army, to gain the funds needed to sustain what’s left.”

“So they wouldn’t be above selling contraband chemical tech to anyone who offered enough money,” Rick concluded grimly.

“That means the only real question,” Jen said, digging through the files in front of

her, “is who’s financing Meilin?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “He’s a drug dealer, Jen. Get your Pollyanna head out of the clouds and—”

Jen shot him a dark look as she flipped open a file. “Carson Meilin is small potatoes, in the drug world, Clipper. He barely even registered in IA dossier databases.” She looked over at Rick. “But I managed to download a little on him, since Matt’s been working his turf, and Meilin’s connected to Maria Trechel, who’s on our list and still AWOL.”

Rick leaned back in his seat, regarding the Creole woman levelly. “Lay it out for us, Jen.”

“Carson Meilin started out as a street pusher for Terrence ‘Big-T’ Walker in twenty-ninety-eight. Big-T’s suspected to be one of Charles Horner’s middlemen,” she explained briefly.

“Suspected?” Tamia asked, leaning forward.

Jen nodded. “No one’s even been able to connect Horner to the drug world, though it’s common street knowledge that he’s the supplier. So, because no one can connect Horner, no one can say for certain *who* Walker works for.”

Tamia nodded. “Go on.”

“Meilin worked his way up through the drug hierarchy, until he got his own syndicate just after the Divide started in twenty-one-oh-nine.”

“So he’s still someone’s pusher,” Tamia said quietly. “Then how’s he acquiring illegal drug tech from China?”

“Good question,” Jen said grimly. “By himself, Carson Meilin doesn’t have the capital or industry connections to interest the Chinese government into breaking bans for a sale.”

“But whoever’s *financing* this deal does, and Meilin’s acting as an intermediary,” Frank supplied with a frown. “So, who’s that leave us with?”

Rick glanced at Matt. “Any ideas?”

“No,” Matt responded sullenly. “That’s what’s got me worried.”

“Horner?” Tamia asked worriedly, glancing at Matt.

“Not his style,” Frank answered with a shake of his head. “Horner can’t afford to get his hands dirty with illegal tech, and he’s usually a *lot* more careful about keeping the lid on things. If Horner had his hands in this, I’m betting we’d have never heard about it.”

“How about Fingers Marcioni?” Jen wanted to know. “He’s a braggart, and he has a history of using middlemen—”

“But he doesn’t touch drugs,” Kelly Blake pointed out, shaking her head. “Guns, numbers, hits; those are all Marcioni’s business, but he detests the drug world.”

“Johnny Caruzo?” Rick asked, shooting Kelly a speculative look. Caruzo was one of the Mob assets Kelly had been tracking down.

“Dead. He apparently had a heart attack and keeled over, two weeks ago. If he were still alive, he’d be my prime suspect. This is just his style, and he had a vendetta with Law Enforcement.”

“And you’re sure he’s dead?”

She smirked. “His wife was quite adamant about it, and about who she held responsible. So, yeah, I think it’s safe to say that’s a fact.”

“McClendan?”

Kelly shrugged. “Possibly. Brain McClendan’s dropped off the face of the earth. Last anyone saw him was in San Antonio, two and half months ago. Consensus is that the law’s after him, but no one seems to have any idea where he’s hiding.” One side of her mouth lifted a wry grin. “And I’m supposed to tell whoever finds him to contact the Irish Mafia. They’re *really* anxious to find him, though they wouldn’t say why.”

“I imagine it isn’t good,” Jen quipped. “But McClendan wouldn’t have the resources for a buy this big, and especially not if he’s on the run.”

“I’d have to agree with that,” Kelly told Rick with a nod. “He’ll need whatever he has to survive.”

“So we’re back to square one,” Rick acknowledged grimly. “Jen, Ishmael, you keep on top of that one. If you flag anyone who’s suddenly moving large amounts of cash around, I want to know about it ASAP.” They nodded, and Rick turned back to Matt. “Anything else?”

He shrugged uneasily. “Well, everyone’s suddenly collectin’ really weird shit, but they’re not dumpin’ it on the street junkies for cold cash like they normally do. They’re hoardin’ it, instead. Like they’re waitin’ for somethin’.”

“Aside from the *Jaosantai*, what else is on the move, Matt?” Tamia wanted to know.

He shrugged again. “Coupla Harlem bruthas are stockin’ Kamikaze juice – which

would be funny as hell since it's such a lightweight, if not for the rest of the drugs turning up. Barbs and perks are rising in demand among dealers, but not among the dopers."

"Nervous suppressants," Jen said grimly. "But *why*?"

"I think," Rick said quietly, giving Tamia an appraising look that shot ice down her spine, "I might have the answer to that one, Jen."

And, as she watched him reach into the paperwork for a familiar magazine, Tamia felt all her fears come flooding back. Someone – most likely their Mole – was building a programmable army.

The atmosphere in the conference room was grim as Rick finished relating the previous night's discovery to the rest of the team. Silence hovered over them all for a long moment. Finally, Kathy drew an audible breath, and asked, "So, what now, ya'll?"

"That's what we've got to decide," Rick said solemnly, before his gaze skimmed the faces around the table. "Whatever we do, it's going to have to be as a team, so we have to figure this out together." He looked at Jen then. "Jen, you're the one with the psychology degree. What're the chances we're being snowed by an outside agency?"

"By the Banhauste themselves, or another terrorist group, you mean?" Kelly interjected. "That would be rather risky, on their part, wouldn't it?"

Rick nodded. "That's why we've got to know, Kel. Jen?"

Jen offered him a wan smile. "I'm a psychologist, not a mind reader, Rick. Besides, layin' odds is *Matt's* job." She sighed then, picking up the file from the table in front of her. Scanning the contents again, she shook her head. "It doesn't make any sense. Banhauste's Regiment isn't profiled as a bunch of deranged lunatics. They're not

even really labeled as terrorists. They're political activists. What advantage they'd ever see in cloning or drugging people I couldn't even begin to hypothesize at. I'm sorry, Rick, but it just doesn't make any sense."

He nodded. "I thought as much. Frank?"

Frank shook his red head. "I'm with Jen. I doubt any terrorist organization would find any advantage in that kind of shit, especially not the Regiment. The old man has always been adamantly opposed to exploitation. Besides, he's worked damned hard to make sure there was no terror involved in Regiment tactics. The people down there aren't afraid of Baraman Banhauste. The Regiment doesn't bomb places, or deal in drugs, or have shoot-outs, or any of that. And I can't believe Baraman himself would have anything to do with genetic engineering or super-soldiers. The Camista family might be sick enough to try something like that, but the Regiment? No way! They're political activists, not mad scientists."

"Besides," Walter Maddoc spoke up, "if it is Banhauste, where's he getting his intelligence? Even if he has a spy in the War Department, those munitions transfers that were hijacked were 'eyes only.' There're maybe a handful of top-level secure-cleared people who had access."

Rick frowned. "Any ideas how the heists were done?"

"We believe it was most likely an inside job," Chelsea Perez said quietly. "There is no evidence that the vehicles were actually hijacked, and no bodies have turned up since, to indicate the extermination of the drivers and transfer personnel."

Rick started, his expression shocked. "Are you sure? You're talking about eight

missing convoys, with about six to ten vehicles and thirty people per convoy. That's a small army, Chelsea."

"Not if they used the same people over again," Walter interjected grimly. "From what we've pieced together, whoever's behind this most likely has a series of storage facilities. There's no way a convoy could skip past ATF border patrols. Here's what we've got." Walter opened a large map of the US, spreading it out on the table's center. On it, several areas were circled in red. "The convoys that went missing were all heading south. Two were headed to Dallas, one to San Antonio, another one to White Sands, one to Barksdale Air Force Base and three to MacIntyre Marine Camp, on the Mexican border."

"Damn," Matt swore lowly. "Most of 'em were headin' for Texas."

Walter nodded. "We figure the 'hijackers' have a storage area somewhere in southern Texas. My theory is, they deposit the convoys there, and then ship the gear out slowly over a period of time. No one can find the weapons because they never left the country in the first place. That's why they show up on the Military Weapons Movement System so quickly once they do leave."

"Which scares me even more, thanks a lot, Chips," Jen said. "Should we be putting two and two together here, Rick? Because I don't like what I'm reading."

"And that is?"

She ticked them off on her fingers. "We have Reaver Teas and nervous suppressants showing up in the hands of New York dealers with an anonymous moneyman, top-secret military munitions transfers going missing, with an anonymous

spy calling the shots, and a possible cloning operation being carried out by an activist who's never supported the idea of genetic exploitation before. This has all the makings of a hype campaign to start a war, Rick."

Rick sighed, and nodded. "Kelly? Ishmael? You both have experience in this sort of thing. What do you think?"

Kelly shrugged. "Who knows? Terrorist activities change with the local political scene. Sure, Banhauste's Regiment could be cloning people, if that's what you're asking. If you think someone's trying to cause panic here from outside the border, that's not bloody likely, is it? Not if it took this long for us to learn about it. Sounds more like Headquarters tryin' to cover its arse to me. There's nothing to gain in spreading rumors that get nowhere."

"Ishmael?"

Ishmael Gordon steepled his fingers. "I concur. There is nothing to be gained by promoting terrorist threats where no one can hear them. I would say that the military is embarrassed by the existence of just such an operation, by a party they can no longer control, and that we are to dispose of it, without having knowledge of it until we get there."

Tamia blinked at him. "Are you kidding?! Ishmael, you don't send armed personnel up against shit like that. You can't just toss a grenade into a post-Polar cloning facility! The DNA purifying chemicals they use are airborne and toxic, and the biological fallout'll kill every living thing for over a mile!"

Rick slumped back in his seat, rubbing the bridge of his nose between finger and

thumb in a weary action. “Look, people, we’ve got to know what we’re up against, but I’ve got a bad feeling that it’s going to cost more than it’s worth. What I want everyone to understand is however we do this, we’ve got to work as a team. I want an agreement, before we leave this room, as to what we’re going to do.” His eyes moved around the table again. “Here’s what we’ve got. Civil and Military Justice both say we’ve got a mini war brewing in Peru, thanks to our Mole and the stolen weapons. That’s it. Guns, bombs, shit like that. They didn’t mention a thing about cloning, or genetic anything. Hell, they didn’t even bring up chem. They say it’s straight terrorist activity, and it’s heading north, toward the border. That’s our Mole’s M.O.

“Science and Research brought up the possibility of genetic experimentation at Poco Nanches. They could give me detailed chemical-trace charts from the last Equatorial Patrol environmental check down that way. There’s definitely something going on down there, if those atmospheric tests are any indication. They wouldn’t tell me where they’d gotten their hands on those scans, though, so we’ve got no idea how accurate they are. The list of contacts wasn’t worth shit, and the list of leads wasn’t worth much more, except to confirm the sale of over three billion bucks worth of stolen military equipment to the Banhauste Regiment compound at Poco Nanches by our illustrious, and still anonymous, Mole. None of which, by the way, were Therm-Chem. All conventional weaponry, aside from the purchase of several large vehicles. All that fits with Banhauste’s code about unethical battle practices. But I think we’ve got a larger problem than that. I got hold of both Civil and Military Justice early this morning, to alert them to the possibilities of cloning, and for correction of orders.”

Jen raised a brow. “And?”

“They weren’t any fucking help. Constable Pauchek informed me that we were sent straightforward mission orders, and that any alterations would have to go through Military Justice first. He didn’t seem concerned about what I told him. So I called Military Justice. Admiral Morrison wants a full report of exactly what we find, after the fact, of course.”

Tamia frowned. “What about Headquarters? What’d they have to say?”

He snorted. “Nothing helpful, as usual. They claim to know nothing of a cloning operation. Said we were to proceed as ordered. Get rid of the bunkers. What we do after that is immaterial to them.”

Walter laid his hands flat on the table. “So what are our choices?”

Rick gestured to the files. “Not a whole helluva lot. One, we can forget all the cloning and super-soldier stuff, go in like we would’ve before, and take whatever comes at us. Two, we can dig up as much as we can on it, go in with a firm understanding of what kind of shit we’re getting into, and maybe come out of this without a body-count...”

“Or?” Tamia asked quietly, glancing up at him.

He drew a breath. “Or, three we can call the bluff that’s been handed us and force Civil and Military Justice to give us a better idea what they want us to do.”

They all looked at one another, and their doubtful expressions gave Rick his answer. Not one of them actually believed Headquarters would claim any knowledge of an operation that was most likely US backed. And none of them were stupid, or suicidal. So they’d have to dig up as much background as they could and go in cautiously,

prepared for anything. No one needed to say a word. Finally, with a heavy sigh, Rick said, "All right, we go in. The bunkers'll be our primary, unless we find out something that puts them in off-limits. It's not in Banhauste's style, but I want low-explosive ammo, in case of Therm-Chems. Anywhere they have weapons stocked is a target. But no gung-ho tactics, any of you. I want to know what's in those bunkers *before* we start chucking grenades or setting charges, or any shit like that. We're not in this for a body-count."

A murmur of affirmation ran around the table. Leaning forward to rest her arms on the table, Kelly asked, "What're the chances of civilian involvement?"

"You mean people not affiliated with the Banhauste?" Rick looked at her. She nodded, and he sighed. "I have no idea, Kel. That's why we're going to do some heavy background first." His eyes moved around the table slowly, picking out each person as he assigned duties. "Chelsea, I'm sending you to Lima. See what the local political atmosphere's like. See what the common folk think about everything. That's Banhauste's pulse. I want to know what they're afraid of, what they love, what they hate, what they want to see in the cinema next. Anything they're thinking about, I want to know. Frank, I think the DEA needs a friendly little visit. Find out what kind of drugs they're finding on the border, how things are getting in and out of the country nowadays. And see if you can find out what the ATF's passing on about weaponry. I want to know who's taking bribes, of what amount, from whom, and what they've let slip through. It's a hard lot, but whatever you can find will be better than nothing. I want some hard figures on exactly what kind of firepower's going that way. That might just give us a

lead on our Mole.” His eyes touched on Jen then. “Jen, I want printouts of every psychological profile IA has on record for any and all Banhauste members, employees, and affiliates. You’re going to start looking for our ‘mad scientist’.” She nodded, jotting something on the pad in front of her, and Rick’s eyes moved on. “Walter, consider yourself enslaved to the networking systems until we’re ready to move. I want every last shred, byte, or whatever, that can be accessed or hacked into on military drug tech, *Jaosantai*, and Banhauste operations and efforts. Pick ‘em apart with a fine-tooth comb. We’re going to need every bit of it as clear as it can possibly read.”

The blond man nodded. “You got it.”

Rick’s eyes fell on Matt next. “Matt, find out what the militant underground is talking about, and keep your ear to the ground on what drugs are moving, and what’s being stockpiled. See if you can’t get an ID on the moneyman behind this recent activity. Chances are, the gangs’ll know before anyone else does if something big’s heading’ this way. Don’t take any reckless chances, though. We need to keep this as clean as possible for now.”

Matt leaned back in his chair, rolling his dark eyes. “Shit, I got stuck in a henhouse...”

“Just make sure you get back here in one piece with the goods, you maladjusted delinquent!” Jen snapped at him, glaring. Everyone else concealed grins. Tamia especially. She wondered how they acted when no one was watching; they fought like a cat and dog during briefings. She felt Rick’s eyes on her then, and looked up from the table.

Rick sighed inwardly to himself as he looked into Tamia's eyes. He needed a frontline spy, someone with the stealth and speed to get in and back out of the Banhauste camp without detection. Someone who could infiltrate Poco Nanches before the mission, and get a large amount of information in a minimal amount of time. Someone who could think on his or her feet if the situation demanded it. Tamia met all of the qualifications. She might as well have been one of the ancient Ninja of the Orient, for her stealth and speed. Her years running with the gangs in 'Frisco had only honed previously untested skills into lethal ability. Logically, she was the ideal choice, the *only* choice, for the assignment. But logic had nothing to do with Rick's sudden reluctance. He knew the fatality ratios, the odds of success, in a mission like that, and they weren't good. Tamia had just been cleared for return to active status today, after nearly getting killed on their last mission. Her reaction time might still be a little sluggish. She could be discovered. What then? And what if there were clones there? How would she react? If she froze, there'd be no one there to help her. He knew how she felt about clones. It had nothing to do with logic. But, he couldn't deny that she was still the best candidate for the mission, besides himself. He considered it for a long moment. He could go, leave her the position he was going to fill... but no, that wouldn't work. If Headquarters tried to get hold of him and couldn't it could be a disaster for all of them. Headquarters wouldn't give mission alterations, or command changes, to anyone other than him. There was really no way around it.

She was regarding him stoically. She knew what had to happen, and she was

prepared; he only wished *he* was prepared. Drawing a deep breath, he said, “Tamia, I’m sending you to Poco Nanches. We need to know what’s really there. See if you can dig anything up, get a general idea of the mood around the compound, and what they’re up to. But, what I told Matt applies. No playing hero, or martyr. If it looks like trouble, it probably is, so get your ass out of there, ASAP. But, if it looks like they’re ready to move out, don’t hesitate to use explosives.”

She nodded and Rick continued on. “Kath, start working over the lobbyists. I want to know what they’re after. Chances are, one of them has been calling for a war of some kind. I want to know who, how, and of what scale. Ishmael, you’ve got Interpol. Get me a list of what CEADS is sending south of the border these days; medicine, food, money, weapons, everything. Find out what they’re shipping, how much, and to whom. And get me a list of all the immigrants to Peru and the Chilean State in the past three years.”

Ishmael nodded, his expression grim. Rick’s eyes scanned the room again. “Kelly and I will be your hub. Anything anyone digs up comes back here, pronto, by whatever means you have to.” He looked at the dark woman then. “I’m giving the files to you, Kel. Piece ‘em together with what I pass along to you, if you can, and we’ll see what you come up with. I’ll monitor communications.”

When mission planning broke up, Tamia immediately disappeared. Worried, Rick watched her go, and then turned back to his files with a frown. He didn’t like sending her into danger, but they both knew it had to be done. They both had jobs to do. So, pushing aside his concerns for the moment, Rick concentrated on getting pre-mission

files finalized.

Twenty minutes later, Rick closed and tagged the last of the pre-mission files for Frank, who was going to be on Comms watch through the night. Then, sighing, he rose and set off in search of Tamia. There were things that needed to be said before she went off into the jungle. He needed to know she was all right with this.

Rick found Tamia sitting, cross-legged, in the Arena, her *tanto* clasped in her hands and her eyes closed. An eerie tingling ran up his spine, and his skin felt suddenly cold. What on earth...? Tamia looked like a statue – carved of ice and stone. No matter how hard he looked, he couldn't tell if she was alive. An uneasy feeling started at the base of his skull. He wasn't sure he knew what was going on, but he sure as hell knew he didn't *like* it.

Light flashed on the blade, then disappeared, as she moved it, her eyes flickering. Drawing a deep breath, she slumped her shoulders and hung her head, looking all too human again, and entirely exhausted. She hadn't noticed him there yet. She was really beat. He watched as she absently sheathed the *tanto*, her brow furrowed in a frown. She looked up then, and saw him. Her eyes widened.

“Rick! I didn't know anyone was there!”

He leaned against the wall, watching her intently. “What were you doing?”

She looked back down at the *tanto* in her lap. “Something Kuron taught me. Preparing myself for battle. He taught me to clear my mind; that if my thoughts were still enough, I can sense trouble before it happens. That's what I was doing; getting a feel for Poco Nanches.”

His eyes widened. “You’re saying you can sit here, in the Underground, and know what’s going to happen four thousand miles away, days from now? You really *did* fry your brains out back in ‘Frisco!”

She sighed. “No, Rick, I didn’t fry my brain. I learned how to do this a long time ago. I know it’s hard to understand – hell, I thought Kuron was crazy at first, too. But the Divide taught me that I stay alive longer if I know what I’m getting into before I hop in. I don’t know what’s happening, or what’s going to happen. But, sometimes, I can sense if there’s particular danger.”

He shook his head slowly, stunned by this new dimension to the woman he was only beginning to really know. “I’m still not sure I understand all that ESP stuff Jen says women are so good at, but if you say so, I guess I can accept the possibility.”

She brushed hair from her face and smiled up at him. “So, what’d we get on the weapons stats so far?”

Rick sighed, sitting down on the bench by the door. “They’ve got quite an arsenal. Not a damned light weapon on site.”

“How heavy?”

“Anti-aircraft.”

“Damn.” She brought her knees up, wrapping her arms around them as she studied him with concerned mahogany eyes. “They might start shooting down commuters. Did you alert the terminals to reroute flights that go over that area?”

“Tried. I put the message through. It’s up to them to respond.”

She sighed heavily. “Therm-Chem?”

He nodded. “Just a few, from the looks of things so far. Hopefully, we’ll have a full rundown before you leave tomorrow. Frank’s promised me he’ll get me as complete a preliminary list as he can.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

He drew a deep breath, and then released it slowly, watching her. He opened his mouth to speak, glanced away as his jaw snapped shut, and then swallowed hard and started again. Damn, he was so worried! “Tamia, watch yourself down there. I want you to come home in one piece.”

She offered him a knowing smile as she rose gracefully from the floor and came over to him. “I’ll be careful, Rick. I haven’t stayed alive this long by being reckless.”

He stood as well, one hand moving to brush her face. “I don’t want to lose you now.”

She turned her head slightly to plant a brief kiss on the palm of his hand. “I know.” She sighed then, pulling away. “I’ve got to go get ready. My flight leaves early tomorrow morning.”

He nodded, but caught her hand as she moved past him, stopping her. “Can I come see you, later? We need to talk.”

She smiled softly, and nodded as she left the room. Rick stood there in the Arena alone, watching the door, his brow furrowed and his blue eyes bright with worry. What had he gotten her into this time?

CHAPTER THREE

Tamia looked up from the small duffle bag she was packing as the door tone sounded, and called out, “C’mon in; it’s open!”

Returning her attention to the duffle that she’d be living out of for the next week or so, she stuffed four extra clips for her Glock-44 and an extra knife – the third she’d packed – into the center of a pile of jungle fatigues. It was a damned good thing she was taking a military commuter into Bocas del Toro, the last city this side of the Equatorial border. If she’d been taking a commercial commuter, she’d never have been able to carry weapons on the flight, even with military ID.

Tamia sighed. After she arrived in Bocas del Toro, she’d be hopping a CIA Black Ops transport across the border. She wasn’t looking forward to that; CIA and the Commandos had an uneasy peace, but Black Ops still viewed them as interlopers. She’d have to watch her back from the moment she touched down in Bocas until she made it back to New York.

Once in Peru, she’d be completely on her own. She’d be in constant danger from the moment she hooked up with Black Ops, but they wouldn’t be her only hazard. Nor would Banhauste’s Regiment, Tamia acknowledged bleakly. As a United States military operative, she was technically barred by the Equatorial Patrol from crossing the Equatorial border with so much as a pea-shooter. If she was caught on the southern side

of the border with a weapon of any kind, she would be immediately imprisoned, and quite likely executed, by the EP.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Rick’s voice reached her then, and she glanced up to find him leaning against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest as he studied her thoughtful expression with probing blue eyes.

“Last of the big spenders,” she quipped, shooting him a teasing grin as she sealed the static lines of her duffle and hefted it to the floor at the foot of her bed. Her expression turned curious as she turned to face him, to find that he hadn’t even cracked a smile. “What’s up with you?”

He sighed, stepping away from the door and into the room.

“Tamia, I...damn, I don’t know how to say this,” he muttered, his expression dark.

She smiled softly. “Hey, sailor, don’t worry about me, okay? I can take care of myself.”

His eyes rose to her face, and his expression turned grim. “This isn’t a game, Tamia. There’re no second tries, and there’s no starting over. I know your pride would never let you turn down a mission while everyone is watching you, but if you want to back out...”

She avoided his eyes for a long moment, busily smoothing the bed covers as she fought down the surge of anger that rose at his words. Yes, she was a little afraid of what was going to happen, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t up to the job, dammit! Drawing several breaths to calm herself didn’t help, either. The eyes she finally turned on Rick

were hard and cold, and full of angry purpose.

Quietly, her voice barely more than a rasping whisper, she said, “Rick, I am only going to say this once: I am *not* a trigger-happy goon, and nor am I a brainless punk, anymore. Our relationship doesn’t change my job, or how I do it. I didn’t accept this mission because of stubbornness or misplaced pride. I took it because I swore an oath to do what has to be done, to preserve the sanctity of human life and defend the innocent. This is something that has to be done, and I won’t back away. Nor am I going to change my mind, so if that’s what you came here for, you can execute an about-face and leave, because it’s not going to happen.”

He moved to stand before her, his expression openly concerned. “Tamia, I’m not questioning your judgment for taking the mission. I just want you to think, honey. You’ll be alone down there, with no back up whatsoever. What happens if Poco Nanches is full of clones?”

Tamia sank wearily to the bed, sitting with her face buried in her hands. She knew exactly what he was asking her. It was the same question she’d been wrestling with since the moment Rick had handed her that magazine last night. What *would* happen if there were clones at Poco Nanches? She already knew she couldn’t face them. Cloning was Tamia’s blind spot; the presence of clones was the only thing she’d ever encountered, in her entire military career, capable of freezing her in place.

“Damn,” she swore quietly, before glancing up at Rick with uncertain eyes. “I don’t know, Rick. It’s never simple, you know. We can’t even be sure that there *are* clones down there. Besides, who else is going to go? You can’t, and anyone else would

mean placing us all in more danger than the mission's worth. We both know I have to do this."

Rick came to crouch before her, taking her hands as he looked into her eyes. "None of that matters," he said softly. "Tamia, if you don't think you can do this, we won't go in. I'll just call the bluff, and see who rises to bait. I won't risk your life on a mission that's only going to fail, again."

She smiled gently at him, raising one hand to skim her fingers across his cheek. "I can handle it, Rick. Even if there's cloning involved, I think I can handle a simple surveillance assignment. We *have* to do this, Rick. There are lives at stake."

He squeezed her captive hand lightly before raising it to his lips. "No one's life is more important to me than yours, Tamia," he whispered huskily. "You be careful down there."

With a small, tender smile, Tamia leaned closer, her fingers twining with his, and let her kiss speak for her as she drew him up onto the bed with her.

The phone was ringing. Damn. It was three in the morning. Who the hell was calling at this time? Tamia rolled over and picked up the receiver with a yawn. " 'Lo?"

"Why are you sleeping?"

Tamia groaned at the chiding she heard in that familiar, energetic voice, speaking in Tibetan. "Grandfather, it's three AM, here. What *else* should I be doing?"

"You should be coming to see me," Shaung Ku-ran went on dauntlessly, as though the words 'three AM' meant nothing to him, even in Tibetan. "Your training will

be all undone by those Americans.”

She grimaced to herself, glad she hadn't invested in a vid-phone. Her grandfather was far too spry for his age. *Must be something in the mountain air.* “I can't come see you right now. I have to stay here. If I go AWOL now, I'll be in deep shit.”

“Do not swear at me,” was Kuron's stern reply. “Just come.”

The line clicked dead before Tamia could protest. With a groan, she replaced the handset and lay back, staring at the ceiling for a moment, before she turned to snuggle into Rick's warmth.

“What was all that?” She heard his voice, and realized that he was awake. “You were rattling away in Chinese.”

“Tibetan,” she corrected in a murmur, kissing his skin lightly. “That was Kuron. He must be getting lonely again. Said I had to come see him, that America was undoing all my training.”

“Training?” Rick rose up to look down at her, his eyes openly curious. “More of that meditation stuff you were doing earlier?”

She nodded, reaching to run her hand across his cheek. “He reminds me, every few years, that I'm not an American – I'm Tibetan. Doesn't matter to him that, legally, I *am* an American. I'm still his granddaughter, and I should be living by the old forms.”

“Such as?”

“Tai chi chuan, Buddhism, things like that.” She lay looking at the ceiling with a wry smile, and then turned her eyes to Rick. “I do the exercises, and the meditating, but it's never enough for him. There's always something more I need to learn, some form

I've neglected."

Rick bent to kiss her skin.

"I'm inclined to agree with that last part, Captain," he murmured suggestively.

"Rick!" She laughed, pushing him away. "Show a little control."

"With you? I don't have any," he whispered as he bent his head to her breasts.

Tamia gasped at the sensation that moved through her, all thoughts of both Kuron and sleep gone completely from her mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was a grim ride from the Underground to LaGuardia AFB – what had, until the Reaver War, been LaGuardia International Airport – and Tamia spent the trip silently studying her lover’s tense features.

To say Rick wasn’t happy about this mission would be an understatement, Tamia decided with dark humor. She knew he wasn’t crazy about solo missions for *anyone* – after all, the man had spent nearly a decade as a SEAL, with their strict adherence to teamwork and back-ups; he wasn’t going to see solo missions as anything better than suicide. But the idea of her going in solo was clearly scaring the hell out of him. He tried three times last night, without success, to convince her to back out of the assignment. He tried again, just this morning, until she told him that the only way she wasn’t going was if he made it a direct order; she knew he wouldn’t.

Sighing, she looked at him again. “This isn’t helping, you know.”

He shot her a glance. “What do you mean?”

“You’re sulking.”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

A wry smile flickered at his lips. “Do you *always* have to have the last word?”

“Woman’s prerogative,” she said with a grin.

He laughed then. “And a comeback. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone quite like you, before, Tamia.”

“I would hope not,” she said with a wry grin. “There can’t be many recovering drug-addict Marine martial artists out there.”

His smile died. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” Tamia said quietly as they pulled up to the front gate of the Air Base and surrendered their military IDs for clearance checks.

“Why do you always do that?” He asked curiously as they waited. “Every time someone pays you a compliment, you find a way to turn it into an insult.”

She shrugged awkwardly, turning her eyes away. She hadn’t thought he noticed; she should have known better. “Conditioning, I guess. David followed every one of his few compliments with a ‘but,’ so I learned to never trust kind words.”

His hand left the steering wheel, as if he meant to reach for her hand. Tamia cast a swift glance at the returning MP, and gave her head a small shake.

Rick sighed, returning his hand to the steering wheel as he muttered, “I really hate this.”

“What?” Tamia frowned, uncertain what he was getting at.

“Nothing,” he said as he took their IDs from the MP and returned the younger man’s salute.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she said firmly. “What were you muttering about, Rick?”

He sighed again as he drove through the gates and into the base. “I’m getting tired of not being able to touch you in public, okay?”

She shot him a surprised look. She hadn't realized that it bothered him. "Look, Rick, we agreed—"

"I know, I know," he muttered, his eyes fixed straight ahead and his expression dark as he turned toward the flight line. "That doesn't mean I have to *like* it." He shot her a glance, his cobalt eyes going indigo with desire. "I'm putting you on a commuter into a dangerous situation, and I can't even kiss you good-bye, Tamia. That sucks."

"You did that this morning," she reminded him with a small smile, adjusting the line of her Battle Dress Uniform.

"That's not the point, and you know it, damn it!"

"I know," she agreed softly. "And I know it sucks. But our job has to come first, and that means we can't act like anything more than comrades when we're in uniform, Rick."

He scowled. "It's not always going to be like this."

Tamia sighed at the promise she heard in his growled reply. She already knew he'd never follow through. As much as Rick might gripe about keeping their relationship secret, he was too wrapped up in his job to ever make a move to change things. Which, she told herself firmly, was just fine with her.

As Rick parked his jeep along the flight line near the terminal, Tamia turned to him with a small, sad smile. "I guess this is it."

His eyes grew dark with worry and emotion he couldn't otherwise express here. "You be careful."

She nodded. "I will."

She heard him draw a deep breath as she turned to reach over the seat for her bag, before he suddenly muttered, “Oh, hell.”

And, before she knew what was happening, Tamia found herself pulled tight against Rick’s chest as his mouth sealed over hers in a deep, mind-stealing kiss. Her thoughts grew hazy as she clutched at his shirtfront, drinking in the scent and taste of him – so familiar and beloved. God, she was going to miss him!

As that thought settled, awareness of her surroundings returned, and Tamia pulled away sharply. “Rick...”

His eyes were closed, and his breathing was labored as a twitch worked in his jaw, telling her how turned on he was.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he managed, after a moment. Reaching into his BDU shirt pocket, he pulled out a disc case and held it out to her. “Here’s all your pre-mission information. Frank downloaded it to disc this morning, so everything’s current. Study it on your way to Bocas; I doubt you’ll have a chance to after you hit the border.”

He was really struggling with this, she saw clearly, and her chest tightened as tears pricked her eyes. How could she have forgotten that he’d sent friends and comrades into disaster before? This must be killing him. Gently, she laid a hand on his arm. “I’ll be careful, Rick. I promise.”

He nodded, and stared straight ahead, his face tight as he said, “You better get going, or you’ll miss your flight.”

She sighed, and grabbed her bags. This wasn’t how she wanted to leave things between them. She didn’t want to leave him while he was hurting. She stopped as she

reached for the door handle, and turned back to Rick with a soft smile. “I love you, Rick.”

And, as she scooted from the vehicle, she heard him murmur, “I adore you.”

They were words that would warm her even in the cold October night, and Tamia tucked them deep into her heart as she made her way toward the flight terminal, and her uncertain future.

The flight to Bocas del Toro was a pleasant enough one, even if the turbulence caused her seatmate – an Army medic being transferred to Regalis Forward Medical Post, outside Bocas – some distress. The woman, a young blonde with impish features and a friendly smile, explained that she survived a commuter crash as a little girl, and turbulence always made her think of that time. Having survived a transport crash and more than one hard landing in a Flight Tank during the Divide, Tamia could empathize with the woman, Shelley Greesok, in her lack of faith in a machine.

As she stepped off the military commuter in Bocas, however, Tamia began to question her own sanity for taking on this mission. Waiting at the bottom of the ramp was a man in jeans and a loud-print Hawaiian-style shirt, his eyes hidden behind dark spectator shades and a sarcastic leer on his face.

“You Commandos have to learn not to dress for war; maybe then you wouldn’t get shot so much,” he said in an undertone as she went to move past him. Since no one besides her Black Op link was supposed to know she was a Commando, she had to assume this was him. Tamia winced. This guy reminded her of a cross between her ex-

boyfriend David Farennes, and Lieutenant Marcus Remil, her one big mistake since. She had to spend at least the next four hours with this man? *Oh, joy.*

He removed his shades then, and she saw the blatant lust in his brown eyes. Oh, yeah, he *definitely* reminded her of Remil. “Although you sure fill out that uniform right.”

Tamia bristled. “Why don’t you try using your *other* head for a moment, spy-boy?”

He backed down, then, his hands raised in surrender as he grinned. “Okay, so you’ve got brass. I’ll give you that, Captain.” He extended his hand. “James Dalton.”

Her eyebrow cocked wryly. James Dalton? As in James Bond and Timothy Dalton? This guy was a real piece of work. “That’s not your real name, is it?”

He grinned. “That’s classified, darlin’. Now, why don’t you go slip into something more comfortable, and we’ll get this show on the road.”

“Where’s your transport?”

He gestured toward an old-model leisure flyer that looked something like a cross between an antique biplane and a car with no wheels. Tamia’s stomach lurched with dread, just looking at it. “Is that thing safe?”

He laughed. “No, but she’s our ticket into Peru. Don’t knock her.”

With a resigned sigh, Tamia turned toward the terminal, where she could change, and steeled herself for the trip ahead. Though her companion seemed friendly enough, she had seen the icy glint in his calculating brown gaze, and knew she was far from safe in his company. And, once again, she wondered if Rick hadn’t been right in his

assessment of her situation down here.

Six hours later, Tamia stepped off the bus and breathed in a deep draught of clean Peruvian air, releasing it with a sigh. It was warmer here than she was used to, but at least it wasn't the miserable; humid heat she'd face once she headed out into the jungle. In a few days, she'd no doubt remember Lima's climate fondly.

Slinging her rucksack over her shoulder and grabbing her duffle bag, she headed down the flowerbox-lined streets of Lima's middle-class neighborhood. There was still a lot here to admire, even after seven years of bloody, inhuman war had left its mark. The fateful course of the Divide hadn't left Lima untouched, but the city still managed to hold onto its mystical beauty and tranquil dignity.

With a sad glance around the street on which she stood, Tamia acknowledged that peace was merely a façade for the bitter fumes of war. Around her, the soft peace of flowerboxes and whitewashed dwellings couldn't quite eclipse the blackened, bombed-out husks of their long-abandoned neighbors, or the rows of little white crosses that memorialized the terrible fighting that had soaked these streets in life's blood. Innocence and evil stood solidly side-by-side, daring developers to try separating them.

To most people, scenes like this one probably just added to Lima's inherent mystique. But, for Tamia, this scene symbolized yet another nightmare and regret. She'd been a part of the 35th Trooper Battalion that had marched through these very streets with the Devil in their blood, six and a half years ago. They'd laid waste to Lima, and burned out these very buildings, during one of the bloodiest chapters of the Divide.

Tamia studied the memorial crosses sadly, remorse spreading through her. Some of these crosses were her ghosts, the sins that haunted her out of sleep. They were the reason she was here, instead of heading straight into the jungles. Peru held within itself an ancient mysticism, and superstitions about the dead who were not avenged abounded. Though she typically didn't consider herself superstitious, Tamia knew that if she wanted to survive the dangers of Peru's jungles, she was going to have to make peace with its dead.

"You come to pay your respects, yes?" A voice said in Spanish, bringing Tamia's eyes from the crosses to a middle-aged woman dressed all in black, her graying hair pinned up beneath a lacy black veil.

"Yes," Tamia responded quietly.

"My *nino*," the woman said, patting one cross tenderly, her dark eyes sad. "I come here every day."

Tamia swallowed hard at the woman's obvious grief, even after all these years. What must it be like to lose a child she'd held, and raised, and loved? Tamia had never known her own child, and yet the pain ripped at her heart every day. She couldn't imagine losing a living, breathing child.

"How old was he?" She managed, her voice hoarse.

The older woman smiled sadly. "Seventeen. Such a good boy, my Pablo. He wanted so much to be a hero, to free us from the wealthy puppeteers."

Tamia recognized the COSEC term for CEADS nations. So Pablo had been a soldier; she felt a kinship to the dead boy, knowing that whose side he'd been on no

longer mattered – if it ever had. They’d all been soldiers of the Divide, and all of them had been too young to see what they’d seen, or do what they’d done.

“Did he die here?”

“No,” the woman shook her head. “But my Pablo never came home. He was taken prisoner, right here, and I never saw him again.”

He’d been a P.O.W.! Her brow furrowed. But... “Surely he came home after the war, when the prisoners were released.”

“No. My Pablo never returned from the prison camps. However,” she glanced around, and then leaned close to Tamia to whisper, “some of his friends came to me. They said that Pablo was removed from the camp with a group of prisoners – all fine, sturdy young men, I was told – and his friends overheard talk of experiments. I think they did that to my Pablo. *Bastardos!*”

And, as she studied the woman’s trembling hand on the bleached white cross, Tamia knew that not all of the past’s ghosts could be easily laid to rest. The dead remembered, and the living would never forgive.

Her conversation with the Peruvian woman stayed with Tamia as she made her way toward the *Hostal Roma*, the hotel that would serve as her base of operations for this mission. Her cover as a journalist – complete with digital cameras and a filming bag meant to conceal her weapons – made the hotel a necessity, even though she planned to spend most of her time camped in the jungles near Poco Nanches.

As she moved along the streets of Lima, snapping pictures and pretending to be absorbed

in her cover job, Tamia studied her surroundings, aware for the first time of the people and the expressions they wore, not only on their faces, but also in their eyes. These were people who remembered only *too* well what the Divide had *really* been about. She shuddered at the memories in those faces.

“You should see your face, my friend,” a soft, familiar voice said in Spanish as Tamia stopped beside a small café.

Turning, she looked into Chelsea’s sad eyes and faint smile. Fighting back her own smile, Tamia moved closer.

“Hello, *senorita*. What do you mean?” She enquired politely in Spanish.

Chelsea Perez’s charcoal eyes sparkled. “You did not expect what you have found. Such is often the case in Lima.”

Tamia glanced around, then seated herself at Chelsea’s table, leaning close to murmur, “I know the Divide hit here hard, but what happened? These people don’t just look war-weary; they look *beaten*.”

“They are,” Chelsea replied simply. “For four years, Lima was sealed off from the rest of the world by fighting. When it returned to that world, everything had changed so much that they felt not merely left behind, but completely abandoned.”

Tamia studied her friend with a frown. Lima had been Chelsea’s home, prior to the Divide. “Why did you join the Underground? Why fight against your own people?”

Chelsea shrugged. “I could not live here, after Marcos was killed. Ace offered me a chance to make Marcos’ death count for something. And my government was wrong.”

“COSEC?” Tamia asked quietly.

“Yes. They believed that the European states were attempting to return colonial control that had already been extinct for over two centuries. And so they rebelled against the aid that could have rebuilt, rather than destroyed, most of the deprived world...”

“And the Divide began after the CIA was discovered trying to make a power play that proved COSEC’s point.”

Chelsea nodded. “Marcos was killed shortly after, for speaking out against the war. His politics were popular among the poor, but not so among the wealthy. Even my father would not stand with Marcos. But Baraman Banhauste did, and when Marcos was killed, Baraman made certain I went to the United States, for my safety.”

Tamia blinked. She’d had no idea that Chelsea actually *knew* Banhauste! “Does Rick know this?”

“As much as it was necessary to tell him, yes. Why do you think he sent me? The common people of this region know me as the bereaved intended of their martyr, Marcos Santiago. They will speak with me willingly of Banhauste’s Regiment, both the good and the bad, because they believe I will take that information straight to Baraman. They know I would never cause them harm.”

Worry slashed through Tamia. “Who?”

“The poor,” Chelsea said simply.

Tamia nodded. Chelsea was the true philanthropist of their group. She worked for the betterment of the world in much more subtle ways than many of the rest of them.

“They tell you anything interesting?”

Chelsea sighed. “Only one thing that I did not already know.”

Tamia perked up. “What’s that?”

“In twenty-one-sixteen, Baraman Banhauste hired a scientist named Juan Perosulo to be head of his research. Opinion appears divided, from what I have heard, as to what happened to Dr. Perosulo after the war.”

“In other words, no one knows where he is.”

“Correct.”

“And Poco Nanches?”

Chelsea shrugged helplessly. “Even the Quechua know nothing of Poco Nanches. They claim to have seen ghosts in the forests, but they know nothing of armed men or *los militares*.”

Tamia sighed, and stood. “Well, thanks for the tip. I’ll check it out.”

Chelsea nodded, and turned back to her coffee without another word. But her parting words haunted Tamia all the rest of that day.

Which is how she’d ended up out here in the jungle a day early, Tamia acknowledged as she blew out her breath and mopped her sweaty face with an equally damp sleeve for what had to be the thousandth time. Damn, she hated jungles. An expression of pure disgust crossed her face as she flicked away another slimy, wriggling body that had attached itself to her sleeve. Leeches. Great, just fuckin’ gr...Tamia whirled and dropped to a crouch as she heard the snap of dense underbrush, her entire being focused on the source of the sound. Slowly, silently, she drew her thermal rifle around and unlocked the safety. She forced her breathing quiet, and held herself ridged, listening

intently. The sound of rustling trees and falling water, mixed with the tittering and squeaks of jungle fauna, filled her ears. Nothing else. Then, suddenly, the snap of foliage, off to her right! Tamia trained her weapon that way, watching intently, listening, waiting.

Her heart was pounding in her ears, her mouth was dry, and sweat rolled down her face, plastering her hair to the sides of her face and neck. Her muscles, cramped already from hours of tracking and hiding, screamed in protest at this newest form of torture inflicted upon them. Time dragged by forever, until she thought she'd go mad. *Come on, bastard!* She swore inwardly, clenching her teeth. Then, another shuffling, and a small monkey bounded out of the brush near her and skittered across the mossy ground and away. Tamia let out her breath, and a small curse, before she laughed quietly, shaking her head. Just as she went to the rifle's safety, something hit her solidly across the back of the head, and Tamia slid to the ground as blackness engulfed her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tamia groaned, her eyelids scrunching against the light glaring, red, through them. She winced then, and turned her head away from the light source. God, her head hurt. Where the hell was she? She groaned again, and tried to move. Panic flooded her. She couldn't move! Her eyes shot open, and she looked down, only to find herself bound to a medical table by broad rubber straps. A familiar, sickening memory washed over her, but she thrust it away. She needed calm reason to get out of this, not panic. How was she going to get out of this?

“Ah, our little friend has awakened, Karl. Good.”

Tamia turned her head to see who had spoken, and her vision swam. A small moan escaped her, despite her efforts to conceal her discomfort. The voice spoke again. “Your disorientation, my friend, is due to the morphine. It will wear off shortly.”

“Who...who are you?” Tamia asked, forming her words carefully around a tongue that felt rubbery. “Where am I?”

A face crossed into her line of sight then. It was thin and pale, covered in a well-trimmed gray beard and moustache, and topped by a nearly bald head that glared under the bright light. Horn-rimmed glasses completed the picture, convincing Tamia that she was in some old-fashioned horror flick. “I am Dr. Juan Perosulo, and if you do not know where you are, then you do not belong here.”

Tamia tried to think – a difficult task when her head was throbbing like a bass drum. She'd done it before, though. Pushing aside the pain, she forced herself to concentrate. Juan Perosulo. Where had she heard that name before? Juan Perosulo... "Poco Nanches?" She guessed. "You're the Banhauste doctor..."

"Ah, very good." He smiled. "The morphine is wearing off, then."

Tamia's eyes widened. "Morphine? Why the hell were you giving me morphine?"

He clicked his tongue. "Questions, questions!" He moved out of her line of sight then. "She was indeed the perfect specimen, Karl. It is lucky for us that you found her!"

A sick feeling crept through Tamia. "Perfect specimen? For *what*?"

Perosulo's face, eyes wide in surprise, crossed her vision again. "Why, for my experiment, of course! Physical strength and durability, good bones and blood, strong organs, pre-existing amniotic fluids...Couldn't have asked for a better subject!"

Tamia's heart lurched in fear. "You can't clone me! That's..."

"Barbaric?" He supplied, humor playing in his voice. "My dear, scientific breakthrough is far from barbaric. I have discovered the most civilized means of procuring an army, or a nation. It will save countless lives..."

"And destroy countless more!" Tamia seethed. "And it's all *illegal*, by the Accords established after the Reaver War."

He sighed. "Always these technicalities. Very well, then." He released the straps. "You may go."

She sat up slowly, feeling her head swim. When, at last, she regained her bearing,

she asked, “Where’s my gear?”

Another figure stepped from the shadows near-by, and Tamia’s heart jumped for an instant. She hadn’t seen anyone there. “You will not be needing them.”

Tamia studied the man a moment. He was dressed in basic jungle gear – camouflage shirt and pants, black beret on his head and green jungle boots on his feet. The only symbol of his rank was the red band that circled his upper right arm.

“Commandant,” she addressed him with a slight nod. “I assume there’s a good reason I won’t be needing my gear?”

He remained stiff-postured, his expression dour. “You are not one of us. You do not belong here. You are a spy.”

Tamia raised a brow. “Really? How would you know?”

He flushed red in anger. “Do not play me for stupid! Were you Banhauste, you would speak Spanish or German. You speak English. You are a spy.”

Shit. She’d forgotten about that. Must’ve been the morphine. She’d have to think quickly to get herself out of this one. Then, an idea came to her. Raising her head firmly, she said, “I’m a member of the Equatorial Patrol, on assignment to cover recent disturbances of peace in this area. As I encountered hostility here, I suppose I’ll have to report the Banhauste as being in need of inspection.”

The Commandant’s face paled visibly. He and the doctor exchanged nervous looks that weren’t lost on Tamia. These people were hiding something, and something big. Finally, the Commandant cleared his throat and said, “Pardon our action, but we have recently been assailed by various espionage attempts, and have begun tightening

security...”

Seeing that her ruse had worked thus far, Tamia became bolder. Turning to the doctor, she inquired, “Do you have paper and pens? My recorder’s obviously been confiscated along with my other equipment.”

Perosulo nodded nervously and scrounged around until he came up with a small vid-corder. “This?”

She nodded her thanks. “That’ll do. I’ll be certain to note your co-operation.” She checked the unit over, and then turned it to face the Commandant. “Now, I believe we should talk. First,” she hit the record button, “state your name, rank, and position.”

He went rigid. “Karl Haslunas, Commandant of Poco Nanches, Second Commander to Baraman Banhauste.”

Tamia’s eyes widened slightly at that. Obviously, Poco Nanches was of more importance than anyone suspected. But if this man was so important, why hadn’t he come up before? Why hadn’t his dossier been in her pre-mission material? Quickly, she continued, “Poco Nanches is a forward post?”

Haslunas’ eyes darted away. “No.”

“No?”

“Poco Nanches is Banhauste center for research and development.”

She blinked, then drew a breath and asked, “How many units?”

His eyes continued to move nervously, never looking at her. Damn. He was going to lie. “Five bunkers, three compound buildings, manpower of eighty-seven.”

Her eyes narrowed as she decided to call his bluff. “Not from what I saw before I

was clubbed from behind. Care to expand on that, or should I request an investigation of the site?" He swallowed visibly. He was nervous as hell. Good. That was just the way she wanted him. "Well, Commandant?"

"Twelve buildings, four underground. Main buildings connected with passages – total of eight, with four underground centers. Manpower of six hundred, with forty-six armored units."

She nodded curtly. "The doctor mentioned experiments...?"

He knew he couldn't lie.

She knew he'd try anyway.

He did. "There are no experiments being conducted at this installation."

She called him on it. "You're going to have to do better than that, Commandant Haslunas."

He closed his eyes, and nodded slowly. "Three cloning sites. Laboratory stasis state. Early-modern configuration. Two regenerative and replacement, one full-procedure."

Her gaze hardened. "Biologicals? Therm-Chem?"

He sighed, nodded. "Bunker Two. Twelve thermal units, seven biologicals. No chemical."

She switched off the recorder. "I have to warn you that you're violating Patrol regulations regarding private institutions and special interest groups, with your stockpile. My superiors will make the final decision regarding action to be taken, but I'd be prepared for some pretty strong backlash, if I were you. If you don't want to end up on

the black-lists, I'd dump that stuff, and quick." With that, she rose carefully from where she was sitting, determined not to show these men how absolutely sick she felt. It could wait. "Now, if you'll be so kind as to return my gear and show me the way out, I'll be on my way."

Haslunas nodded, and called for one of the men waiting outside the door to bring Tamia's gear in. A few moments later, as she secured everything, Tamia reflected on how gullible these people were, and how close she was to puking her guts out right there. Every movement cost her a supreme act of will, but she hid that fact as best she could. She had to get out of here, and fast. They'd be getting suspicious and checking up on her story, sooner or later. She'd rather not be there when they did. She needed to cover her ass, and quick.

Four hours later, Tamia leaned her head against the wall of her hotel room bathroom with a groan. She'd just puked her entire digestive tract into the toilet. God, she hated morphine, for good reason. Ever since drug Detox, before Basic Training, morphine made her queasy and light-headed. But she'd never been so violently ill from it before. They must have OD-ed her on the stuff. Now that the effects had worn off completely, she could feel the reason they'd given it to her. Her head was throbbing. She vaguely remembered being cracked on the back of the head. They must have hit her with the butt end of a rifle, and hard. She felt around the back of her head with tentative fingers, until she found the lump. God, she hoped she didn't have a concussion. A sharp, stabbing pain in her abdomen drew her attention away from her head for a moment. Must be the

effects of throwing up so much. She felt miserable.

The phone in the bedroom rang, and Tamia groaned again. Slowly, using the wall as a prop, she walked her way to her feet and wound her way into the bedroom. Picking up the phone, she mumbled, “Yeah? Who’s it?”

“Tamia?”

“Oh. Hi, Rick.” She sat down on the edge of the bed, before she ended up on the floor.

“You okay? You don’t sound good.”

“I don’t feel good either.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Aside from a lump the size of China on my skull and the after-effects of a truckload of morphine, nothing.”

She heard his sharp intake of breath. “Tamia, what the hell’s going on down there?”

“I found everything we need. I’ll try and be back day after tomorrow. Tell you then, okay?”

She heard a swish of static from his end as he gave up his line of questioning. Thank God. “Okay, but take care of yourself...”

She smiled. “I will. What’d you need?”

“We’ve been piecing together some pretty deep shit over the past couple of days. Seems we’ve got more to worry about than I first thought. About four years ago, according to the records we were given, the Banhauste employed a new doctor. One Dr.

Juan Perosulo...”

“We’ve met.” Tamia grimaced. “And I dug up that fact on my first day in the country. Seems it’s common knowledge down here.”

“Yeah, that’s what Gypsy said, too. Do you know the rest? His history?”

She shook her head, and the room spun. “No.”

“Let’s see,” Rick’s voice trailed off for a moment, and Tamia heard pages being flipped in the background. “Graduated from Princeton in ‘03, with a degree in experimental medicine. He was thrown out of three hospitals and twelve clinics after he began experimenting with biological mutations. During the Divide he worked as a CIA field surgeon, defecting to COSEC in ‘10 – not long after the war started. He served as head of the COSEC Medical Development Team until Baraman Banhauste offered him his own research department in 2116, right before the end of the Divide.”

“Banhauste *himself* hired Perosulo?” Tamia asked, alert with surprise.

“Yeah. Strange, huh? Banhauste always prided himself on working for the betterment of humanity, and then he goes and hires a two-bit gene pool scientist as head of research. Wouldn’t be surprised if Perosulo’s involved in some kind of genetic experiments.”

Tamia shivered. “He is. Rick, do me two favors. Send someone to IA to get a dossier on a Karl Haslunas; supposedly, he’s Second Commander to Banhauste, now. And get in touch with Kyato Hoshimiro at EP headquarters in Rio de Janeiro and tell him I need to speak with him.”

“Tamia, we can’t contact the Patrol!” Rick sounded stunned. “You’re a US

operative in an area of the world you shouldn't be!"

"I know. Trust me on this one, Rick. Tell Hoshimiro that Kuan Tamiasa needs his help, and give him my number here. Tell him what's going on."

"Why can't you...?"

"Because I promised Kuron I would never contact Hoshimiro directly."

She heard Rick's sigh. "Okay. I just hope you know what you're doing."

"I do."

"All right. Now, what have you found out?"

"A lot. Poco Nanches is more than a forward post. It's their center for research and development."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I was told so. Because Perosulo's there."

She heard him swear. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. They've got mechanized defense, biologicals, and thermals."

"What kind of mechanized? Tanks?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. All I know is that they have forty-six armored units. For all I know, they could be personnel carriers, or they could be Devil's Dice."

"Okay, that's going to have to be enough. Get back here ASAP—"

"Two days, tops."

"...And we'll add what you've dug up to the stuff we already got. Hopefully, it'll start making sense soon. Jen's pulling her hair out over this already."

Tamia smiled wryly. “None of it makes any sense to me, either, Rick. Maybe Banhauste’s just gone sour in his old age.”

“Maybe. See you soon?”

“Yeah,” she murmured. “As soon as I can.”

She heard the line click, and fell back on the bed, setting the handset back in the receiver, groaning. She felt like she was going through Detox again. Her last thought before she succumbed to sleep was that she had twenty-four hours to start feeling better. There was no way she was letting James Dalton, or whoever the hell he really was, see her like this.

Damn. What was going on down there? Rick paced away from the phone, plowing his hands through his hair as worry ate at him. When Chelsea had called in her report two days ago, Rick had been mildly worried by the lack of information available on Poco Nanches. He’d sent Jen scrounging for a full profile of Juan Perosulo, and that file made his blood run cold. The man was a cloning freak, and Tamia was down there in the thick of things.

He’d been waiting impatiently for her to report in, anxious to hear that she was okay. Finally, he hadn’t been able to stand the silence any longer. He’d called her; and found out that all his nightmares were true.

She sounded like hell, and her comment about injury and morphine scared him half to death. His mind still painted terrifying scenarios of how she’d been injured. And the morphine...God, he didn’t even want to think about that. Tamia was a recovering

drug addict; it wouldn't take much of any drug she'd ever taken to bring the physical cravings back. He knew her medical records contained an extensive list of prohibited drugs. Morphine, an opiate similar to heroine, was on that list. God...

Rick reached for the cigarettes in his shirt pocket, and stopped short. Tamia was right. How was his smoking any different from her drug addictions? He turned to cigarettes to calm his nerves when the stress got to be too much. She'd turned to drugs for a similar escape.

He felt sick as he pulled out the pack and stared at it. No wonder Tamia hated to watch him smoke; she probably remembered every grueling moment of Detox, every time he lit up. She needed someone to believe in her, but no one ever had. He'd as much as told her *he* didn't, already.

Rick clenched his teeth in self-disgust. He wanted her to believe in him, and to turn to him when she needed help or a shoulder to lean on. Was he such a self-centered hypocrite that he couldn't do the same with her?

Crumpling the package in his fist, he strode to the kitchenette and dumped the cigarettes into the trash recycler, and made a silent deal with Tamia, and God. If she came back in one piece, and if she'd give him the chance, he was going to change. He was going to believe in her, and in them, first and foremost. He was going to do exactly what he'd promised her, before he'd sent her off on this damned mission.

Rick's thoughts flashed to the display he'd passed on his way home from a meeting at the War Department after dropping Tamia at the airstrip. Something had made him stop, his attention captivated by a plain gold band, inset with an intricate

pattern of tiny gemstone flecks. Even then, he'd pictured slipping that ring onto Tamia's finger; every time he thought about it, his chest tightened with emotions he couldn't fight any longer. First thing in the morning, he was going to follow his heart, if he could find the courage.

For now, though, he had to concentrate on getting her out of Peru in one piece. She seemed convinced this friend of hers at Rio de Janeiro could help her. Rick reached for the phone, praying he wasn't about to seal the coffin on the woman he loved.

CHAPTER SIX

Slowly, the sound of a telephone ringing seeped through her sleep. Groaning, she opened her eyes, and watched the ceiling swim before her eyes. She closed them quickly, to avoid being sick, and blindly groped for the phone. This better be good. “Lo?”

“Tamiasa.” The voice was unfamiliar for a minute. Then, she remembered.

“Hoshimiro. Thanks for calling.”

“My honor to *Sifu* binds me. Why did you not call me yourself?”

She sighed. “My promise to Kuron. He told me never to contact you directly – to let you decide if you wanted to speak to me.”

“I see.” He sounded mildly disappointed. “So, what do you need?”

Tamia bit her lip. How was she going to explain this one? “I need your help, my friend. You were contacted...”

“By an American who claimed the impossible.” Hoshimiro’s voice was stern.

“Banhauste’s Regiment are neither mad scientists nor psychopathic killers, Tamiasa.”

“Are you saying I’m lying?”

“I would never compromise your honor in such a way. I say the American lies.”

“But I told him what to tell you. I have everything necessary to prove my claim, too.”

She heard his intake of breath. “You will have to come here at once.”

She groaned. “I can’t, Hoshimiro. The Banhauste captured me at Poco Nanches and pumped me full of morphine. Besides, I just need a small favor from you. I had to lie to them to get out of that place – I told them I was with the Patrol. They’ll probably be contacting Rio soon to verify that. I need you to get me on the rosters, or answer their questions when they call in.”

“I will not lie.”

“Hoshimiro, forget honor for a minute. Do you want me to die?”

He made a skeptical sound. “You are not in their compound. How can they know where you are?”

She drew a deep breath and sighed heavily. “I found beacon chips on my clothes, and the possibility exists that I was followed, and that I’m being watched.”

She heard his gasp. “Then you should come here. As an international traveler, you are a subject of Patrol protection, and the building is shielded.”

“Hoshimiro, do you know where I’ve been living and working for the past sixteen years? Do you have any idea what I do for a living?”

She heard him make a sound of puzzlement. “You have been at study in Switzerland, and then working embassy duties in Sydney. Why does that matter?”

She laughed. Good old Kuron! He still spun a long yarn when necessity bade. “*That’s* what Kuron told you? Hoshi, I’ve been a United States Marine for ten years, and I work as an undercover agent now. Why else would I be checking up on the Banhauste? We got a tip that they were playing around with genetics. Trust me, if this information gets to the right level, there’s going to be all-out war. Please, Hoshi, in the name of

peace...”

She heard his heavy sigh. “Very well, Tamiasa. I will tell you now – I am sending a Patrol rover around for you. You will be under my protection, and I will not tell anyone who you are, unless you fail to convince me of the severity of this. Then, I will turn you over to the incarceration facilities, on the charge of illegal espionage.”

“Nothing like friendship, is there, Hoshi?”

A pause. “I will do what I can, Tamiasa. I cannot hold back the law if there is no need. I will do as my duty demands.”

“You do as you must, Hoshimiro,” she said quietly, “and I’ll do what I have to.”

She heard the line go dead, and knew the conversation was over. Hoshimiro would help her as much as he could, but he wouldn’t stick his neck out the whole way just for someone to take it off his shoulders. He still maintained a safe distance from her, like he always had. His family sent him, as a child, to learn from Kuron. The young Japanese boy had grown up alongside Tamia, and learned the same lessons Tamia had. He’d had a crush on her when they were little, and she’d always had a fondness for him. He reminded her of her brother, sort of. Obviously, that still wasn’t enough for him.

Ten minutes later, Tamia nearly jumped as someone pounded loudly on her door. Slipping her Glock-44 from its holster, she disengaged the safety and aimed it at the door as she called out, “Who is it?”

“Kuan Tamiasa, this is Field Marshall Zander McCalmut, of the Equatorial Patrol,” came a deep, brogue-laden voice from the other side of the door. “I’ve been sent

by Mr. Kyato to escort you to Rio de Janeiro.”

Tamia released a relieved breath, resetting the safety and slipping the weapon into the waistband of her jeans, beneath the bulky t-shirt as she crossed to the door. There was no way she was going anywhere, with anyone, unarmed.

Two hours later, Tamia was being ushered into the South American Headquarters of the Equatorial Patrol. As she stepped into the building, she glanced around, impressed. Nice place. You could tell the EP was funded by the richest nations in the world, places like Switzerland and Japan...

“Tamiasa!” She glanced over at the man who had addressed her. He hadn’t changed much in the sixteen years since she last saw him. He’d grown up just the way she figured he would. His dark hair was neatly trimmed, his glasses sparkling in the lights, and his pleasant features arranged just precisely, with all the decorum and respect Kuron had tried – and failed – to instill in her. Of course Hoshimiro would have learned that lesson.

Spoiled little rich kid, she thought fondly, even as a grin curled on her lips.

“Hoshimiro, you look well.”

He gave her an once-over. “I cannot say the same for you. You look...”

“Like hell. Yeah, I know.” She offered him a wan smile. “Not everyone gets cushy jobs in this world.”

A grin broke across his face as he pushed dark hair from his bespectacled eyes.

“You have not changed, Tamiasa. Well, come, we will talk in my office.”

She nodded. “Thanks for doing this, Hoshi.”

He shrugged. “It would break *Sifu*’s heart to learn of your imprisonment.”

She laughed again as she fell into step beside him. “Like hell, it would. If that was true, he’d have had several coronaries by now.”

Hoshimiro cast a surprised look at her. She smiled back. “Like I said, not everyone gets cushy jobs.”

Twenty minutes later, in Hoshimiro’s private office, the man leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers, staring hard at Tamia. “You realize they’ll execute me for dereliction of duty if they ever find out about this.”

She nodded. “That’s why I didn’t want to come here. Not only for your safety, but for the safety of my team.”

Hoshimiro sighed, shaking his head. “I still cannot believe *Sifu* lied to me.”

“Would it have been better for him to tell you the truth?” Tamia asked with a half-smile, one eyebrow lifted in query.

He thought a moment. “No, I suppose not.” His eyes bored into hers. “Why did you contact me?”

“Because I needed a friend, and cover.”

He leaned forward, reaching across the desk to where her hand lay. “I can get you out of danger forever. I can get you out of the war zone.”

Her head shook, and she pulled her hand away. “Danger’s my life, Hoshi. I was born and raised in a war zone. I know what you want, and I can’t do it.”

He slumped back in his chair. “So. I thought I might have a chance, with the number of years we were apart. I do not, do I?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He sighed again. “All right. What is your story? Why are you this far across the border?”

Tamia pulled the vid-disc from her jacket pocket and flipped it to him. “It’s all on there. A personal confession of one of Banhauste’s Commanders.”

Hoshimiro’s eyes widened. “How did you get it?”

She looked squarely at him. “By being Patrol, for about ten minutes.”

“So. Shall we see what’s on here?”

She nodded. “I want it back, though.”

He got up and crossed the room to his monitor. He slipped the disc into the machine, and ran his fingers over the terminal, typing in a sequence. A moment later, the screen came alive. Hoshimiro studied it in confusion. “What is this?”

Tamia moved quickly to where he was, her brow furrowed. As she looked at the monitor, she gasped. “Oh, my God. That’s the cloning process... that disc must have been used for the experiments!”

Hoshimiro’s face set grimly. “You did not tell me they were performing cloning operations. That is illegal.” He turned to look at her. “I will take a copy of this to my superiors. Meanwhile, I want you to get on the next available commuter out of here. You may take your disc with you. I do not want you in the country when they start questioning. I will come up with an explanation, and I will contact you again soon.”

She drew a breath, and then nodded. “Okay. Let me know what the Patrol plans to do.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rick was worried. Tamia could tell that even before the commuter pulled to a complete stop. She saw him along the strip, his eyes searching the commuter windows. She watched him relax as his eyes found her, and steeled herself. He was likely to have a million questions, most of which she already didn't want to answer. Well, he'd have to save them all for later. Here, on the military airstrip, they were unit commander and subordinate, nothing more. Squaring her shoulders, she grabbed up her duffel and moved down the aisle. As she stepped off the commuter, she heard the hiss of the pressurized door close behind her, even as she stepped up before Rick and snapped to, in proper military fashion. She breathed an inward sigh of relief that her dark shades masked her twinkling eyes, as the humor of the situation hit her. He returned her salute, and they fell into step as they headed toward the parking lot, where Rick's jeep was parked.

As he went around to the driver's door, Rick glanced at her. "Everything go okay?"

"Yeah. I'm back in one piece, aren't I?" She offered him a small smile as she settled into the passenger seat and closed the door. As Rick slid in behind the wheel, Tamia gave him an once-over, and grinned at the Navy tan uniform. "Been a while since I've seen you in anything but civvies or BDUs."

He grinned back, but said nothing for a moment. As he started the jeep, he said,

“We have an image to uphold, in our line of work. If we wander around a military base in civvies, it’s improper enough to make people suspicious.”

She let her breath out through her teeth. “Hell, Rick, I don’t think I even know what proper is, anymore. I’m fucking crazy.”

He gave her an odd look as he pulled out of the parking lot. “Why do you say that?”

A wry grin crossed her face. “I went from being a spy to a science project, to Patrol and a student in less than twenty-four hours. It’s crazy, because I’m not sure which was worse. All I know is, I’m glad I’m out of there.”

“That bad?”

She leaned her head back, tiredly. “Yeah, leeches and all. The worst part was having to deal with Hoshi, I think. I didn’t want to have to do that to him, though I guess it was time he learned the truth.”

He shot her a sympathetic look. “Well, it’s over for now, hon, and the info you have will help us connect all this shit together.”

She nodded. “It’s in my duffel; there’s a vid-record of everything. When are we moving out?”

“I don’t know, yet. For now, get some rest. I don’t need to tell you the condition we need everyone in when we go.”

Tamia nodded silently, turning her gaze out the window. After a moment, she quietly asked, “So, what do we know about the super-soldier drugs, so far? Anything?”

His expression was grim when she turned to look at him. “Walter’s working on

it. Though I have to say, what he's found out so far is making me nervous." He glanced at her. "Hell, Tamia, I've never seen a Reaver Tea with that kind of composition. It's like brainwashing on overdrive!"

"I know," she agreed, her voice barely more than a murmur as she flinched away from the memories that tried to crowd out clear thought. "Thank God for Kuron."

He cast her a curious glance. "What do you mean?"

She shuddered, but answered, "If not for him, the Chinese government would have shipped me off to Beijing and started feeding me that shit; I was young enough that it would have worked, too. That's how they deal with adult subversives they can't execute. They turn them into zombie-soldiers."

His expression turned grim. "So whoever's behind this might not be as interested in cloning as they are in drugging the general populace."

"No," Tamia countered, shaking her head. "He'll want clones. Remember, Reaver Teas work best on genetic copies. On a normal person, they're simply brain-frying drugs. On a clone, they alter the mind completely, making the clone immune to pain and fear while leaving them open to easy command."

"Not to mention making them fucking nuts," Rick muttered. "That's how the Reaver War got started, after all."

Tamia nodded bleakly, and stared out her window again as she said, "And that's why we have to stop this, Rick. Because I'm convinced someone's trying to start another war; and this time, *we're* the targets."

The rest of their trip was completed in silence. Tamia caught Rick's occasional worried glance, and knew what was on his mind.

"I'm fine, okay?" She said as they pulled into the parking garage attached to the mall.

He looked unconvinced. "How's your head?"

"Fine," she assured him, rolling her eyes. "Hoshimiro had the EP docs check my head before he let me leave. They said there's no permanent damage done; they cleared me to get on a commuter, after all."

"And the morphine?"

That was what had him the most worried, she realized as she met his cobalt gaze. She sighed. "Working its way out of my system as we speak."

"No cravings?" He sounded tense, and his hands were clenched on the steering wheel. Obviously, he'd been indulging in more of those worst-case scenario games he played every time she went somewhere remotely dangerous.

Tamia uttered a sharp laugh, recalling all the nausea she'd felt; check that, *still* felt. Rick needn't have worried. "No fear of that. Ever since Detox, opiates have been one of the drugs my body plain won't tolerate."

The tension drained from him as he parked the jeep and turned to her, his hand reaching out to caress her cheek as he murmured, "You don't know how glad I am to hear that."

Then, before she could respond, his mouth came down on hers, and for the first time in seventy-two hours, Tamia's vertigo had absolutely nothing to do with head

injuries or morphine.

Tamia stretched luxuriantly, a contented smile tugging at her lips as she felt the brush of Rick's skin against her own. She hadn't realized quite how much she missed him until he set about proving it to her three hours ago. He barely let her get in the door to her quarters before he kissed her again, until she was breathless with wanting.

Tamia bit back a wry grin; and Rick worried about morphine. Didn't he know that *he* was her only addiction, now? Compared to him, no drug in the world stood a chance of giving her cravings. She felt the light touch of his hand skimming her naked body, and turned her head to meet his worried cobalt eyes.

"Are you really okay, babe?"

"Oh, yeah," she murmured, letting her fingers trail up over his chest and over his shoulders. "I've never felt better."

He smiled, but the motion seemed forced, and she saw tension in the lines around his eyes. Fear flashed through her. "Rick? Are you okay?"

He drew a deep breath, and glanced toward where they'd discarded their clothes so hurriedly, earlier. "I..."

Tamia's heart stalled as he stopped, and she watched him swallow hard. Why was he suddenly so nervous? A terrifying thought occurred to her. Oh, God. He wasn't going to end their relationship now, was he? She remembered his off-hand comment at the airstrip, and felt her insides contract with the need to be ill again, this time from dread.

“Rick?” She breathed his name as the fear bombarded her. “What is it?”

He drew another breath, and then sighed heavily, a rueful smile curving on his lips.

“Nothing, sweetheart,” he said as he bent to kiss her neck lightly. He was clearly trying to distract her. She was damned if she’d let him get away with it.

“Rick,” she stopped him, forcing him to meet her gaze. “What are you thinking?”

He sighed again, his cobalt eyes sad. “I keep thinking about...” He swallowed hard, and then swore. “Hell, Tamia, I want us to have a kid; I want to get you pregnant so bad.”

Her throat closed at the flare of hungry blue flame in his eyes, even as her heart eased. “Rick, we can’t... the Code—”

“Damn it, I *know*!” He swore, turning his face away. “I’ve been over it a hundred times already with Colonel Barkley, at JAG. Justice Salvatoi’s given me a good indication that Civil Justice might find a loophole for the civilians, if I approach the matter right, but Barkley won’t budge on the rest of us, so far. He says that the reg came down from the War Department, and that I signed an agreement to abide by it. The Code in exchange for military Intel. Damn it, I didn’t know!”

Tamia swallowed hard as she watched the pain and rage mingle in his face. She’d never guessed, until now, how much the whole thing was really eating at Rick.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly, turning his face back to hers with gentle fingers. “I wish we could, too.”

She smiled tightly, through tears that were a mingling of hope and pain, as Rick

made sweet, desperate love to her. And, as the last ripples of release eddied through her, she pulled his head down and, against his ear, murmured, “I want to have your babies. Someday.”

The longing in his eyes, and the trembling of his hands as he held her, told Tamia just how many dreams they shared. Closing her eyes, she felt hope surge within her heart that someday would come before the violent world ripped them apart.

The Commandos assembled in the command center early the next morning, their expressions beyond grim as they viewed the vid-disc Tamia brought back from Peru. The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife as they watched the interview, and the following clips. Sickened and unwilling to watch, Tamia averted her eyes from the images on the main monitor, choosing to study the faces of her comrades, instead. They were all, to various levels, both repulsed and fascinated by the cloning process being shown. Rick, in particular, seemed intent on the procedure, his expression grim in a way that Tamia found almost frightening. Then, as the words being spoken reached her ears, Tamia yanked her eyes back to the screen. This was a part of the disc she hadn’t seen!

“...Added to the Reaver Tea, this substance increases concentration and focus, and allows the controller to manipulate and enforce orders via electrical impulses shot through the neurotransmission chips implanted in each unit,” Perosulo was saying, his nasal voice full of glee.

“My God,” Jen muttered, her green eyes full of horror. “They’re making remote-

controlled assassins!”

“Suicide troops,” Kelly agreed with a nod, before turning to look at Rick. “Well, boss? What now?”

Rick reached to shut down the disc player, and sighed heavily. “What do we have on that *Jaosantai*, so far, Walt?”

The ex-Marine shook his blond head. “Not much. Seems China was pretty interested in keeping that one to themselves, prior to the Divide. I’m not having much luck finding the formulas or side-effects tables, but I did find several post-Divide sites where they list contact numbers for bidding on both the drug and the formula. I also found a vast number of EP resources on super-soldier drugs. I’m still trying to piece it all together.”

Rick nodded. “Well, keep at it.” Turning to look at each person around the table, he continued, “I think we’ve just had the stakes raised on us. We’re not making any more moves until I can get this,” he held up the vid-disc, “to Civil and Military Justice. I’ll run a copy by IA while I’m at it, and see who bites first. Meanwhile, all of you stay on your assigned tasks. Maybe we’ll get a break, now that we have an idea what we’re up against. Tamia,” he looked at her, his expression grim, “I want you to help Walter do the headwork. You know the most about *Jaosantai*; maybe the two of you together can come up with an idea of what our friends down south are planning.”

She nodded tightly, feeling her heart pound. She knew the stakes, now, and she wasn’t happy about it. The stakes were nothing less than the lives of the people she cared for, and the man she loved. She sure as hell wasn’t going to fail him now.

As soon as the meeting broke up, Tamia followed Walter into Comms.

“What’ve we got, so far?”

He flashed her a grin. “That antsy to stay in the game, Blade?”

She laughed. “Yeah. Which explains why I got stuck crawling around in the mud and leeches while you sat all snug and dry, here at your computer.”

He chuckled.

“I’m no idiot,” he agreed with a wink. Then, growing serious, he said, “Actually, like I said at the meeting, there’s very little out there on *Jaosantai*. But the EP material on super-soldier drugs makes pretty interesting reading.”

“Which explains why you don’t sleep, right?” Tamia said, suppressing a shudder. “Didn’t you MI boys and girls see enough of this shit first-hand?”

“Nope. We saw very little drug technology in Intelligence, actually, and especially not Reaver Teas. Hell, Tamia, you probably saw more of these things on the streets than I saw in my entire military career.”

Tamia opened her mouth to tell him that Reaver Teas were something even gangs stayed away from if they liked survival, but a wave of dizziness hit her out of nowhere, nearly knocking her flat. Her knees went watery as the room spun away and returned, and she felt the rising need to vomit. Tamia closed her eyes and groped blindly for a chair.

“Hey!” Walter’s exclamation had her opening her eyes in time to see him pull over a chair and guide her into it. “Don’t pass out on me, girl! I was just kidding.”

“I know,” she muttered weakly, rubbing her face wearily. “I’m just still a little

shaky. Maybe I've got jetlag."

He looked doubtful, but didn't press the issue. As the wave passed, Tamia drew a deep breath and offered Walter a reassuring smile. "So, what've we got to work with, Chips?"

Two hours later, Walter looked up at her as she closed her eyes and stifled a moan for the hundredth time. His expression was concerned. "You okay, Blade? You still look a little green around the gills."

"Just getting over the whole morphine ordeal, still," she muttered, and then groaned and buried her face in her hands as her stomach heaved again. "God. Detox wasn't even this bad!"

"Hey," Walter said quietly, laying a hand on her shoulder. "You're beat, and you really don't look good, Tamia. Maybe you should check in with Jen at the infirmary."

Tamia drew a deep breath, telling her rebellious body to settle down and deal, and then raised her head, looking at Walter grimly. "No. We need to finish this. I'll be okay."

And, as they returned to poring over the information he'd assembled, Tamia prayed she wouldn't be proven a liar.

As she left Comms later, Tamia kept one hand against the wall to orient herself and keep the vertigo under control. This was ridiculous! Even at her worst, back in 'Frisco, she'd never felt as if her world had come unglued at the seams. Detox had been

bitter hell, but she'd never suffered vertigo for more than a few minutes at a time. Just how much morphine had Perosulo given her? She stopped dead as she realized she'd never even asked that. God, what if he'd poisoned her?

Damn. She needed to see Jen, after all. If there was even half as much morphine in her system as she was beginning to suspect, she was going to have to go through Detox all over again. The mere idea made her want to be puke, or kill someone – preferably Dr. Juan Perosulo. That frigging bastard...

Unsteadily, Tamia made her way to the infirmary, where Jen always began and ended each day, in case she was needed in a medical capacity. At the door, Tamia drew a deep breath; she wasn't looking forward to this. She hated exams.

Tamia pressed her hand to the door pad and, as the door slid open, promptly wished she hadn't been so hasty. Jen wasn't alone. She and Matt were crushed together in a passionate embrace that, had Tamia been a little less world-wise, would have shocked the hell out of her.

Instead, she felt a wry grin tug at her lips. She'd known these two had something going on; it was hard to miss the signs. As much as she hated to break this up, though, she really needed Jen's help. So, clearing her throat, she turned her eyes away as they hastily broke apart. Jen, at least, looked flustered as she quickly rearranged her clothes.

"Oh! Tamia, come on in," she managed, and Tamia's grin widened at the disgruntled look on Matt's face.

"Sorry to interrupt, but..." Tamia gasped as the world suddenly faded out of focus again.

“Matt, catch her!” She heard Jen’s frantic command from a distance, and felt strong arms suddenly buoy her up.

Next thing Tamia knew, she was lying on the exam table, Jen leaning over her with a worried expression on her face.

“What’s going on, Tamia?” Jen asked quietly, even as she shined a tiny light into Tamia’s eyes. Tamia groaned and closed her eyes against the stabbing starbursts of pain that accompanied that light.

“I don’t know,” she admitted hoarsely. Why did her voice sound so rusty? “They gave me morphine at Poco Nanches; I think they ODeD me.”

Jen was frowning when Tamia opened her eyes again. “Have you ever ODeD on an opiate before?”

“No.” Tamia tried to sit up. Nausea and vertigo rushed over her, and she groaned, lying back again. No use trying that, when she was going to be flat out again if she did.

“Besides the fainting, what other symptoms have you experienced?” Jen asked, tapping away at the palm-sized computer in her hand.

“Nausea; I haven’t been able to keep much of anything down since I came back from Peru. I’m tired all the time, too, but I can’t sleep. I have vertigo bad, sometimes.”

Jen’s eyes widened as she looked up from her computer. “Tamia, have you been getting your shots regularly?”

“Yeah,” she answered, closing her eyes. She was so tired, and felt so sick. She couldn’t seem to get her mind around what Jen was implying. “Ever since Dr. Matnes

cleared me to start them again. Why?"

Jen glanced at the room's other occupant. "Matt, I'll see you later."

He met her gaze, glanced at Tamia, and then looked back to Jen with a nod.

Tamia frowned as she watched him leave. What did Jen want to discuss that couldn't be said in front of any of the rest of the team? She groaned. If her brain wasn't so fuzzy, she was sure she'd be able to figure it out.

Jen sighed, laying her computer on the supply table as she sat down on the rolling stool next to the exam table. "Tell me the truth, Tamia. You and Rick are sleeping together, aren't you?"

Tamia, in the process of slowly attempting to sit up, again, straightened abruptly. She paid the price for the sudden move as vertigo nearly doubled her over. Groaning, she muttered, "I don't see how—"

"Just answer the question."

She rubbed her face again. "Yeah. Why?"

"I was afraid of that," Jen said soberly. "I'm going to give you something. You take it in the privacy of your own quarters." She met Tamia's eyes grimly. "I don't want to know the results, or what you decide."

Tamia's brow furrowed, but before she could question her friend, Jen had disappeared into the dispensary. She returned a moment later, holding out a miniscule, secure-sealed packet that, once she looked at the wrapper, made Tamia's heart stop for one dreadful, hopeful moment. Then, her gaze shot to Jen's.

"You think—" She couldn't finish the question, too afraid to hope, and too scared

to know.

Jen nodded and sighed. “Given your symptoms, I’d say it’s highly possible. You don’t have the symptoms of drug overdose, at any rate. If that’s negative, I’d suggest you go see Dr. Matnes. It could be a graft rejection.”

A different kind of fear lunged through Tamia. “At this late date?”

“It *is* unlikely,” Jen admitted, shrugging. “However, it is possible.”

And, as Tamia eased herself slowly from the exam table, she sighed heavily, unsure which would be a worse problem – the one she held, or the possibility of her body rotting from the inside.

Ten minutes later, Tamia stood in her bathroom, looking at all the proof she’d ever need that she wasn’t going to be okay for a long time to come. Perosulo’s words rushed over her again, and she realized what he’d said that she hadn’t, at the time, caught. *Pre-existing amniotic fluids*. Damn. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Tamia cursed again as she looked at the reader. Bright blue. Those damn shots hadn’t worked. She sighed as she stuffed the reader back into its plastic and discarded it. Well, she was definitely pregnant. How far along, she wasn’t sure, but it had to have been a while, for Perosulo to say what he had. She laid a hand against her belly. Hard. Just a little more curved, maybe. Would anyone notice? Would Rick?

Damn. She’d forgotten about that. What about Rick? How was she going to tell him? Maybe she shouldn’t. She didn’t want to hurt him. His battle with the Judge Advocate General’s office over the unit’s adherence to the Fertility Code had been a dead-ended one so far. The brass wouldn’t budge. Rick worried enough as it was about

that whole mess. She didn't want to have to tell him she was pregnant again, when the brass would only insist that she get an abortion. She'd have to get one before anyone found out. That stabbed her like a knife. She didn't want to do that. She already lost one baby because of her job. She didn't want to lose another. But this was war, no matter how covert, and she'd signed and sworn to the Code.

She sighed again. She knew exactly how Rick would react if she told him; he'd tear himself apart over it. They both wanted children so much, and to know that they'd have to partake in the killing of this child they created together was a pain Tamia didn't want to think about herself, let alone pass on to Rick. Better if he never knew, she decided, even as the deceit stabbed her heart.

She glanced at the glowing numbers on the bedside clock as she entered her bedroom. 1930 hours. She had to get out of here, get some air, and forget about all of this for a while. Maybe she'd head over to Walsh's Pub, see what was going on in the world at large. With a sigh, she sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled on her boots. She reached for her coat, on the chair, as she rose. It was below freezing out there. Best stay warm. As her hand ran down the static-lock of her coat, it lingered gently against her belly. She had to keep the baby safe, at least until she could figure out what she was going to do.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rick sat at the bar, immersed in silent thoughts, far away from the pub around him, or the beer in his hand. Should he do it? Hell, it was hard to say. He'd look at her, and think it would work, but he was afraid to rock the boat. What if she didn't want to commit? What if she decided they had gotten too close?

He couldn't imagine that. They'd been lovers for six months now, and it wasn't like either one of them had anything else going for them. Maybe he should just ask... Rick's hand went to his shirt pocket again, felt the hard lump nestled there. What the hell was he supposed to do? He wanted to just ask her. He almost managed it last night, but hadn't been able to say the words. His courage had failed him.

He grinned wryly at himself in the bar's polished surface. He, the bulletproof machine of the Divide, "the man without fear", he'd been billed by magazines and newspapers. *He* didn't have the courage to ask a simple question. His eyes fell to his beer. Hell, he'd never done anything like this before. He'd never done anything so far outside the box before...

"Penny for your thoughts?" A warm female voice asked from beside him, and Rick looked up, startled, at the woman standing beside him. He couldn't believe his eyes.

"Jean!"

“Long time, no see, sailor,” she said, grinning, as she tossed wavy red hair from her eyes and slid onto the stool next to him. “Buy a girl a drink?”

He laughed, reaching to give her a quick hug. “Sure! Hell, I thought I’d never see you again. Thought you went back to Boston for good after...”

“Guinness draft,” she told the bartender, and then sighed, resting her elbows on the bar, her hands clasped together. “Yeah, I thought I had, too. Guess I was wrong.”

He gave her a worried look as the bartender slid a filled mug onto the bar before her. “So, why are you back in New York?”

“Journalistic politics, Rick,” she said with a wan smile, taking a drink. “Your favorite reporter’s got a date with the Big Man.”

Rick winced, recalling what Matt Clipper said about Horner’s possible involvement in the *Jaosantai* mess. But that was classified information, and Jean was a reporter. He couldn’t tell her about it. “Horner? Tough break, kid; you be careful. If anything happens, you still know where...?”

“Yeah, I still have your number,” she said, patting her purse. She looked nervous as hell.

“Worried?”

She gave him a look. “That noticeable? Hell, Rick, I’m scared to death. Horner’s not an easy interview. If I make one wrong move, I could end up dead.”

He nodded, and reached out to squeeze her hand. “You’ll be fine, Jean. You’re the best damn reporter in the world.”

She squeezed his hand gratefully in return, and then withdrew from his grasp.

“Yeah. Guess I am. God, Rick, I’m glad I found you here. It’s a good thing you’re a creature of habit.” She looked up at him with a smile, and gave him an once-over, her green eyes dancing. “You’re looking good. And acting a whole helluva lot more normal than last time I saw you. What’s changed?”

Rick grinned lopsidedly. “Wouldn’t you like to know! Didn’t you hear – I don’t give interviews anymore.”

“Yeah.” She nudged him with one elbow. “But this isn’t an interview. No pad, no pencil...”

“Recorder?”

She grinned, wide and wicked, with all her patently Irish charm. “You’re welcome to frisk me, Commander. I’m clean.”

He laughed then. “I’m sure you are, Jean.”

“So,” she pressed as she lifted her mug and took a sip, “to a friend, what’s up? Never seen you this relaxed before, even drunk.”

“Hell, Jean,” he let his breath out in a rush, looking at his drink, “I’m not even half as relaxed as I look. I’ve got a problem.”

“Ah,” she smiled, folding her arms on the bar, “I see. Lay it on Dr. Jean, amateur psychologist. I’m really interested in people with your sort of problems.”

He sighed. “You’ve been a good friend, Jean, but I doubt you could help me with this problem.”

“No sex life?” She asked with a small laugh. “Hell, Rick, I fixed that before.”

He shook his head, and winced at her reminder. “Jean, what happened in

Montreal should never have happened at all. There's no way in hell I want to put that kind of strain on our friendship again."

"Rick, you were hurting," she said quietly, laying a pale hand on his arm. "You needed someone, and I was the closest available person. I understand that now. I did some real soul-searching after I got back to Boston. Found out what I really wanted, who I really was. I got married, Rick. I have a husband and a six-year-old daughter waiting for me back in Boston."

She pulled a picture from her pocket and laid it on the bar before him.

He glanced at the snapshot of a grinning, redheaded little girl dressed in jeans and a bright yellow sweater, a German Shepard puppy clutched awkwardly in her arms. She looked sweet and adorable, and he couldn't help but smile. "She's beautiful, Jean."

"Yeah." She smiled softly. "Looks like her dad, doesn't she?"

Something about the way she said that... Rick looked closer. *Six years*. Hell, it couldn't be. "Jean..."

"Like I said, I hoped I'd see you here. Wanted to give you that."

His heart flipped over. Dear God, he'd never known. They hadn't spoken in nearly seven years – ever since Montreal. Now, he sat looking at a picture of a girl who, when he looked closely, he couldn't deny was definitely his daughter. Same grin, same blue eyes...God, what would Tamia think?

Jean touched his arm again. "I just wanted you to know. I never hated you for what happened. Hell, I thought I loved you. It was something we both needed; brought us both back to reality. I don't chase stardust and dreams anymore. I've got more than I

ever asked for – more than was ever my right. I just want to help. As the friend I once was, and hope to God I still am.”

Rick drew a deep breath, shaking his head to clear it. “Hell, maybe you can help me. At least give me some advice.”

She nodded, but said nothing, listening.

“There’s someone in my life now, Jean. We’ve been lovers for about six months. I want to ask her to marry me, but I’m not sure I should. I don’t know what to do.”

She looked at her hands for a moment, thinking, then asked, “Do you love her, Rick?”

“More than anything,” he murmured, more to himself than to Jean, as he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the small leather box. Opening it, he showed Jean the glittering, gem-studded band inside. “I wanted to give her something she wouldn’t have to take off for missions, or for her training. She’s a martial artist. I got this to give her, but now, I’m not sure I...” He looked up then, and stopped.

Tamia stood in the doorway, looking directly at him and Jean. Her face was a mask of disbelief and heartbreak. Then, in one move, she turned in her tracks and disappeared through the door again. Rick winced. He knew what it must’ve looked like to her. God alone knew exactly what she was thinking, but Rick had a good idea.

Jean had seen it all. Gently, she laid her hand on his arm again. “Follow her, Rick,” she said quietly. “If you love her, go after her. Do what your heart says is right.”

With a quick, grateful look for Jean, Rick stuffed the ring back into his pocket. He looked at the picture lying on the bar again and picked it up. “What’s her name?”

“Tiffany.”

He nodded and stuffed the snapshot into his jacket pocket as he rose and shrugged it on, already heading for the door. He knew where Tamia would go, the only place she ever went when things went bad.

As he got off the elevator in the Underground ten minutes later, Rick heard the noise from the gym – even before he saw the light. Tamia was there, alone, working over the old punching bag like it was her worst enemy, a murderous expression on her face.

“Would you care to have a go at the real thing?” He called over the noise of the rattling chain.

She stopped for an instant, looked at him, and then went back to the bag. “Go to hell.”

“Tamia, I know what you saw back there, but...”

“Save it for someone who cares!” She snarled as she pushed past him and disappeared out the door. Rick winced, knowing there wasn’t going to be an easy solution to this problem. But he couldn’t give up on her; his heart would never let him.

“Tamia!” She heard Rick’s voice behind her, and his hurried footfalls. She would have smiled at his determination, if she wasn’t so pissed. “Tamia, please, just listen to me for a minute. Jean’s a friend, and we were just talking. Please, Tamia, you’ve got to believe me!”

“Dammit, Rick, I don’t know what to believe, anymore!” She bit out the words,

whirling to face him, as she came to stand before the door to her quarters. "One minute, you're telling me how much you love me, making me feel so damned special, then the next I find you sitting all cozy at the bar with some red-headed bitch, with a picture in one hand and a ring in the other. How stupid do you think I am? If that's the way you want things, fine! We're through. Go find yourself some slut, someone who just wants to be screwed!" She stormed into her quarters then, and slammed her hand down on the access pad, sealing the door against him. It gave her very little satisfaction.

Alone, Tamia sank down along the door, burying her face against her knees as her door-tone sounded. Dear God, what a first class fool she'd been! She'd promised herself that she wouldn't get involved with another man after David died. She wouldn't put herself through all the heartaches. That hadn't been a problem, either, at first. She hadn't been able to see men as anything but faithless, lying bastards, after David. Then she met Rick, and suddenly, she wanted a relationship like she'd never wanted anything in her life; she told herself it was safe to get involved with him, to have a relationship with no strings attached. Hell, now she had more strings than she'd ever had with David; and now she was crying again, because she'd gotten in over her head, again. But she loved Rick as she'd never loved David; she'd given him her heart. She had his baby growing inside her body. Hell, it should be easy to believe him, to trust him. It wasn't. She heard the door signal again, and ignored it. He'd go away soon, maybe even back to that redhead at the bar. David always had, whenever they'd fought.

"Tamia, I have to talk to you!" She heard Rick's voice in the hall outside. Damn. He wasn't going to go away. Sighing tiredly, she rose from the floor and re-keyed the

access pad.

“What is it, Rick?” She asked wearily as the door slid open. “It had best be important.”

“Can I come in?” He asked quietly.

“Why?” She demanded, suspicious.

“Because I’d prefer not to air our conversation to the entire compound.”

She sighed again. “Look, Rick, we really don’t have anything left to say to one another. I’ve been as supportive as I know how to be, and this is how you repay me. I’ll be damned if I’m going to be just another conquest.”

His eyes met hers, and her heart nearly melted at the hurt in those cobalt depths. “Tamia, you’ve never been ‘just another conquest,’ and you know it. I want to talk to you. I know what you saw back there, and how it must’ve looked. I’ve been a real jackass over the past few months, by placing you in this awkward position. I should have just come out and told everyone – I know that. You don’t think I kick myself for being such a by-the-book ass? Please, we have to talk.”

She wanted to believe him. Oh, God, she wanted to believe him so badly, to hear him say that it was all some mistake. But how could she? She’d seen it with her own eyes; even David hadn’t gone *that* far. She almost told him no. Almost. She had to know why, though. With an exasperated sigh, she stepped aside. “All right, Rick. Come in.”

As the door slid shut behind him, Rick reached to take Tamia’s hands. “I know what you must think of me right now, Tamia. I know what you saw, but it wasn’t what

you thought. Jean's a friend, babe. I hurt her once, a long time ago, and hurt our friendship. I haven't seen her for years, and I had no idea that she was going to be here. I wasn't proposing to her; hell, Tamia, she's already married and she's my friend. I couldn't have asked if I'd wanted to, and I don't want Jean; not that way."

She saw the look in his eyes, a pain that could only be described as guilt, and her heart plummeted. "You screwed her."

He winced, but answered. "That was a long time ago, Tamia. Something I shouldn't have done. Something we both knew we shouldn't have done." He squeezed her hands lightly. "Tamia, I've done a lot of stupid things, and you're the only person I've ever let in deep enough to know about them. What I want to say now is probably the most difficult, and important, thing I've ever said..." He stopped, drawing a deep breath as if fighting for the courage to continue. "I love you, Tamia. I would never hurt you, if I could, but I'm only human, I make mistakes. Tonight wasn't one of them; I could never cheat on you, because there's no one else I'd ever want. There's no reason for you to be upset, hon. Yeah, Jean and I were talking, but it would never have got past that, because you're the only woman I want."

She was listening, in spite of herself, drowning in the warmth of his eyes. She felt drawn to him, pulled by the force of everything in her heart. But there was still something she didn't understand. "What about the ring? Rick, I saw it with my own..."

"Shh." He gave her a small, tender smile as he pulled her into his arms. He bent his head to kiss her neck then, murmuring, "I can't get any more faithful to you than this, babe. You're the only woman I've slept with in six months, the only one I've even

thought about having sex with in over four years. I was a military machine before you came along – ask anyone here. I’m not asking you to forgive me, or even to love me if you don’t want to. All I’m asking is that you believe me.”

She pushed him a little away, looking up into his eyes. “Why? Why should you care if I believe you? What does it matter?”

His eyes closed then, and he buried his face in her hair. “I’m afraid of dying, Tamia, like I’ve never been before. These past few years, since the Divide, have been more than rough. I don’t want to be a hero or a legend; I don’t want to be the lie used to trap kids into this hell of a life. I want to be remembered as a *man*, Tamia, with all of humanity’s stupid little quirks. You’re the only one who’s ever really given me that chance. With you, I’m not Ace Carinson, the legend. With you, I’m just Rick, without being afraid of who’s watching, or that I’ll do or say something to destroy the image everyone else wants to see. I need you to believe in that man; I need you to believe in *me*.”

She touched his face, and then drew away, her throat tight with tears. She’d never seen him quite like this, before. But still... “You still haven’t answered my question, Rick. If she’s just a friend, why the ring?”

He opened his eyes, looked into her face, and she saw the sudden flare of a need she couldn’t quite comprehend in his blue eyes. “I was showing her something I picked up a while back. I thought she might be able to give me some advice, since she’s been there, already. I was trying to find the courage to do this right. Guess what I’m trying to say is...” He gave her an odd little smile, then pulled the small leather box from his

pocket and went to his knees, looking up at her. “Will you marry me?”

CHAPTER NINE

Tamia stood rooted to the spot, staring down at Rick in disbelief. That was for her? She didn't know why she was so surprised. She should have seen this coming; especially after his comments about them having a kid – *the baby*. Tamia suddenly felt sick inside. Rick had been acting strange ever since she'd been wounded at Porto Alegre, when she'd lost the first baby. She couldn't tell him she was pregnant, because he was right; she *did* know him best. She knew all of his hopes and dreams, all of his very human traits – both the endearing and the exasperating. She'd watched him laugh, cry, and rage. He was real to her, not the false veneer he was to most people. And she loved him for all those half-assed little quirks, as much as she did for all his very stellar qualities. Now, she looked down into his openly hopeful eyes, and her heart broke as she realized there was only one answer she could give him.

“No, Rick. I can't marry you,” she said quietly, brushing the back of her hand across his cheek. “That would make it too easy. Too easy to forget why I'm here. Too easy to forget everything I have to remind myself of every day.”

“Tamia,” he pleaded, catching her hands in his own, “don't do this. I've been through hell and back on countless battlefields since I was sixteen, and the only thing that went through my mind was ‘Why the hell am I still alive?’ There wasn't anyone who'd ever really miss me, who'd ever cry for me, or even remember me as a person once I was

gone. There was no one to go back to, nothing to keep living for in this fucked-up world. I went from battle to battle like a whore from fuck to fuck, never caring who was buying me next, only wishing I could get the hell out. I kept pushing, hoping for a way out, a chance to die again. I kept thinking ‘maybe this time...’ Christ, Tamia, you ought to know the kinds of things that go through a mind during war. I thought ‘em all, at one time or another, before I met you. After Rio Bantos, it was like I was seeing you everywhere. I saw you at all those ceremonies and command functions any sane human being tried to avoid, and found a little peace. I saw you in my mind, every time I went into the field, and that peace went with me; you made me pay attention to what was important. I kept coming back, because I believed there was *one* person who cared what I did, who would be there when I got back. You kept me alive even before I knew your name. Until a few years ago, I wasn’t even a man, babe. I was a fucking machine; a heartless sonuvabitch with more luck than brains of my own. I didn’t care if I lived through a mission or not, so I took a lot of stupid, degenerate chances. Only, they never worked – I always survived. Then, you were there, and I couldn’t take those chances again. I was afraid I’d never see you again, if I did.

“The truth is,” he murmured, looking up into her eyes, “In my mind, it was never Jean I turned to after Montreal. It was you. God, I need you, Tamia. You’re what gave me my life back. I need to know you’re going to be there, no matter what happens.”

Her eyes closed, and she turned her face away as tears slipped free from her burning eyes. God, she’d never even known... All those years, she’d watched him from a distance, never knowing that he was watching her. Knowing that made her lie all that

much worse. “It’s not that simple, Rick. I wish it was, but it’s not. I have to keep reminding myself who you are. You’re my commanding officer, for crying out loud! I’ve been breaking every fraternization reg in the books over the past few months. Hell, Rick, I could get court-martialed for this!”

“Frat...? *Court-martialed*?” His voice was tinged with lack of comprehension. “For what?”

She shook her head in frustration. Damn it, why couldn’t he understand? “For fucking my commanding officer!”

She twisted her hands loose from his then, and moved across the room. Rick hopped up and came over behind her. “Whoa! Hold on a minute, babe. You’re thinking like a Marine, again. We’re not really military here, remember? That’s how we get around all of the bullshit.”

She stilled, a frown crossing her face. “But the Code... I had to re-affirm the Fertility Code to get my transfer...”

She felt his hand on her shoulder. “And that’s all the red tape we’ve got to deal with. Who knows for how much longer, either. You know I’ve been going back and forth with JAG over this for months. Most of the unit’s civilian. Why should the military have jurisdiction over a group of private citizens? We’re not funded by the military, anyway. Only medically, and that’s only on mission. We’re more like CIA than military.” He turned her to face him. “Come on, Tamia. We can do this quietly, and the brass can’t say anything about it.”

She bit her lip, not looking at him. “I’m just not sure if it’s...”

“Tamia,” he teased softly, pulling her close, “what’s a man got to do to prove himself to you?”

She knew this mood of his well. He had made his point, laid all of his cards on the table, and he was waiting for her response. The ball was decidedly in her court, and she hadn’t the faintest idea how to play it.

She looked up then, and was swallowed in his blue eyes. Knowing it was a mistake, she closed her eyes, anticipating his kiss. In the next moment, she was drowning in the flood of emotion.

They moved together to her bed, and their clothes were quickly discarded for the warmth of each other’s bodies. After the first wave of urgency was satisfied, Tamia drew away and rose up on one elbow to look into Rick’s eyes. She saw the love and desire in those blue depths, and knew she saw the reflection of her own heart there. She felt the warmth of his hand on her breast, the pulses of heat that surged through her as his thumb moved lazily across her nipple. God, she loved the feel of his hands on her, the emotions and sensations he drew from the very core of her. Nothing had ever felt so right before. She pressed into his touch, and saw the flicker of his smile, before he moved his mouth to her erect nipple, suckling and nibbling gently. She gasped, feeling the trembling heat inside herself, and pressed closer. She felt herself being lowered, until her back touched the firmness of the bed, felt his hands on her body, stripping away her defenses as he had her clothes. She couldn’t believe how much she wanted this, how much she wanted him.

As he heard her gasp, Rick drew away a little, watching as she moved against the

sheets, her head tossing as she begged in whispers for the completion he denied her. God, she was beautiful. He wanted to watch her, touch her, and screw her, all at once. Then, as her whispers mounted to cries, he thrust into her, and felt her shudder of desire, heard her breathless cry. He lost himself in her then, feeling her moving beneath him, around him, until he could stand the mounting desire no longer, and, grasping her thrusting hips, pressed her flat against the bed.

She struggled against the restraint in desperation, and desire built swiftly into an inferno between them. Tears of need squeezed from her eyes, and she gasped his name as her eyes opened wide. She bit back a scream of ecstasy then, and he felt her orgasm wring him even as he gave over to his own release with a needy growl.

When he rolled over a moment later, taking her with him, she continued to move leisurely, and he felt the slowly fading shockwaves of her clasping flesh. Then, with a final, shuddering sigh, she snuggled against him. “That was—”

“Too fast,” he whispered, caressing her thighs and rear.

“But wonderful,” she murmured as she kissed his skin. Slowly, she slid beside him, curled into the shape of his body. With another small sigh, she closed her eyes and was soon asleep.

Rick lay watching her sleep, and felt his heart twist. Dear God, she turned him inside out so easily. He’d never felt so deeply protective before, or so openly indulgent. He would give her anything, and sell his very soul to know that she was safe. She was right – it wasn’t as easy as he wished it could be. His fingers moved to gently brush her cheek, and he saw her smile. His eyes were worried as he traced his fingers over her arm

next. Those dark lines under her skin – proof of how she'd hurt herself so many times. She didn't trust herself. How the hell was she supposed to trust him? Her struggle to get free of heroine should have killed her; it would have killed almost anyone else. He'd spoken to the doctors who saw her through Detox, and knew exactly how much of a miracle her survival was. Yet, she tried so hard to pass it off as a momentary inconvenience.

He also knew about David Farennes, and about what that bastard put her through, both privately and publicly. No wonder she didn't like to talk about her past, or to remember it herself. She was a beautiful, intelligent woman – but she hadn't always been that. She'd been a starved, confused girl once. She'd gone through three different sets of Detox when she was drafted – one for the drugs, one for the STDs she contracted in 'Frisco, and another for blood poisoning, from leaded water and food. That she was still alive when she got her commission had made her a military wonder. She'd been a clean slate from then on. Hell, even his smoking bothered her. But she still didn't trust herself – he wondered briefly how much she even *liked* herself.

He drew a deep breath. He'd been a real jackass throughout this. He never seemed to know what to say or do without hurting her. He knew she'd gone through hell with Farennes. Her mahogany eyes, with their haunted wariness, testified to that abuse far too often for his peace of mind. Most of the time, Rick wished he knew everything Farennes had done to her, so that he'd know which tripwires to avoid. The rest of the time, however, he was glad he didn't know. He couldn't bear to even think about it without wishing he'd had a chance to kill Farennes himself. It had taken Tamia a long

time to trust him enough to even let him in. There were times, like tonight, when he still wasn't sure she trusted him at all. Her past with Farennes played a part in her reaction to Jean, he was fairly sure.

He was afraid he'd lost her for good, that the simple misunderstanding of what had happened in the pub would tear them apart forever. He didn't want to think about that – he didn't think he could live with it. He sighed, staring up at the ceiling. He couldn't be sure the danger of losing her was past. Sure, they'd made love, but that didn't mean everything was all right. Hell, sparks flew whenever they were near each other – it wasn't like they had control of that. But there was more between them than sex and he didn't want to lose any of it, dammit! They had been each other's lifeline, and best friend, for the past few months. They could be who they really were, and could voice all their hopes and fears with each other. There were no inhibitions between them, no distances or walls to be maintained. At least, he'd thought that was true, before tonight. Tamia's earlier anger, and the way she rejected his proposal, made him wonder if there wasn't something she was keeping from him. Her rejection bothered Rick the most. Why had she? She'd told him about her dreams of having a normal life, and a family. He wanted so badly to make those dreams come true, and to be a part of them. But she'd turned him down, and he had no idea why.

His eyes flew to her as he heard her whimper of pain, and felt her shudder against him. She was unsettled, tears tracing her cheeks as she whimpered again and burrowed against him, as if to hide. Gently, he brushed his hand across her cheek.

"Tamia! Wake up, babe. You're all right," he murmured as he shook her gently. "Shh.

You're okay; you're here, with me. Wake up, Tamia."

Her eyes flickered open, and she shuddered again. Rick rubbed her back soothingly, kissing her bare shoulder gently. "Bad dream?"

She pressed close to him, seeking warmth and human contact. She was silent for a long moment, as if still caught up in the thrall of her nightmare. Then, she slowly shook her head. "It wasn't a dream."

His brow furrowed. "Of course it was. You were asleep."

Her eyes closed, and she shivered against him.

"It wasn't a dream," she maintained in a whisper. "I wish to God that it was!"

"Tell me about it?"

"It was a memory, Rick. It happened a long time ago, and it's best left buried."

"Not if you're having nightmares, it's not," he returned, and a thought struck him.

"It was about your family, wasn't it?"

She pulled away, staring at him. "How...?"

"Tell me," he said gently, pulling her back into the shelter of his arms.

She rested her head against him again. "I don't think..."

"You watched what happened..." He prompted, kissing the top of her head. He knew the basic story already, had read the cold facts in her file, but he'd never heard it from her. They'd never discussed how it affected her. Was there some of that fear of separation left? What that the reason she didn't want to marry him?

She shuddered, but nodded. "I was four, almost five at the time. I can still remember the man who came to our house. Lao Turing. Of course, my parents would

hide him. They were Tibetan, and revolutionaries. They didn't want to be Communist, to see everything they worked for fall apart. My father was a writer. He was imprisoned in 'sixty-eight, for his work. He was released after his work won him a Nobel Prize in 'seventy. My brother was born in 'seventy-two, and my twin sisters in 'eighty-two.

"My parents wouldn't let the government kill their children. Mikisha and Sarubi were sent to stay with Kuron as babies. They came back when they were five or six, I was told, and sent to school in Tibet, away from the Communist regime. My brother, Malun, was in college by the time I was born in 'ninety-two. He brought Turing with him when he came back from school. My parents took Lao in; Father'd heard him speak at rallies in Tibet, and knew he was hiding from the Army.

"When the Army marched into our town two weeks later, they found Lao Turing at our house. They arrested my parents, my brother, and my sisters, along with Turing. I was sent to a government-run orphanage, where they tried to tell me my family was evil. *I loved my family.* When I refused to believe them, the Communist Reavers made me watch the tortures and executions. I hated them with everything in me! I wanted the entire Army to die! The government was going to ship me to Beijing, to boarding school, but Kuron stepped in, and offered to raise me by their laws. They couldn't see through that old man." Her eyes squeezed closed. "I still see those executions in my sleep, sometimes, still see the blood, the mutilation, and everything they did to my mother and sisters, all the torture. I couldn't cry then, couldn't scream. I would have ended up like them."

He held her close, and felt a wave of protectiveness sweep through him. No

wonder she had shut herself down emotionally for so long.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

She half-shrugged against him. “I only remember it every once in a while, so what’s the difference? I wake up eventually, and don’t have to see it anymore.”

Tamia watched as a worried frown wrinkled Rick’s brow, and he looked as if he might say something. When he didn’t, she propped herself up on one elbow and looked down at him with a soft smile.

“It’s nice to have someone care for a change,” she whispered as she bent to kiss his lips, then the base of his neck, her hands moving down between them. She bent her head to trace nibbling, playful kisses over his chest, and then rose up to smile at him. She saw the desire burning in his eyes, and slid her thigh across his groin, smiling as she heard his sharp intake of breath, followed by a groan, as she felt his body swelling harder against hers. She rose over him then, shifting to take him in. She moved down on him slowly, feeling the slow, deep penetration as she rocked against him. She stopped, with a small gasp of surprise, as she felt herself pulled downward and his mouth and hands were suddenly on her, teasing her senses. She felt the pressure of him against sensitive places, and arousal flashed through her. She rocked back again, felt his thrust in her. Then, she was moving on rising tides, drawing nearer to her own climax.

Rick lay watching her through slit eyes, feeling the rising tide within himself. Sweat glistened on her skin, and he was reminded, for an instant, of the mythology he’d

taken in high school. Venus. That's who she was. His honey-skinned, dark haired Venus. He wanted to hold her so badly. With a groan, he reached out, drew her down, and rolled her. Her eyes opened wide, startled, at the movement, then closed as she cried her desire. He moved in her, wanting her so badly he thought he would explode.

Tamia was amazing, and she was his. Tenderness curled within his desire as he savored her breathless sounds of pleasure, those panting pleas that drove him wild as she rose to meet him with a hunger that matched his own. She was so responsive she took his breath away, and he felt his body clench with the first tremor of release. Burying his face in the curve of her shoulder, he fought it, wanting her there with him. He wanted to feel the sweet pain of her clenching flesh. Then, in a blinding flash, he felt the convulsive ripple of her around him, even as she cried out his name, arching up hard. His forehead pressed tightly against her shoulder, he thrust hard, and let her pull him over the brink with a groan of rapture. As the wave ebbed a moment later, they fell together, drained.

Tamia didn't move, but the soft trailing sensation of her fingers sliding over his back, and the slow, aftershock pulsing of her inner muscles told him she was content where she was. Rick levered some of his weight from her, his mouth playing softly over her throat and shoulder, captivated by the sweet, sultry scent and taste of her skin. With a small sigh, Tamia ran her fingers up his back and through his hair, causing a warm shiver to pass through him.

"How do you do it, Rick?" She murmured softly. "I keep telling myself I'm not going to do this again, that I can't let you get this close, but you make me forget so easily. How?"

He rose up on his elbows and shifted, watching the reflexive shudder move

through her and feeling her inner flesh clench around him.

“Maybe because you want it too much. Maybe because I do. Hell, Tamia, I don’t know.” He bent his head to her breast, moving his lips along the soft skin, tasting salty sweat. “Maybe because we’re so damned good together.”

Tamia closed her eyes, feeling Rick’s caress clear to her soul. God, she wanted him, again. She always wanted him – his presence, his touch, and his love. She was so confused. They shared the same dream – family, children. She kept telling herself she couldn’t let herself love a man like that. Too late. She loved Rick in more ways than she could name. She’d been looking for a friend, and found a lover. She’d been looking for comfort, and found commitment. All of it only made what she had to do worse. She couldn’t marry him – not now. If he’d asked even yesterday, before she knew, she would’ve told him yes. But she couldn’t now. She was *pregnant*, for God’s sake, and with *his* baby. Hell, they were both still under the Fertility Code. She knew she should’ve gotten an implant after her miscarriage. But the doctor had told her that getting pregnant would be difficult after she lost one ovary. So she’d put it off, thinking her body hadn’t recovered enough from her wounds for there to be a danger. Nor had she noticed when her periods stopped. Dr. Matnes told her that might happen sometimes. She thought there wasn’t a point in getting implants, as long as she was taking birth control shots. Well, she was paying for it now, and would really get dragged over the coals once this reached the brass. No matter what Rick said, the military still carried some weight in the unit. She’d be dead in the water once they learned she’d been fucking

her commanding officer, that she was pregnant with his baby. She'd have to get an abortion soon, before anyone found out. Tamia felt her heart contract at the mere thought of what she had to do. Hell, it wasn't like she had a choice. If she did, she would keep it, and she knew Rick would want her to. But she didn't have that option. The War Department brass would make it an order. She couldn't marry Rick. He'd be in up to his neck in shit he didn't even know about.

CHAPTER TEN

Something was wrong; *very* wrong. Rick frowned as he watched Tamia rise unsteadily from the bed and weave toward the bathroom, looking as if she was drunk. He knew that wasn't true; Tamia hadn't touched a drop of alcohol since before she'd gone to Peru. What was going on?

As he heard the unmistakable sound of her vomiting, chilling fear stabbed through him, and he leapt from the bed, yanking on his jeans as he hurried to the bathroom.

"Are you okay, honey?"

A muffled affirmation answered him, doing nothing to alleviate his concern. Opening the bathroom door, he found Tamia sitting on the floor, her cheek and forehead pressed against the tile wall. She looked pale, gaunt, and miserable, and his heart clenched hard in fear.

"God, Tamia." He knelt beside her, gathering her into his arms as he felt fear pressing against the backs of his eyes. "Sweetheart, you look like hell. Are you sure you're okay?"

She groaned and pulled away, aiming for the toilet again. Grimly worried, now, Rick held her while she heaved what little contents remained in her stomach into the porcelain bowl, brushing her hair back from her face with one hand. Was this merely the after-effects of the morphine she'd been given, or something more ominous? After Dr.

Matnes had mentioned the possibility of it happening, Rick had read everything he could find on grafting and regenerative procedure patients whose bodies rejected the new skin and organs, even turning against the newer organs and causing internal tissue rot. He'd wanted to know what signs to look for, certain that Tamia would never tell him, or anyone, if she were truly sick. It appeared he'd been only too right. His heart pounded harshly. Tamia had undergone both grafting and regenerative procedures. Could her body be turning on itself?

Tamia sat back, her head lolling against his chest as she moaned miserably. Folding his arms around her tenderly, he cradled her close as he struggled with his fears, pressing soft kisses against her clammy, sweat-soaked forehead.

"What's wrong, Tamia? What can I do to help?"

She laughed hoarsely, and mumbled something he didn't catch under her breath. Then, looking up at him, she said, "It's just the morphine, Rick. I'll be okay."

He kissed her softly, even as he sighed internally. He didn't know whether to believe her or not; all he knew was, he was calling Dr. Matnes ASAP, for advice. He wasn't taking any chances with Tamia's life. But he couldn't tell Tamia that, so he merely nodded. "All right, but take the day off. Rest up."

"Rick, I have Comms this morning."

"I'll take the shift," he said firmly. There was no way he was letting her work herself to death. "*You* are going back to bed, and you're going to rest."

Not giving her a chance to argue, he scooped her up into his arms as he rose to his feet, and carried her back to the bed. After tucking her in, he reached for his shirt and

shoes, and finished dressing. Then, leaning over Tamia, he brushed a soft kiss over her lips. “I’ll get Jen to stop in later and have a look at you, just to be on the safe side. And I’ll be back as soon as the shift’s over,” he murmured, letting her see the worry in his eyes. “If you need anything...”

“I’ll get it myself,” she replied with a mutinous expression.

He sighed heavily. He didn’t want to quash Tamia’s independent spirit – that was part of what he loved most about her – but he wished like crazy that she’d just let him take care of her, at least sometimes.

“I’ll be back later,” he repeated firmly, then turned on his heel and left, before he did something really stupid, like beg her to marry him, again.

Tamia waited until she heard the front door of her quarters close, and the tone of the lock being set, and then climbed out of bed, pausing briefly to let a wave of vertigo pass. Making her way to the kitchenette, she grabbed up the phone on her way. In the tiny kitchen, she pulled the card she’d been given when she left the hospital from its place in her appointment book and, heart thudding anxiously, punched in the number.

“Mount Sinai Medical Center. How may I direct your call?”

“My name is Tamia Kuan,” she said, her heart squeezing with tension. “I need to speak with Dr. Maria Matnes.”

“Just a moment, Ms. Kuan, while I see if she’s available.”

Tamia waited tensely in the silence, her gaze glued on the clock. Rick said he’d send Jen by, and she knew Rick when he got in these protective moods. She had to get

out of here soon, or she'd be answering a question she didn't want to answer; a question she already knew Jen didn't want to ask.

"This is Dr. Matnes. How can I help you, Captain?"

Tamia smiled nervously at that. Of course Maria Matnes wouldn't forget a patient; particularly not one as difficult as Tamia. "I have a problem, Doc."

"The graft?" Maria sounded concerned.

"No," Tamia assured her quietly, even as she wondered if that was what Rick thought as well. Her heart squeezed again. "It's nothing to do with the surgery. I need some professional advice."

"I see," Maria said quietly. "Well, Tamia, I have a ten-thirty burn graft. How soon can you be here?"

"Half an hour, tops."

"Okay. I'll see you when you get here."

And, as Tamia replaced the phone in its charger unit, she breathed a small sigh of relief. The impression she'd gotten of Maria Matnes was that the woman genuinely cared. Hopefully, she'd care enough to help Tamia without filing a report with the military.

Back in her bedroom, Tamia dressed hurriedly in a pair of jeans and a baggy sweater, wincing as her bra snugged tight against her breasts. Damn. She'd been wearing jungle gear or bodysuits so much lately that she hadn't worn a bra in a couple of months. It looked like she'd already grown a cup size. This wasn't good. Sighing, she discarded the bra, deciding to do without for the moment, and donned her sweater and

jacket. Slipping on her shoes at the door, she released the lock and poked her head into the corridor to glance around before stepping out. So far, so good; the coast was clear.

Biting back a wry smile at the necessity of sneaking out of the one place she ever felt truly safe, Tamia drew a deep breath as she passed the command center door. If Rick caught her leaving, or even out of bed, he'd hit the roof. She'd seen how worried he was, and how tightly strung his emotions were. But she had to do this, for his sake as well as her own.

It was a tense ride up in the elevator, wondering if anyone had the entry monitor turned on. Apparently not, she decided when no one queried her over the intercom, and the elevator didn't stop suddenly.

Ten minutes later, Tamia walked through the sliding glass doors of Mount Sinai Medical Center and strode up to the front desk.

"May I help you?" Asked the perky brunette behind the desk.

"Tamia Kuan, to see Dr. Matnes."

"Fourth floor, Ms. Kuan. Room four-eighteen."

"Thanks."

Tamia rode the elevator up to the fourth floor nervously. She hoped to God that she was doing the right thing by coming here. On the fourth floor, she made her way quickly to Dr. Matnes' office, rapping lightly on the door.

"Looking for me, Captain?" A familiar voice came from behind her, and she turned to see the blonde doctor standing a few steps away, a stack of files in her hands.

“Yeah.” Tamia flicked her a nervous grin. She held open the door for Maria, and then followed her into a sparsely, but warmly, decorated office.

“Have a seat,” Maria nodded toward one plush chair as she deposited files on the top of a filing cabinet.

Tamia settled herself into one chair, unable to keep herself from fidgeting anxiously.

Maria turned to her desk, frowning. “What’s going on, Tamia?”

Tamia swallowed hard. God, how did she explain this? Best to go with the simplest explanation. “I’m pregnant.”

Maria’s sculpted blonde brows shot up. “That *is* rather a problem for you, isn’t it? But why come here? Mount Sinai has a strict Life-First policy. We don’t perform abort—” Her eyes narrowed. “And you don’t want one, either, do you?”

Tamia sucked in a breath, and shook her head. “No.”

Matnes smiled broadly as she settled into her seat. “I knew there was something special about you. You were too shook up by that miscarriage; though not as much as the Commander was.” She regarded Tamia speculatively. “Do I even need to guess who the father is?”

Tamia blinked, but offered her a hesitant smile as she felt heat creep into her face. It appeared they’d been pathetically lousy at hiding their affair. First Jen, and now Matnes... “Is it that obvious?”

Maria laughed. “Captain, I thought I was going to have to fetch smelling salts after I told Commander Carinson about the miscarriage. I thought he was going to faint

on the spot.” She grinned wryly, but sadness streaked her mossy eyes. “I’ve never seen a man react like that; especially not a military guy. That wasn’t relief, Tamia; it was grief.”

Tamia dropped her gaze as she nodded. Rick hadn’t gotten over that grief, either, though he’d pushed it aside. She felt like such a traitor, for not telling him about this baby; but what else could she do? Swallowing hard, she said, “That’s why I need your help, Dr. Matnes. I can’t abort this baby. I want it too much, and I won’t hurt Rick again.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I need you to help me hide this.”

The doctor frowned. “Not easy to do. How?”

“First, don’t tell anyone what we’re discussing here. If anyone calls you about me, just assure them that I’m fine. That includes Rick. He can’t know.”

Maria didn’t ask why. She probably already knew. “What else?”

“I need to see an obstetrician. Someone Life-First, and opposed enough to the Code that he or she won’t breathe a word about this to anyone.”

Dr. Matnes smiled then. “Now that, I can do. I know just the lady. Her name’s Sherry Faulker; she’s an ob/gyn who used to work here, until she decided to open her own practice. She runs a women’s clinic in Chinatown.”

“She’ll help me?” Tamia’s pulse sped up, as hope blossomed within her.

“I’m sure of it.” Maria smiled. “I’ll give her a call right now.”

Tamia watched nervously as Matnes picked up her phone and punched in a number. “Sherry? This is Maria Matnes.” There was a pause, and then Maria laughed.

“I understand. Sherry, I’ve got someone I want to send to see you. Her name’s Tamia Kuan, and she needs a discreet obstetrician.” There was another short pause. “How did you know?” Then, a smile. “Yeah, that sounds about right. I’ll fax it over. Okay, I’ll tell her. Thanks.”

Dr. Matnes scribbled an address on a prescription sheet and handed it to Tamia, smiling. “She’ll see you immediately.”

Relief broke over Tamia, and she smiled. “Thank you so much!”

“My pleasure. That Code’s immoral, and I’m glad to help circumvent it.”

They shook hands, and Tamia started toward the door, excitement bubbling within her. Maria’s voice stopped her at the door.

“Tamia?”

She turned to see Maria’s smile

“Congratulations.”

Tamia left the hospital on light feet, a grin plastered on her face. For the first time in too long, she was high on life; all thanks to the tiny soul she carried within her womb.

Dr. Faulker’s clinic was clean and orderly looking from the outside, quaintly charming among the shop fronts of Chinatown. Smiling at the irony of the China she’d despised for so long now hiding her salvation, Tamia stepped inside the small clinic, and was met by a smiling redhead with pale green eyes and kind, gentle face.

“Dr. Faulker?”

“As charged,” the redhead quipped. “You must be Tamia. Lucky for you, I was

planning on an early lunch today, so the office is clear.”

“I didn’t mean to intrude—”

Sherry Faulker laughed, a rich, open sound that put Tamia immediately at ease.

“Don’t worry. If I’d had plans, I would have scheduled you for later. Now,” she glanced over Tamia speculatively. “How far along are you?”

Tamia shrugged helplessly. “I’m not sure. I was injured a while back, and Dr. Matnes told me that my periods would be intermittent because of the damage.”

“To the uterus?” Faulker looked worried.

“Not according to her.”

Relief crossed the doctor’s green eyes. “Good. Okay, let’s get you into an exam room where you can undress, and then we’ll see if we can’t figure out how you’re doing.” Dr. Faulker smiled reassuringly, gesturing for Tamia to enter an exam room.

Fifteen minutes later, Sherry Faulker sat back from her ultrasound equipment with a smile. “Congratulations, Tamia. Not only are you pregnant, but from what I picked up, it looks like you’re about four months along.”

Tamia’s heart stuttered. *Four months!* That meant she had to have gotten pregnant not too long after she got out of the hospital, before she’d gone back on the shots... *the shots!*

“Dr. Faulker, I’ve been getting my birth control shots for the past two months. They wouldn’t—” she stopped, unable to finish that horrifying thought.

Faulker shook her head. “That’s one of the good things about those new shots.

They won't affect a pregnancy already in progress. I'm sure your baby's just fine."

Tamia swallowed hard. "And I was given morphine a week or so ago..."

Faulker frowned. "Now *that* could be problematic. How much?"

"I don't know," Tamia replied glumly, her heart crying with the pain. Please, not her baby! If she'd put her baby at risk...

"Well, we'll have to keep an eye on that. Chances are good, from what Maria sent over of your file, that anything short of an overdose won't affect your baby much. You received a chemical Detox treatment less than a year ago, after you were wounded in that explosion. That would trap and purge any harmful drugs in your system, including opiates. The worst you should experience is a heightened case of morning sickness; especially nausea."

Tamia rolled her eyes, muttering, "You can say that again."

Sherry frowned in thought. "But, just to be on the safe side, I'm going to give you a fetal Detox, along with your healthy baby shot, before you leave. That should make sure the baby remains unaffected."

Tamia wilted in relief as her hand moved to her belly briefly. It was good to know her stupidity hadn't cost her another child. "Thanks."

"No problem." Sherry smiled as she rose from her seat, patting Tamia's shoulder in a friendly manner. "I'll go get your shots ready. Get dressed."

Tamia did as instructed, smiling as she laid her hand against her slightly curved belly again. This was really happening! She was going to have a baby!

"I'll take good care of you, sweetie," she whispered to the little life inside of her.

“I promise.”

Dr. Faulker returned a moment later, to administer two shots. Then, smiling at Tamia, she said, “The Detox might make you a little tired for a while, since it’s not gene-specific, like the adult Detox system is. The healthy-baby shot should balance your body chemistry out, and help with any morning sickness you might be experiencing.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Faulker said with a smile. “I’m setting you up a tentative appointment for next month. If you have to change it, just let me know.”

Tamia felt tears sting her eyes at the generosity of this woman. “What do I owe you?”

“Nothing.” Sherry Faulker held up a hand when Tamia opened her mouth to protest. “You’re willing to pay the price of having a baby against regulations, Captain. That’s payment enough. Take care of yourself, and that baby, and I won’t ask anything more of you.”

It was, Tamia realized as she made her way out of Chinatown, just more proof that she wasn’t the only one who thought the Fertility Code was a very bad idea.

Half an hour later, Tamia sighed as she plopped down on her sofa, a half-finished novel in hand. It’d been a long night last night, and an even longer day today. She was looking forward to escaping from her own worries. Grinning, she considered the irony of that, realizing she’d come almost full circle.

When she left Tibet as a girl, she left behind the well-educated, bookish girl she’d

been, exchanging that for the guise of a bad-ass punk with little moral compunction, and even less care for anything remotely resembling stationary activity. She'd grown comfortable in that streetwise skin, over the years. Eventually, she'd tempered it with practical smarts and, thanks to the Marine Corps, a sense of values. But she'd never gone back to the girl who once valued history, tradition, and the written word, much to Kuron's continuing dismay.

"Your daddy's the brainy one," she murmured to the life inside her, rubbing her belly lightly.

Even tossed around as a kid, or maybe because of it, Rick had found escape from the harshness of reality in the words of other eras. His bookshelves were a source of constant wonder to Tamia, who'd rarely seen more than four books that weren't manuals stacked in one place. Rick was eclectic in his tastes, with a range of old and new that astounded her. Everything from the newest Liam Dewalz technothriller to an archaic collection of leather-bound Sherlock Holmes mysteries shared space on his shelves. But Rick's pride and joy was a hardcover collection of Tom Clancy thrillers from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; he had them all, and he could quote from every single one of them. The day she came back from Peru, he handed her his copy of *Clear and Present Danger* and, with a wry grin, told her she'd identify. He was right, as usual, and now had her hooked on the story. With a sigh of fond exasperation, she shook her head and opened the book, determined to learn if Jack Ryan was walking into a trap or not.

She was deeply engrossed in the political intrigues when a sudden noise jolted her from her reading. What was...? Oh, the door signal. Tamia glanced toward the door, sighed, and reached to tap the lock release as the tone sounded again. “Yeah?”

Kathy beckoned as the door slid open. “You’ve got a call in Comms. Sounds pretty important.”

Her brow wrinkling in consternation, Tamia put down her book and followed Kathy back to the control center. Who would be calling her through Communications? She picked up the headpiece and slipped it on, then hit the switch. Her brow wrinkled even further when no picture came over the video screen. What the hell was going on?

“Hello?” She asked cautiously. “Who is this?”

“Do not say my name,” warned a voice she almost didn’t recognize. “I am not using a secure line. I checked up on your information, and handed the evidence over to Security. They are going to send a routine investigation squad; my superiors are treating this as a minor mishap, or a hoax, even with the evidence. I do not trust them to make an honest, thorough investigation.

“I convinced Central Command to give me authority to call in six agents from neutral nations for a secondary investigation, with express permission to destroy any contraband on site. I will be transmitting you a list of profiles, over a secure frequency, sometime soon. Do not do anything until you hear from me again. Get three women and three men for the team, and tell them to learn the profiles I send well. Those are the identities you must assume. You are to oversee the site, then apprise me of the situation. I will be the one making the final decision whether or not it merits attack, as it will be my job, and

possibly my life, on the line if something goes wrong. We have to make certain they are not cloning. I do not want another Chinese Army.”

“Neither do I, my friend. Thanks for doing this; I owe you.”

He cleared his throat. “It was I who had a debt to repay, to an old teacher. I owed him my life, and if saving yours is returning that which I owe, it is a debt gladly paid.”

“How soon can I expect to hear from you again?”

“About a week.”

“Okay. Thanks, again.”

“Farewell, Tamiasa.”

The line went dead, and Tamia leaned back in the chair, letting her breath out as she flipped off the station. She sat silently for a moment, and then pulled off the headset with a sigh. They were in. They wouldn’t have to risk their lives at both the hands of the Banhauste and the Patrol. She should feel happy about that. Why was she so uneasy?

Reaching over, Tamia hit the “page” button on the team communications panel. It was time to round up the troops; they had big decisions to make, and she knew at least one person who wasn’t going to like them.

Three minutes after Tamia finished relaying the substance of her phone call to the assembled Commandos, Matt finally broke the silence with a low whistle of appreciation.

“Damn, girl. And I thought I had connections! You must have a direct line to The Man!” He grinned and winked at her. “You’re like a lucky penny, china girl. I might just have to break down and marry you.”

“All right, so we’re in,” Rick cut in darkly, and Tamia avoided his cobalt gaze as it came to rest on her. She knew what he was thinking; Matt’s teasing comment about marriage had scraped over raw nerves in both of them, bringing back the sting of last night. Glancing up, away from Rick, she saw the speculation on Jen’s face as the profiler’s green eyes moved from her to Rick and back.

“Yeah,” Tamia said quietly, still not looking at the man beside her. She glued her eyes to the paperwork she already knew by heart, to keep from having to meet his piercing blue eyes. “Hoshi said he’d be transmitting our ID files soon, so we’ll need to pick the team now. I have dibs on one female slot.”

“Since when?” Rick bit out the words, and Tamia steeled herself against reaction as she finally met his gaze. Even prepared, though, the heat and pain in his eyes hit her like a thermal round in the chest, searing through her heart. Shifting her eyes to scan the faces around the table, she knew, with gut-wrenching certainty, that they had all noticed the tension suddenly buzzing between herself and Rick. God, no; she wasn’t going to do this again. Every argument she and David had ever had – and there’d been plenty – had been aired in full view and hearing of the entire gang; and each one had cost her a little more respect, until she had none. But she wasn’t that girl anymore, she told herself sternly. She was a former United States Marine, and a trained and capable Commando. She wouldn’t knuckle under pressure; not even from the man she loved. So, stiffening her spine, she faced Rick squarely, and handed him back his words, plus a few facts.

“Since I am the only member of this team Hoshi knows or trusts. Since I already know that one of the files he’ll be sending will be made to fit me. Since I know he

expects to see me.”

Rick’s eyes narrowed, and she saw a glint there she couldn’t remember having ever seen in Rick before. Was he actually jealous? Of *Hoshi*? She would have laughed, but that would probably only enflame the situation. And then he spoke, and the situation came damn close to nuclear meltdown.

“You seem to have gotten pretty close to him, for that short stay in Peru, didn’t you? Just how well do you know this guy?”

“Well enough,” she answered stiffly, even as she fumed internally. Richard Carinson had best watch his ass, because the moment she got him alone, she was going to kill him. Just because she had been a slut, years ago, didn’t mean she was still one. She’d given Rick her whole heart, dammit; and she was a mother, besides. “And I’ve given you all the information you need to know, *Commander*. My position is non-negotiable. Now, who else is going?”

Rick’s eyes went cold and hard at that brush-off, and Tamia felt something inside her begin to crack. Please, no; he couldn’t shut her out now! She needed his support, even if she couldn’t tell him why. She needed him to be there for her.

Afraid he would read that need, and misinterpret it, she yanked her eyes away from his, to study the grooves of the table, instead. Finally, she felt the weight of his gaze leave her, and heard him sigh.

“Okay. Frank, you’re our resident expert on Banhauste and the Regiment, so you’re in. Chelsea, you’ve got connections down there we might need, and you’re local, which gives you the ability to blend in. You’re going, too. Matt, Kelly, you’ve both got

the operational experience to handle night raids and explosives; you're taking two slots. I'm the last man, and Blade," his eyes bored into her again, "rounds out the mission list. Walter, Jen, you're going to be our brains; whatever we find comes straight back to you, and you're cross-checking and whittling it all down to provide us background. Ishmael, Walt and Jen are going to be busy as hell, so you've got Comms for the duration. And Kathy," he turned to the blonde, his expression grim. "We need something to take the heat off our investigation. I got a call from John Tolson at IA, earlier, and he says he's been receiving calls from the press asking about possible investigations of top government officials. Find out who those reporters are, and see if you can't put out those brushfires." He rose abruptly to his feet. "That's it, everyone. Dismissed."

Tamia was the first on her feet, determined to get away from the anger she heard in Rick's voice. But her escape plans were halted by Rick's hand on her shoulder. "Could you stick around for a moment, Blade? I want to talk to you."

"What for?" She asked in an undertone only he could hear, even as her heart pounded heavily. "You already have my answer. You didn't like it the first time."

Rick squeezed her shoulder in warning, and she subsided, waiting until the last of the team had left the command center before turning to Rick with an exasperated sigh. "Look, I already said—"

Her words were cut off as his mouth suddenly captured hers in a kiss that heated Tamia's blood clear to her toes, pushing everything except the taste and scent of him from her mind. She reached up, fisting her hands in his shirtfront as she dragged him closer; she could feel his hands at her hips, his arousal pressing against her abdomen, and

her entire body screamed, *more!*

With a tortured groan, Rick suddenly tore himself away from her. He stared down at her with tormented eyes that were indigo with arousal, and she knew he was as confused and afraid as she was. The only problem was, she knew why they had to stay away from each other; he didn't. And she couldn't tell him.

"God, Tamia," Rick rasped, plowing his hands through his hair as he paced away from her. "What's happening to us? We were doing so good, and then, last night... And now I can't even hear another man's name leave your lips without losing complete control of my temper."

She offered him a strained smile. "You're jealous, Rick."

"You're damned right I am!" He growled, his eyes bright with anger as he turned them on her. "And do you have any idea why?"

She sighed, sinking back into her seat. "Because of what I did last night. Because I turned you down."

"Wrong," he said grimly, turning her chair so that his hands rested on the armrests, trapping her into the seat. Yet, even trapped, she didn't feel threatened by Rick; she knew he'd never hurt her. "It isn't because of *what* you did," he said in a dangerously soft voice. "It's because of *why*."

Her eyes shot up to his, full of fear, and she barely resisted the urge to press her hand protectively to her abdomen as she gasped. He didn't know, did he? He couldn't possibly... "What do you mean?"

"Remember how you felt when you first saw Jean and I together? You were

scared, weren't you?"

"Yes," she admitted quietly, staring into his eyes.

"You thought I was cheating on you."

"Yes."

"And you were jealous as all hell because you thought I might actually want her over you, right?"

"Yes. But how—?"

"Because the same thoughts have been running through my head, over and over, since you told me no, but couldn't give me a good reason why not. I've been going out of my mind, honey; wondering if you met someone else..."

She gasped, a hand flying to her throat as those words hit her head-on. "Oh my God! Rick, no," she managed, reaching out to touch his chest with one trembling hand. She'd never imagined that thought would ever cross his mind. God, what had she done? "I *love* you! I've never felt this way for a man in my entire life, and I could never do something like that to you!"

He sank down in his seat, his shoulders slumping as he released a relieved breath. Looking up at her, he muttered, "When you thought I could, it set me wondering if you were just applying your own sense of morals, or even your own deeds, to me..."

She looked away, her eyes stinging with tears. God, she never wanted to tell him about the baby so badly, before. She wanted him to understand. She couldn't possibly turn her back on him; not before, and definitely not now. But she couldn't tell him about the baby. So she told him about her past, instead.

“Rick, I wasn’t seeing me, or even you, when that happened. That was the problem. I was seeing David; he used to pull shit like that all the time. I guess old habits just die hard,” she smiled sadly. “Mine is that I always assume the worst when dealing with men.”

He reached for her hand, swallowing visibly before he managed, “Does this mean you’ve reconsidered?”

She met his hopeful eyes, and felt her heart beginning to crack. Turning her gaze away before she had a chance to give in, she rose to her feet.

“No.”

With that, she left the room, unable to look back. She knew that, like Lot’s wife, if she looked back, she’d be doomed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tamia closed her eyes and fought the plunging sensation of her stomach as the Black Ops transport lifted off from Bocas del Toro; morning sickness was no picnic, but flying choppy transports with morning sickness sucked big time. Leaning her head back against the transport's bulkhead, she stifled a sigh.

He was doing it again. Ever since they lifted off from New York, she felt Rick's eyes burning into her. That wasn't new; she could almost ignore it, now. Almost. But when they hooked up with the Black Ops team heading into Brazil, she nearly groaned aloud to discover James Dalton, her flirtatious guide from last trip, among them. From the first grin and wink he shot her, Rick had been alternating his scowl between her and Dalton. And when they boarded the transport, there was no doubt in her mind that Rick's choice of seat – sandwiching her between him and the crew cabin divider – was a calculatedly possessive move. The man was raging jealous, and not even bothering to attempt hiding it.

“Who *is* that guy?” He suddenly muttered, low enough that only she could hear.

“James Dalton, or so he claims,” Tamia said off-handedly, shrugging. “He was my guide last trip.”

She glanced at Rick as he stiffened, and saw his frown deepen. “Just how friendly did you get with him?”

The fine thread of Tamia's restraint snapped at that growled accusation. That did it! She'd put up with this shit quite long enough. Turning to glare at him, she clenched her teeth and hissed, "What the hell is your problem, Rick? You know damned well I'm not like that, anymore! If you think so little of me, maybe you shouldn't have asked me to marry you in the first place."

"Not that it mattered to you," he shot back darkly. "You turned me down cold."

Her eyes narrowed. "And I told you why. Why'd you ask me?"

He tensed, as if she'd slapped him. "Because I don't kid myself, Tamia. I love you. It's just too damned bad that isn't enough for you."

She rocked back, reeling from his attack. How could he think she wanted anything more? "What do you expect me to say to that?"

"Nothing," he snapped. "I just want to know what is enough for you, dammit!"

Glancing away, Tamia saw Frank watching them speculatively. Sighing, she turned back to Rick. "You are. We'll discuss this later."

"Like hell. We'll discuss it now—"

"We're drawing attention, Rick."

His eyes burned into hers, and she swallowed hard at the hungry light there. For the first time ever, Rick almost frightened her; but it was the danger he posed her heart that scared her.

"I don't care if the whole damned world knows."

"But I do," she murmured, her heart pounding. If Rick didn't respect this, he'd never respect her. Tensely, she waited for his answer, watching the snapping tension in

his eyes. Then, with a yank, he turned his head away, and sighed heavily. “Fine. Later, then.”

With that, he turned his attention away completely, staring morosely toward the far bulkhead. Closing her eyes, Tamia laid a hand against her womb, and prayed she was doing what was best for all of them. It was the only thing she knew to do; so why did it hurt so damned much?

The rest of the flight was long and tense for all of the Commandos, considering they had to rely on the good graces – or not so good graces – of CIA Black Ops, again. But the tension cut even deeper into Tamia, until she ached from the heart out, wondering if this trip would be the end of the best thing in her life.

Though she and Rick had patched up their differences over the past two weeks since their confrontation in the command center, their brief argument on the transport had proven to her that things were far from normal between them. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

Now, walking through the main atrium of the Equatorial Patrol’s South American Headquarters, Tamia felt as if all eyes were glued to them, assessing their attire, bearing, and attitudes, and probably drawing an all too correct conclusion. Suddenly, she wished she were visibly pregnant; these people would never suspect a group containing a pregnant woman...

“Ah, good, you have arrived.”

Tamia started at the sudden sound of Hoshimiro’s voice. To cover her nerves, she

offered him a smile and a formal bow. "Greetings. I am Lei Po-lan."

Hoshimiro returned her bow, straight-faced. "It is good that you have come this long distance from Beijing, Ms. Lei. And my thanks to the rest of you, as well. Please, accompany me to my office, and I will explain your task."

And, as she started after Hoshi, Tamia felt Rick's eyes burning into her, and knew that their relationship was getting ready to go through yet another grueling trial. Anxiously, she prayed there'd be something left to salvage when this test was over.

Moments later, Tamia released her breath in a sigh of relief as they stepped into the security of Hoshimiro's office. The curious glances they received from the Patrol staff were unnerving, to say the least. All it would take was one suspicious person.

"I can't thank you enough for doing this, Hoshi," she told her friend again. "If you hadn't been willing to help..."

"It must be done." He brushed aside her gratitude. "Now, please introduce me properly to your comrades."

Tamia grinned. Good old Hoshimiro; she'd known he would ask. Hoshi didn't have a problem with fabrication, as long as he knew the truth.

"This is Commander Richard Carinon, team leader for the Commandos," Tamia introduced Rick with a smile.

Hoshimiro looked between them, and his eyes narrowed slightly. He nodded briskly, and his voice was cool when he spoke. "Of course. I remember reading of you. A war hero, am I correct, Commander?"

“Unfortunately,” Rick said stiffly, with a grim nod. “Though I might debate that there’re ever living heroes after a war.”

Tamia’s brow furrowed as she looked between the two men. They were verbally circling one another, like predators staking claim to a kill. They weren’t actually fighting over *her*, were they? To judge by the interested look on Matt’s face and the wink Frank threw her, that was exactly what was going on. Well, she’d just see about that one!

“Actually, Hoshi, you and Rick have spoken before.”

“I do not recall any such conversation.”

Rick flashed him a tight smile. “I was the one who called you when Tamia was down here before.”

That broke through to Hoshimiro, and he cast her a startled glance. “ ‘Tamia’?”

She grinned, and shrugged. “A nickname that stuck so well that no one seems to know it’s not my full name anymore.”

He nodded. “I see. And who else has accompanied you?”

Tamia gestured toward Matt, now thoroughly engrossed in flipping through a file Kelly had handed him. “That’s Matt Clipper, our resident bloodhound. He can track down people with little more than a picture or name to go on.”

“Impressive.”

“You don’t know the half of it, man,” Matt said, glancing up with a grin. “An’ you don’t wanna, either!”

Hoshimiro glanced nervously away from the black man, and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “It cannot be!”

Tamia chuckled. “Oh, trust me, it most definitely is. Hoshimiro, meet Chelsea Perez, the daughter of Ernesto Perez.”

“What is a drug lord’s daughter doing in an organization such as yours, Tamiasa?”

“No one knows the drug cartels’ habits better, my friend,” Tamia said, and then nodded toward Kelly. “This’ Kelly Blake. She’s our international espionage and terrorism consultant. She knows that world first-hand.”

Hoshimiro looked duly impressed.

“And this,” Tamia said, grabbing Frank’s arm, “is Frank Harlin. If anyone knows Banhauste and his Regiment, it’s Frank.”

“Ah, yes. Baraman’s containment officer turned DEA agent, yes? Baraman still speaks highly of you, Mr. Harlin.” He looked them all over briefly. “Do you have any questions about your mission here?”

“A few, actually,” Frank spoke up, a frown wrinkling his brow. “When did Baraman recruit Karl Haslunas? He can’t have been there long. I don’t remember anyone by that name, and neither Internal Affairs nor the information you sent provided a dossier on him.”

“Ah, yes. Our mystery man.” Hoshimiro sighed as he moved to sit behind his desk. “The truth, Mr. Harlin, is that I know nothing more about him than you do. That is part of the reason I pushed to bring your team here. You see, Karl Haslunas is, well, non-existent.”

Rick’s eyes narrowed on the shorter, bespectacled man. “What do you mean

‘non-existent’?”

“Plainly, Commander, I mean that we have no record of any such person ever being connected to or affiliated with Banhauste’s Regiment. As a matter of fact, no nation on this continent has a record of any such person ever existing. The only proof of his existence we seem to have is Tamiasa’s taped confession.”

The six Commandos traded uneasy looks, and Tamia’s frown deepened. She didn’t like where this was heading. “What are you saying, Hoshimiro?”

“What I am saying is, the Equatorial Patrol’s official stance on this matter is that the vid-record we possess is a sick prank, meant to send the world into hysterics, and is therefore worth absolutely no attention. However, this is not *my* opinion. I am willing to believe that Tamiasa’s recording is both genuine and proof of a significant threat to world peace. Therefore, acting on my own judgment, I prevailed upon my superiors to allow me to bring in six agents to investigate environmental anomalies in that sector. I have brought you six here to discover exactly who Haslunas is, and what he is doing here.”

Matt looked up from his file. “Hey, Rick! Check this out, man. Seems Doc Perosulo got hisself thrown out by the ol’ man when he started messin’ around with DNA a few years back.”

Rick’s frown deepened, and he glanced at Frank. “Why would Banhauste rehire a man he’d personally fired?”

“He wouldn’t,” Frank said grimly. “I vote we get cracking on this ASAP.”

Rick looked at Hoshimiro again. “Can you get us ecological blueprints of Poco Nanches? Any ideas exactly what Banhauste’s up to and why he would have shipped

Perosulo there? And how the hell did he get his hands on cloning tech, anyway?”

“To the first, yes, I can and I will give you that information. I had planned to, anyway, as you will need it for your cover.” He pulled a thick folder and several discs from one drawer, handing them to Tamia. “To the second, nobody appears to know anything about Poco Nanches, or why Perosulo would be there. The compound was not even listed in Patrol files before Tamiasa’s report. And as to the last, Commander – that is a question that I, too, would very much like to know the answer to. Baraman Banhauste has, many times, publicly denounced the use of biological weaponry, chemical toxins, and exploitative genetics. This occurrence is, for the first, entirely irregular, as I am certain that Mr. Harlin has already informed you. But the Regiment also lack the capital necessary to obtain such expensive contraband.”

Rick sighed heavily. “All right. We’re here now, and we can’t leave until we’ve had a look over the place, just to be sure. Kel, Matt, take these,” he plucked two discs from the stack Tamia held and handed them to the other two people, “and go have a look over the thermal imagery. See if you can’t find some positive ID’s on chemical traces, too. Frank, see if you can get hold of Banhauste himself. I want to know just what in God’s name is going on. Chelsea, *indagas*.”

The petite Hispanic woman nodded at his significant look. With another glance for Tamia, Rick nodded, and the room quickly emptied, until only Tamia and Hoshimiro remained.

“You keep odd company, Tamiasa.”

She grinned wryly. “This is only a small fraction of what you’ve missed!”

“Your Commander Carinson does not much like me.”

“Rick’s just—”

“Very protective of you. That man is the reason you refused me, I assume.”

Tamia blushed, knowing she was caught. “How did you know?”

“I would have to have been blind not to see the look that passed between you.”

He looked at her somberly. “Tamiasa, I fear I have made a grave mistake.”

Her brow furrowed. “Why? Because you let us in?”

“No,” he replied, shaking his head sadly. “It is because I fear I have forced you into a dangerous position.”

“Danger’s our life, Hoshi. We know all the risks.”

He sighed heavily. “No, I am very much afraid that you do not. Tamiasa, there is no Poco Nanches.”

She blinked, confused. “Wh...What?”

“Oh, it exists now. But Banhauste’s Regiment has never heard of it. Neither Peru nor Brazil has any record of it, and, as I told your Commander, neither did the Patrol, until you came along.”

Tamia’s eyes closed as she fought to understand exactly what Hoshimiro was trying to say. “You’re saying...I’m *lying*? Hoshi—”

“No.” His head shook sharply. “What I am saying is that, whomever these people are, they are lethal, and entirely beyond the Patrol’s considerable reach. Until we know who they are, why they are here, and what they want, we cannot fire a single shot, and—”

“By that time, they’ll have an entire army of loyal soldiers,” Tamia finished for him, nodding. “I see your point, Hoshi, but I don’t see how we can help. We have orders, too; orders to live, breathe, and think Patrol. Our hands are as tied as yours, under these disguises.”

He paced to his office window, his expression grim. “What about... night missions?”

She grinned. Hoshi must have developed Kuron’s mind-reading technique. “We already planned on it, if what we discover in daylight doesn’t answer all of our questions.”

“And if it does?”

“Commandos ask a lot of questions, friend,” Tamia said, throwing him a wink as she slipped out of the room. It was time to get down to work.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tamia sighed as she made her way from Hoshimiro's office toward the Temporary Living Quarters the six Commandos had been assigned. After that little scene in Hoshi's office, even she had to concede that it was high time she and Rick had a serious heart-to-heart about what was going on. There was obviously something riding him, that he'd taken her rejection as hard as he had. It wasn't as if she'd told him that she didn't want to see him anymore, or anything like that. Surely marriage wasn't that big of an issue to him; it hadn't appeared to be, before.

Entering Rick's temporary quarters in the housing sector, Tamia found Rick at the table in the small kitchen, deeply engrossed in work. Figured. Whenever he came up against something he couldn't handle in his personal life, Rick buried it, and himself, in work. With an internal sigh, she walked over to lean against the back of his chair, draping her arms casually around his neck as she surveyed the paperwork and satellite images spread out before him. It was all so precisely ordered, he might as well have labeled it. "What're you doing, hon?"

Rick shook his head, his attention still fixed on the pictures in his hands, a frown on his face. "Just going over imagery pics. Kelly's right. These chemical readings are all screwy; they're way too elevated. Nitrogen, chlorine, sodium... Look at this, babe," he held up a chemical analysis chart. "Check out those spikes; they're off the charts."

That's too heavy a concentration for any of the old cloning formulas. Here, see this?"

He poked a finger at a large orange spot on one photo. "Carbon; there haven't been much more than trace amounts of that anywhere on the planet since the clean tech came online at the beginning of the Reaver War. But here, there's enough to make smog in a pre-Reaver city. Yet this photo," he held up a recon survey of the area, "shows the base as clear as a bell. Not even a petrol-coal film."

Tamia frowned, taking the contradictory images from him. "Chlorine, nitrogen... Any hydrogen traces?"

"Only this," he said, holding up another graph. "Poco Nanches and the surrounding sector gets an average of three point twenty-four more inches of precipitation on any given day than the rest of the Rainforest."

Tamia swore under her breath. "That's a lot of hydro."

"You're telling me. Cloning uses massive amounts of high-temperature hydro and sodium, but only in the post-World War Three procedures. But those don't use nitro, chlorine, or carbon, at all. In fact, there's only one thing I can think of that uses all of that..."

Tamia felt her stomach rise into her throat as he handed her a computer printout. "You think they're making VX? Rick, that stuff was banned clear back in the late twentieth. How the hell do they know how to make it? The only surviving formulas are stored at..." She drew in her breath sharply as the implication of her own thoughts hit her. "The only surviving formulas are stored at the War Department Headquarters, back in New York."

Rick nodded wearily. “Exactly. I’m afraid of what we’re going to find at Poco Nanches, Tamia. I have a feeling it’s not going to be anything like what we expected.”

“We should tell Hoshi about this—” She stopped, frowning, as she felt him stiffen beneath the hand she still had on his shoulder. “What?”

“You and that Hoshimiro guy,” he said quietly, his gaze fixed on the paperwork, though she knew he wasn’t even aware of its existence at the moment. “Did you ever...?”

Tamia sighed in fond exasperation, dropping the printout on the table as she moved around to stand, straddling his lap with the backs of her thighs against the table. She loved him dearly, but this fixation of his with her sexual history had to stop, before he drove her completely insane. Looking down into his pained, uncertain eyes, she said, “No, I never slept with Hoshi. He’s like a brother to me.”

“*He* doesn’t think so.”

She sighed again, sadly. He was right, unfortunately. “I know. But I never encouraged him that way. To me, he’s like a brother; I can’t help what he thinks.”

The tension in his shoulders eased slightly, and Tamia felt her heart catch at the raw vulnerability of that action. God, she hated hurting him. Laying one hand against Rick’s cheek, she murmured, “I know you know my past, Rick. You know what I did in ‘Frisco. I’ve never pretended to be an innocent; yes, I slept around. Yes, I cheated on David regularly, for stupid, petty reasons. But the day David died, the entire course of my life changed. I looked up from the muck of my life, and saw my future – *you*. And ever since then, you’ve owned my heart, even when I thought I didn’t even have your

attention. I can't betray my heart, Rick. I can't betray you."

His eyes closed, and she knew it was to hide the depth of his reaction to her words. She felt the burn of tears behind her own eyes.

"So why did you say no?" He asked hoarsely.

She swallowed hard. This was the hard part, because he'd never truly understand her reasoning, even if she told him about the baby, which she couldn't do. "Because I love you, and I have things I have to work out for myself. It wouldn't be fair to ask you to shoulder those burdens as well, or to wait for me while I work through them. It wouldn't be fair to you to make you a part of my problems."

His eyes snapped open, and she saw raw, wild fear there. "You're not ending things, are you?"

"No," she whispered, sliding her arms around his neck. "As much as I wish I was that strong, I'm not. I need you, and love you, too much to walk away."

And, as she leaned to join her mouth with his, Tamia knew she'd given him nothing but the truth. And the truth wasn't nearly enough to solve the problems between them.

Rick's speculations about Poco Nanches haunted Tamia as she lay in the middle of the night-draped jungle she hated so much. Her heart beat painfully against her ribs, and, to her, her breathing sounded like a train going through. Fortunately, her headgear muffled that sound. Lying sprawled on her stomach in the foliage a short distance from the base, she could observe Poco Nanches through night-vision binoculars without

detection.

There was little movement in the compound, now. Only four night guards moved around within the closed gates. Three of them were armed with high-power rifles, and the fourth carried a LongKnife, a weapon that looked a lot like an M-16, except that it had a battery unit in place of a cartridge, and shot a long, thin blade of pure thermal energy – almost completely invisible to the unaided eye – instead of bullets. Two of them held the leashes of patrol dogs.

Damn, Tamia swore silently. A patrol of four was an easy number to overtake, even if they had all been armed with thermal weapons. But dogs spelled trouble. If those dogs caught their scent, they were screwed. Signaling Rick, Tamia motioned toward the dogs. His nod was swift and grim.

“Abort. I repeat, all units, abort. Regroup at Alpha,” Rick’s voice came over the comlink.

Carefully, Tamia slid back further into the trees, then rose to a half-crouch and moved quickly away from the compound.

Five minutes later, the team was gathered silently in a crevasse between two fallen trees, their masks removed and their expressions grim.

“So,” Matt spoke at last, barely above a whisper, “is someone gonna tell me why we just aborted?”

Rick grimaced in disgust. “They’ve got patrol dogs. We need a new strategy.”

Frank straightened, his expression shocked. “Patrol dogs? The Regiment doesn’t

use dogs. Baraman himself forbade it.”

Rick nodded. “Which is why I’m suspecting this has little to nothing to do with Banhauste, or his Regiment.”

“Great,” Matt grumbled. “So what now?”

“Now,” Rick said grimly, “we work out a new strategy.”

“We’re still going in?” Kelly asked, frowning in concern.

“You’re damned right we are. Blade and I studied the ecological printouts of this sector earlier, and it appears that our friends might be making VX down there. If that’s true, we’ve got bigger problems than just cloned assassins.”

“We’ve got a goddamned madman,” Frank muttered darkly. “All right. So what’s the plan?”

“We need to get past those dogs, first,” Rick pointed out. “We don’t want to kill them, if we can avoid it, but we need them out of commission.”

“Leave it to me,” Kelly said, removing two small darts from her utility belt and grinning. “I used to do this all the time. ‘Never go anywhere without tranqs’ – that’s a second-story watch phrase. Be ready to move on my signal.”

As she slipped away into the darkness, Rick said, “Once Hood has the dogs down, we go in. Gypsy, Red, you two have the bunkers. Check to make sure there’s nothing in there that’s going to make a worse disaster when we blow the bunkers. Watchdog, you hook up with Hood and get into the labs. You’re taping in there, to get the evidence we’ll need. Blade and I will see if we can find the system hub for their network and download what we can for Chips and Cat to finish profiling with. Record everything you find, even

if it doesn't seem important at the time. Chances are, we're dealing with professionals. They were nervous enough to slip up at the hint of Patrol activity, which means they don't want to be discovered, but you can bet they won't leave incriminating evidence laying around, since Blade's threat."

They all nodded their understanding, just as Hood's voice came over the comlink. "We're in. Get your arses down here before the tranqs wear off."

And, with their objective looming ahead, all problems, personal or professional, were pushed aside as the Commandos made their way toward Poco Nanches, and an uncertain future.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Frank Harlin crouched in the shadows of Bunker Three, his gray eyes glittering with anger. So far, the bunkers had been full of nothing but contraband, almost as if these people had nothing to fear from discovery. Or they weren't planning on being discovered. Talk about arrogance.

Rick had been right about the VX. Bunker One had been filled with enough of the stuff to wipe all of Asia off of the map. There'd been case after case of VX missiles, and specially made bullets, each packed with enough of the deadly toxin to wipe out entire populations of nations. It was enough to make Frank's blood boil. Whoever these people were, they were planning nothing short of wiping out the planet.

Bunker Two was full of weapons as well; a standard arsenal of chemical and thermal weapons – for the army of a small nation. And when Chelsea checked the serial numbers on the crates, she confirmed what he already feared; these were the missing munitions hijacked in the US. Which meant their terrorist camp here just got a whole hell of a lot closer to home.

Standing pressed up against the metal-and-concrete wall of Bunker Three, Frank drew a deep breath and nodded to his diminutive companion. Raising her weapon, Chelsea indicated that she had him covered. Frank stepped out of the shadows and up to the bunker door. Removing his universal keycard – Walter had given them each one

before they left New York for the purpose of getting into locked rooms – Frank swiped it through the lock and listened as the tumblers clicked open.

Inching open the door, he squeezed inside and stopped, sucking in a sharp breath.

“Gypsy, there’s something fucked-up going on around here,” he muttered into his comlink as his eyes scanned the laser bars that enclosed the four corners of the building. Inside each cage were packed several dozen children

Like cattle in a herding pen, Frank thought in disgust. Whoever was running this base was one sick bastard. The kids were asleep, thankfully, their small bodies packed together for warmth and security. They looked bedraggled, dirty, and half-starved. God, something like this would break Calli’s heart; or piss her off. It sure as hell pissed him off.

“*Madre de Dios!*” Chelsea whispered from beside him. “Red, we cannot leave them here!”

“You’re damned right, we’re not,” Frank growled. “But first we’ve got to find out why they’re here in the first place.” He spotted what looked like the control room from their reconnaissance photos at the rear of the bunker. “C’mon. Let’s see what we can find out about these kids.”

Nothing, Frank decided five minutes later as he finished downloading and transmitting the contents of the control room computers, could have prepared him for the answer. Touching his group comlink, he said, “Ace, we got a problem, here.”

“What problem?”

“We found hostages. At last count, there’s one hundred-three of them. All kids.”

“Kids?” That was Tamia, fear threading through her voice.

“Affirmative. Says here that there’s twelve control subjects – all adult – supposedly imprisoned somewhere in the compound. These kids – all boys – are their clones, best I can figure out. They’re in laser cages, and there’s a notation in the computer about administering something called ‘JX482’ to a number of them.”

“We’re on our way,” Rick said grimly. “Watchdog, Hood, where are you?”

“Laboratory Two,” Kelly replied. “I’m headin’ out now. Watchdog’s already gone off to set charges.”

“Affirmative.”

The comlink went dead then, and Frank switched back to his fire-team frequency. “C’m on, Gypsy. We need to trip those cages and get these kids out of here. Watchdog’s already laying the charges.”

She nodded and hurried for the fuse box by the front door. Frank followed, poking his head out the door to check for the rest of the mission team. “Find it?”

“Red, this circuit is not like most,” Chelsea said quietly, her voice full of fear. “I cannot open it.”

He came to her side, looking over her head at the fuse box, and swore as he tapped his group comlink again. “Watchdog, for God’s sake, don’t set the charges on Bunker Three!”

Matt Clipper poked his head in the door just then. “Holy shit! C’m on, guys, we gotta get out of here! It’s too late; I already set the timer.”

“We cannot leave these children!” Chelsea shot back, her voice steely with determination as she wrestled with the delicate, fused circuit. Then, with a small, triumphant cry, she stepped back as the cage bars dissipated. “Quickly, both of you! Take some children out of here, while I rouse the rest.”

Matt and Frank rushed to comply, scooping up three of the smallest children, who cried in fright at the masked Commandos. Chelsea yanked off her mask as she moved among the older children, shaking them awake with murmured words in Spanish.

“Get a move on,” came Kelly’s voice through the comlink. “Time’s almost up.”

Frank cleared the door, Matt hard on his heels. As he moved toward the safety of Kelly’s position, a sudden series of blasts sent him flying forward with their concussion, and he felt the stinging pain of shrapnel imbedding in his back, before the world went black.

Tamia leaned her head back against the headrest of the EP junglecraft they borrowed for their mission, and fought back a wave of horror and sorrow. They’d been so close to walking out of Poco Nanches unscathed. Opening her eyes, she looked toward the medbay, where six unconscious figures lay. Three were children, suffering from malnutrition and injuries so severe that Tamia was surprised they’d lasted this long. Instinctively, her hand went to her belly, as if to protect her unborn child from the horror she’d witnessed digging through the rubble of that bunker in search of survivors.

Tamia’s eyes skimmed the occupants of the other three medbay stretchers, and her heart clenched in fear. Those were her friends, and none of them were lightly injured.

Chelsea was, by far, the worst off; she was barely hanging onto life by a thread. Tamia didn't even want to consider the extent of the other woman's injuries, remembering when she had been the casualty of an exploding building. It would be no small miracle if Chelsea survived.

Frank and Matt weren't quite as badly injured, though she wouldn't have been able to tell from the blood alone. Both men had bled quite a bit, and Kelly speculated that at least Frank had sustained a concussion from the blast. How bad was anyone's guess, until they could get him to proper medical facilities back in Rio de Janeiro.

"How're you holding up?" Tamia turned her head at Rick's quiet query, and sighed as she saw his grim, worried expression.

"I'll be a lot better once we know how bad they really are," she admitted with an awkward shrug. "I think I liked being the injured one more than I like this worrying."

He nodded his understanding as he checked the junglecraft's autopilot settings. The land-sea vehicles were equipped with automatic flight controls, set to return to the nearest EP hub when activated.

"We'll be there soon," Rick told her, and glanced back toward where Kelly moved among the stretchers, checking vitals. "Talk to me, Kel."

She looked up from one of the kids and sighed, her dark eyes sad. "Frank 'n' Matt are doin' fine, all things considered. Two of the little tykes might pull through if they get to hospital soon. Chelsea's pretty bad, but I think I can keep her stable, for now." Her expression turned grim. "I think we're gonna lose the other little one, though. I can't get a stable pulse, and I've had to jolt him twice, now."

As those words hung in the air, Tamia felt a fist of dread closing around her. Whatever the intelligence they found at Poco Nanches revealed, it would never be worth the price they already paid to get it.

Twenty minutes later, the junglecraft settled into its bay at the Equatorial Patrol dock, and the EP hospital staff Tamia had radioed ahead for met the Commando team as they disembarked. With a flurry of orders and motion, the six stretchers, including a now semi-conscious Matt Clipper, were whisked away, and the three remaining Commandos were left facing a dour-faced man wearing a Patrol uniform and Field Marshall stars.

Tamia winced as she met the man's granite-hard gaze. He clearly wasn't happy to see the dark night camouflage, or the duffle bags full of contraband equipment and weapons.

"Where's your friend now?" Rick asked next to her ear, his voice dark with sarcasm.

Tamia frowned. She was wondering that herself, but Rick didn't need to sound so smug about it. If Hoshimiro had cut them loose now, she was going to have serious words with him about loyalty.

"I will take it from here, Field Marshall Serano." Hoshimiro stepped through the bay doors, his expression stern.

"These people were in wrongful possession of Patrol equipment, Mr. Kyato. They are—"

"Here under my authority, and that of the Equatorial Patrol Security Council.

They are cleared to make use of all Patrol equipment necessary to monitor a very sensitive situation. That is all you need to know.”

Serano executed a smart salute, though his suspicious glower never abated as he turned and marched out the door. Breathing a sigh of relief, Tamia grinned at Hoshimiro.

“That’s what I call cutting it a little close, Hoshi!”

He faced them grimly. “Commandant Pierson wants you all officially debriefed. News of the damage done to the compound is spreading fast, and we can take no chances that it might lead to war. Even before you arrived, damage control teams and a research squad were dispatched.”

“Some of my team are severely injured, Kyato,” Rick said, his expression unyielding. “I don’t want them remaining here any longer than necessary.”

Hoshimiro nodded. “I have already informed the Commandant that one of the hostages recovered from the blast was Chelsea Perez. I have also contacted her father and gained his permission to send her to the US for treatment.” He glanced at Tamia. “That is why I am late.”

Tamia felt shame flood her for her earlier doubts. Of course Hoshimiro wouldn’t abandon them after he’d gone to the trouble to bring them here. Honor was his life, and turning on them would have been the ultimate dishonor. “Thank you, Hoshi.”

“And the others?” Rick broke in testily.

Hoshimiro shook his head. “That will be determined by the doctors. If they believe that either Mr. Harlin or Mr. Clipper is in any significant medical danger, they will request movement to a hospital installation. We will see about where they end up at

that time, should it arrive.”

Rick nodded. “Good enough.”

“For now,” Hoshimiro continued, “I will need the three of you to accompany me. You must be debriefed.”

And, looking into Hoshimiro’s unyielding eyes, Tamia stilled Rick’s protest with a hand on his arm. There was nothing to be done except to follow Hoshimiro, and pray that their comrades were in good hands.

Tamia sighed and rolled her head in an effort to lessen the stiffness in her neck, and cast a look at the man lying unconscious in the bed beside her chair. She’d been sitting in Frank Harlin’s room ever since Matt Clipper had finally come around completely, shortly before dawn. So far, Frank hadn’t so much as stirred, and she had to activate the distress alarm once when, shortly after she arrived, he stopped breathing.

“C’mon, big guy,” she murmured, staring at him as if her gaze alone could make him awaken. “Rick doesn’t want to have to explain to Calli why we didn’t bring your sorry ass home alive.”

No response. At least, not from Frank, she acknowledged with a small, wry smile. A fluttering in her womb had Tamia smoothing her hand over her abdomen in an absently soothing motion. The baby was getting more and more active, every day.

“Good morning, sweetie,” she whispered as she let her hand linger against her belly, even as she lifted her book with her free hand. Sighing, she went back to her reading.

She sat up straight in the next instant, her book forgotten, as the man in the bed groaned and stirred. His gray eyes flickered open, and she offered him a relieved smile.

“Hey, big guy. Glad to have you back in the land of the living,” she said, bending over him. “You scared the shit out of me this morning with that little breathing stunt.”

Frank groaned again. “Where am I?”

“EP Headquarters. They won’t let any of us leave until you both give official statements.”

“Both?” He croaked groggily.

“You and Matt, yeah. Rick’s in talking with Matt, right now. He should be here soon.”

Frank tried to sit up, and grimaced. Tamia felt a shaft of empathy; she’d hated being injured. She could imagine how it must feel for Frank.

“Tamia, what... what happened?”

Concern avalanched through her. The doctors hadn’t said anything about amnesia. “Don’t you remember?”

“I remember Chelsea fiddling with those damned circuits, and Matt saying that the explosives were set. I remember Kel saying to get the hell out, and...My God,” he managed in a stricken voice, falling back to the bed. “Chelsea. She’d taken off her mask. She was still in there, when...”

“Yeah.” Tamia felt her throat closing at the memory of rooting through little bodies, searching for survivors. Those dead children had made her all that much more determined to protect her own child, even if that mean concealing its existence from its

own father.

She looked up at Frank, saw the pain etched on his face, and knew it was only partly from the wounds he'd suffered. She reached to lay one hand lightly on his arm.

"She's alive, Frank," she murmured reassuringly. "At least, she was last time I saw her. The EP recognized her, thought she was a victim of the compound, too, and contacted her father. He insisted they send her to the US for treatment, and Hoshi got her shipped to Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York. Jen's going to keep an eye on her for us."

"Thank God," Frank muttered, his eyes closed. Then, cracking one eyelid, he asked, "How bad was she hurt?"

"Bad enough," came Rick's grim voice from the doorway. "Preliminary medical exam indicated that she's probably lost a couple of organs. Matt just got off the phone with Jen, and she said the doctors aren't sure there's anything left to use for regrowth. Chelsea's going to be in isolation for at least a good month, for now."

"And Matt?"

"About the same as you. He has a concussion, a couple of cracked ribs, and a whole lot of cuts and bruises."

Frank glanced back to Tamia. "The kids?"

She pressed a trembling hand to her mouth, her eyes welling with tears as she fought the painful memories. She turned away, unable to speak.

"Six survivors," Rick said grimly. "The three you and Matt got out are going to be fine, once they get over the mental trauma. The EP doc had to remove

microtransmitters from their skulls, but once they're healed, they'll be placed with good families down here. The other three we found were in pretty bad shape. I convinced the EP to send them to Bocas del Toro for medical attention. From there, a contact of mine will see that they get to Castor National Children's Hospital, in Phoenix. That's the best we can do for them."

As she looked between the two men, Tamia had the unsettling feeling that they were seeing the beginning of the end for the Commandos. Why did she get the feeling that they'd just played into a madman's hands?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rick sighed as he sat back from his work with a frown. Something was wrong with his team, and it was ruining his concentration, wondering what was going on. For the past month, since they'd returned from Poco Nanches, the Underground had been virtually silent, with very little of the camaraderie that had existed before. Tamia was withdrawn and looked ill more often than not, Jen wore a perpetually worried frown, and even ever-cheerful Kelly looked unaccountably grim these days. Something had to give, eventually, and he was left with a knot of dread in his gut, wondering what that would be.

Suddenly, Jen burst out of Comms and, shooting Rick a worried glance, demanded, "Where's Tamia, today?"

He blinked, nonplussed. "She's not out on assignment today. She's probably in her quarters, or the gym. Want me to check?"

"No," she said shortly. "I'll do it."

With that, she disappeared through the door with a rapidity that was unlike Jen's normally sedate pace. And she was on Comms; Jen *never* left her job unfinished. The knot in his gut grew tighter, and Rick rose to his feet, turning toward Comms, determined to find the answer. A voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Rick, I need to talk to you."

Rick turned to face Frank Harlin's grim expression. He'd been expecting

something like this; ever since they returned from South America, Frank had been withdrawn and silent, almost brooding. He'd imagined all the possible scenarios, and just prayed that the one he dreaded most wasn't about to happen. "What's up, Frank?"

"I'm calling it quits."

Rick blinked at the big man, and felt his gut plummet. It *was* as bad as he'd thought. Aside from himself and Tamia, Frank had always been the most staunchly behind the ideals and mission of the Commandos. If he was calling it quits...

"You're kidding."

"No." Frank sighed, leaning his arms against the back of Tamia's empty seat. "I can't do this, anymore, Rick. From the moment we hit Poco Nanches, my gut's been telling me we're in over our heads. It's only going to get uglier..."

"We saw enough 'ugly' during the Divide to write a book about, Frank," Rick said quietly, watching the other man for some sign that he wasn't seriously considering leaving. But he was, deadly serious. "You never talked about backing out, then. Why now?"

"Because ugly never cost a hundred children their lives, before."

"They weren't living before we got there, either, Frank. They were zombies."

"They were *kids*," Frank reiterated, his eyes darkening with anger. "We're supposed to be the good guys, here!"

"We are the good guys," Rick said firmly. "Watchdog set those charges exactly the way he'd been told to. Bunker Three shouldn't have blown like that; I have no idea why it did. Only the control room was supposed to go, and you know it."

“That doesn’t matter, Rick. I can’t stay with an organization that kills children.”

He glanced away, then muttered, “Calli and I are getting married, Rick. She wants me out.”

Rick sat down heavily, stunned. In all the time he’d known Frank, the other man had consistently claimed he wasn’t built for marriage. Why had he suddenly changed his mind?

“Congratulations. Uh, can I ask why so suddenly?”

Frank shrugged, and pinned Rick with his dark gray eyes. “There’s something about thinking you’re going to die that sort of changes all your priorities. You see exactly what’s important. And what’s important to me is Calli; I don’t want her to ever have to worry that I’m not coming home again.”

Rick felt those words stab him between the eyes as his mind flew back to his own proposal to Tamia. Calli Malone didn’t know – or want to know – what Frank did on the job. She assumed that every time she told Frank good-bye, she was saying it forever, she once told Rick at the height of the Divide, when he’d gone to tell her Frank had been injured. If Calli felt that way, what must go through Tamia’s head prior to missions? She knew all the details of the mission at hand, including the odds of injury or loss. It must rip her to shreds on the inside; it certainly did that to him. He recalled the pacing he’d done, the anxious insomnia that had plagued him, the entire time she was snooping around Poco Nanches alone.

Looking up, he found Frank watching him intently, and sighed. He couldn’t stop Frank from leaving; their code stated that a Commando only had to say he or she wanted

out to leave. But, damn, he was going to miss the big guy.

“All right, Frank. You do understand that you’re required to sign a Secrecy Act agreement?”

Frank nodded. “Don’t worry. The Commandos are still important to me. I just can’t do the job, anymore.”

“Okay. I’ll get the paperwork to you by the end of the day. You sign it, and you’re free to go. And, Frank,” he said as the other man turned away. “You know you can always come back.”

Frank grinned suddenly. “I know that, but I don’t think I’ll be back. I’ve got everything I ever needed waiting for me at home.” He sobered then. “Good luck, Rick. I hope you catch the bastard.”

And, sitting alone in the command center, Rick wondered why Frank’s statement about having everything he needed stuck with him most.

Frank’s words still troubled Rick that evening as he sat in his quarters watching the news, with Tamia’s sleeping warmth curled up against him. Glancing down at her dark head, he felt an emptiness sweep through him that terrified him. How had they come to this point? They were like familiar strangers, sharing downtime, and, occasionally, a bed. But they weren’t communicating – not like they used to. There was a wall around Tamia, these days, like she didn’t want him close. That thought scared him.

Gently, Rick brushed his fingers over Tamia’s cheek, pushing back the silky

strands of midnight hair so that he could study her sleeping face. As he watched her, his chest tightened and his gut clenched. God, she was so beautiful she took his breath away. He loved her so much, and all he wanted was for her to trust him enough to drop those walls she'd raised. Was that really so much to ask?

As if she felt his gaze on her, Tamia stirred and blinked awake. Sleepy mahogany eyes met his and a soft, apologetic smile danced over her lips. "I must have drifted off. You should have woken me."

"You looked like you could use the sleep more," he murmured, brushing a kiss over her forehead. It was only the truth. Lately, Tamia looked exhausted all the time, with dark smudges beneath her eyes and a pallor to her face that terrified him. But she hadn't said a word about being sick, and he knew he'd catch hell for implying as much.

She blinked owlshly at him. "What's wrong, Rick?"

He turned his eyes away. How did he tell the woman he loved more than life that he was debating the wisdom of continuing a relationship that was going nowhere but backwards? He didn't know, so he didn't try.

"Frank quit today."

Tamia sat up abruptly. "*What?*"

Well, that at least got her attention, he conceded sourly. "I said, Frank quit."

"I heard you the first time. Why?"

He shot her a look. Why was this upsetting her so much? It wasn't like they'd never see Frank again. "Does it matter? He's already gone."

"Of course it matters!" She stared at him, before her eyes narrowed. "What the

hell's got into you, Rick? When did you transfuse yourself with ice water?"

"Probably about the same time you bailed on me, Captain," he snapped, jerking away to rise and pace. He couldn't deal with this; it was tearing him apart, inside. "As if you have space to talk about ice!"

She snapped upright, looking for the world as if he'd physically struck her.

"Rick..."

He turned away. Damn it, he was frustrated, angry, and heartsick, because of her. He didn't want to care that she was hurting, too, or that his words were what wounded her. He didn't want to care; but he did care, damn it all! He wanted the open, expressive – and yes, even obstinate – woman he loved back!

"Frank's quitting because of Poco Nanches. He said he doesn't want to be known as a baby-killer. He and Calli are getting married." He turned as he said the last, just in time to see her flinch. His anger exploded at that movement. "Damn it, Tamia! What are you so damned afraid of?"

She looked up and met his eyes, and the pain in those mahogany depths slammed into his heart.

"I was afraid of losing you," she said quietly, even as she rose and slipped her feet into her shoes. "But now I see that I was foolish to think that, because I never really had you, did I? Good-bye, Rick."

Those words hit him right between the eyes, nearly bowling him over. She was leaving! As she moved toward the door, dread of losing her completely crowded everything else from his mind.

“Tamia!” He rushed to stop her, placing himself between her and the door.

“C’mon, honey, this is stupid. I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to snap at you like that.”

She looked up at him, and her eyes were weary and tear-filled. “Why are we fighting, Rick? I thought we were solid...”

“We *are* solid,” he whispered, reaching to pull her into his arms. God, he wanted it to be true, even though he knew it wasn’t. Maybe he should just throw away his damned pride; if that was the only way to keep her, he’d do it. “This is all my damned fault, sweetheart. I want something you can’t give, and it’s tearing me apart.”

Her arms crept around him, and he closed his eyes as he felt her trembling against him. He barely heard her as she murmured, “I won’t hold out on you forever, Rick. Just give me time.”

“You got it, honey,” he said, tilting her face up to kiss her lightly. “As long as you need.”

“All I need right now,” she said as she raised up to kiss him, “is you.”

And, as he lost himself in the sweetness of her lips, Rick decided that he could live with that, for now. Sooner or later, he’d need the truth; but, for now, he just wanted to hold Tamia for as long as she’d let him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tamia sat on Rick's bed, staring at the leather box that mocked her from the bedside stand. She knew he hadn't left it there deliberately, but its presence stabbed her anew each time she saw it; it practically screamed *traitor* at her. Tamia's gaze dropped to her hands. She couldn't look at Rick, for fear of giving in, either to him or to tears. God, she loved him so much. So why was she doing this to him? Because she loved him, and she couldn't live a lie if it meant hurting him. She'd rather be in pain herself. But last night, after she'd convinced him that she was too tired to make love, she realized that the truth was hurting him as much as a lie would, because he still didn't know why she was denying what they both wanted.

This verbal dancing around the truth wasn't the kind of dancing she wanted to do with Rick. Her heart lurched as she remembered their very first dance together. They'd danced together since then, but not like that first time. That had been magical, a slow awareness of each other. Feeling warmth rush through her, Tamia looked up at Rick with a hesitant smile. "No one's ever proposed to me before."

He bent to kiss her lightly. "No one?"

She shook her head, and her eyes turned away. "David didn't believe that anything, or anyone, was worth that kind of faith. He was only looking for a body to fuck. He didn't care what I thought, or how I felt, or even who I was."

“Then he was a fool.” His voice was husky as he kissed her neck, and then drew away to look down into her eyes, his indigo with emotion. “Don’t ever judge me by him.”

She knew what he was saying, but she couldn’t give him the answer he wanted. Looking away, she gave him the only answer she could give; she changed the subject. “You should go. You’ll be late.”

He studied her with hungry, but wary, eyes, and then glanced at the clock. “Shit, you’re right.” He gave her a quick kiss. “See you later, babe.”

“Yeah. Later.” She murmured as she watched the door slide shut behind him. God, why was she doing this?

Rick sighed heavily as he laid the file back on the desk. “Shit, John. That’s tough.”

“Yeah.” John Tolson, Head of Internal Affairs and former Press Secretary to ex-President Clinton Marsols, leaned back in his seat. “Nobody gets much more high profile than Martin Panfild. The fact that he’s been indicated in a recent drug bust, along with a prominent businessman like Charles Horner is either the coup of a lifetime, or a shitstorm ready to blow up in everyone’s faces. You understand the kind of pressure I’m under to do this quietly?”

“Yeah, I guess. But, John, this isn’t our jurisdiction. This is the FBI’s business.”

“Hell, Rick, I know that.” Tolson swiveled his chair to face the window. “But this is an operation that I can’t afford to have bungled by Pete Wilson and his boys during

an election year. Not like Hiram Sparker did to the last one.”

The last one, June 15, 2109. The war that should never have happened; and Tolson viewed it as nothing more than a bungled political operation. Yeah. Like a doctor mistaking someone’s brain for a bullet. The Divide had been started by a supposedly failed coup in Buenos Aires, a coup backed by the CIA and ordered by the acting Chairman of CEADS, then-president Marsols. Countless lives had been lost in the following seven years, and even more were still missing, but Tolson looked upon it as nothing more than a political stumbling block for ex-President Marsols. With a disgusted sigh, Rick shook his head. “I still don’t see what this has to do with my Commandos, John. Why not send in IA agents, or Special Forces? Why us?”

Tolson sighed heavily. “Because your team’s got a public success rate of almost one hundred percent, but a completely silent Ops record. No one will ever know, until after it’s all said and done, if your Commandos go in. C’mon, Rick, I’m being pressured here to make this work.”

“Is this all the information you have? You’re not holding out on me, are you?”

Tolson’s head shook. “That’s it. Any reason why?”

Rick scanned the meager contents of the folder again. “Yeah. Last few operations went badly...”

“Not from what I heard!”

Rick sighed. “No, we did what we were sent in to do. But they didn’t work the way they were supposed to. Our informants forgot to mention some very relevant things. Nearly got two killed and had another three with minor wounds. I don’t want a repeat of

those odds again.”

Tolson nodded, gesturing to the file in Rick’s hand. “What you’ve got there’s all the information I have to give. Names, numbers, shit like that; if you want to question anyone. Hell, Rick, I wish I could be of more help, but it’s all being kept under wraps, and we’re not even sure if it’s for real. You could end up on a wild goose chase, and Panfild come up clean. You could end up with nothing at all to do in this except talk to a few people. Then again, we could have another war on our hands.”

Rick grimaced. He didn’t like vague orders, or vague information. And he really didn’t trust politicians like John Tolson. If any one of his team got killed in this, there’d be hell to pay on Tolson’s part.

Ten minutes later, Rick stuffed the manila envelope containing the file and five CDs of information into the inner pocket of his leather jacket and headed out into the snowy winter streets. He looked around for a cab, and then decided he’d walk the distance back to the compound. Hell, it was only twelve blocks. He’d gone farther than that with an 80 pound pack on his back as a SEAL. Besides, the walk might help clear his head.

He let his eyes scan the snowy storefronts as he went, watching the people bustle in and out with armloads of packages. Two weeks till Christmas. The stores along Park and 49th were done up like whores in heavy make-up, flaunting their merchandise in bold red-and-green signs and lights, in bright, festive displays. Rick sighed heavily. He didn’t feel like Christmas. The hard, heavy lump in his jacket hung over him like Scrooge over

Cratchett, blocking out all thoughts of celebration or festivity.

Merry Christmas, he told himself in wry, bitter humor. Christmas would probably find the team on a stakeout, crouched in some godforsaken place, waiting tensely to see who would get hurt next; who might die.

Damn. Why was he still doing this? He could disband the entire team, settle down, and have a family. But something in him was crying out for justice, for vengeance. They were the voices of his own Christmases past; buddies who had died in his fucked-up Christmas raids. They were the reason why he had rescued Matt from Cabrini; the reason he kept such a tight rein on the brash black man. He saw in Matt Clipper the man he had been himself, once, and had hoped to save another from repeating his mistakes. And, speaking of mistakes...

Rick winced as he recalled his argument with Tamia from last night. He was a selfish bastard. What right did he have to ask her to marry him? What had she done to deserve that kind of life? What in her past was so horrible to deserve him as a husband? She should be happily married, with the children she wanted so badly. Instead, she was stuck in a “might-as-well-be-military” unit, deprived of children, or even the assurance that her lover would always be there. He worried for her if he would ever die. He wondered, for an instant, if proposing to her had been smart after all. But he couldn’t live with anything less, now. He had to offer her what security he could.

Security. Damn. His mind went to the folder in his pocket again. Grimly, he considered the assignment he’d been handed – the assignment he’d accepted. Hell, once he wouldn’t even have questioned the mission – orders were orders. But now, he

wondered. He wasn't satisfied with the information Tolson had given him – damned little. A list of names and numbers that probably wouldn't mean squat in the end. He could send Kathy Terrell to do most of the interviews – most of them were politicians anyway. As for the four DEA agents whose names he'd seen in passing... hell, he already missed having Frank Harlin around. There wasn't anyone better than a DEA agent to get information out of that cagey lot. But Frank had decided that enough was enough, after Chelsea had nearly gotten killed at Poco Nanches. One hundred ninety-seven dead in the end – mostly children. Frank quit the Commandos yesterday, wanting out of a job that he'd said "meant killing kids." He'd decided to move on with his life, and Rick wished him well. It would be easier to look at the vacant space at the table and know Frank was living a happier life, than to have to remember another funeral. God, he'd been to too many of those back with the SEALs. Of course, it didn't mean that looking at that space wouldn't hurt them all – but at least they wouldn't have to grieve for him.

Rick sighed. He'd set the Commandos up on a code all his own, a mandate the military had not been able to understand. But Rick had been firm, and the brass had capitulated, eventually. The Commandos were a testament of memory. Every one of them had lost someone, somewhere. Rick had watched too many faces come and go quickly during the early days of the Divide. He'd seen buddies die, only to become lost in the paper shuffling of finding a replacement. Now, those guys were only a string of numbers on an endless sheet of KIAs and MIAs, their bodies rotting in some unmarked hole in the ground. Thinking about it was enough to drive a man crazy. But the brass

never saw combat – they didn't understand what happened out there, and why combat fatigue even occurred. And Rick, like every other frontliner, knew only too well. And Rick, like many, never forgot. Those men and women were real to him; he could close his eyes and watch them die, all over again. And it hurt like hell.

Rick had decided he wasn't going to lead a team who forgot their dead, or even their living. When a Commando went, by any means, they weren't replaced. If that meant that the team no longer functioned, so be it. But one spot didn't hinder their operations, unfortunately. They had a gap in the ranks for the entire Divide, and they operated just fine. Of course, that space hadn't been from a death or dismissal. Rick hadn't started his roster until midway through the Divide, and he looked for certain qualities. Like Matt, for his brashness, or Frank for his sound reasoning, or Kathy for her connection to a scene they'd otherwise have been unable to manipulate. Same with Chelsea and Ishmael. Kelly had taken convincing, after he discovered her. She hadn't wanted to draw attention to herself, and Carrissa had been adamantly opposed to Kelly's placing herself back into the war zone again. Walter had approached Rick, asking if they needed technical assistance. Rick dug up Walter's record, and instated him soon after. A hacker was a good thing to have. Jen came recommended with a degree in psychological profiling from IA. Rick was glad to have her there, if only to keep rein on Matt. But there had been one space left. Rick hadn't known exactly what he was looking for in that person. A quick mind, maybe, or combat reflexes that would stand good as a replacement for himself if he should die. He wanted someone with a military record that was next to spotless, and who would understand exactly why the Commandos operated as

they did. Someone who could hold their own, on any level. He went through literally thousands of military records searching for that person, looking for someone to complete the team. Most of them had come close, but not close enough. He'd added them to a list of possible recruits, and requested a volunteer. But when he came to Tamia's file, he knew he'd found the one he really wanted for the unit. He was impressed by her record, and her background had seemed eerily familiar, at the time. It was almost as if he'd already known her. When she submitted her name for the transfer, he'd disregarded all the other names on that list. And then, when he laid eyes on her for the first time, he knew he was in trouble, because she was the woman he'd been dreaming about since Rio Bantos. They had a rocky start, mainly because he hadn't trusted himself, or her motives. But now, he couldn't even think of what it would have been like if she hadn't volunteered.

Rick sighed again. He wished that Frank hadn't decided to call it quits. Frank had been a close friend of Rick's since day one, and he'd shown amazing support for Tamia. He was definitely going to be missed. Oh, well. No point thinking about it. Maybe he'd get Walter Maddoc to have a go at the DEA; he always seemed to know how to get people talking.

As for the street punks on the list, hell, that was an easy one. Matt Clipper was a product of the streets, rescued by Rick from the Cabrini Green district of Chicago in 2113. A bonafide "brutha," with an attitude larger than the state of Texas and an amazing immunity to interrogation of any kind, Matt knew how to get what he wanted with very little effort. Rick grinned wryly at that, but his face fell in the next instant, as he

remembered another “product of the streets” – who would most decidedly *not* be going back out there – Tamia. She’d grown up on the streets too, and knew the gang and punk types as well as Matt did. Only, Tamia gave that up for the military, and she didn’t have the connections that Matt still kept. Tamia’d been used when she ran with the gangs, and she didn’t like the streets.

Shaking his head to clear it, Rick centered on the mission again. Chelsea would have to head south again, back to Peru. He’d have Walter give her some bugs, maybe, and keep an ear to the drug trafficker’s trade. He wanted Kelly mixing with the bar-hoppers, finding out what they knew about Charles Horner and Panfild. After a moment’s consideration, he decided he’d keep Jen LaSaulle in reserve, as their Comms monitor. That way, if there were any problems, they’d know. That meant, of course, that the hardest lot would once again fall to the only two people in the unit who could afford to put their necks on the proverbial chopping block – Tamia and himself. They were the only ones capable of unobserved infiltration at the War Department. Rick and Tamia could walk freely through the doors, access the Spec Ops computer terminals, and the military files, without question, until they started opening coded files. Then, they would have to supply a reason for being there. Once in the system, they couldn’t just withdraw either. Those terminals were monitored. They would have to have the access codes – they only had one try.

Shit. He hadn’t thought of that. That meant a break-in to Panfild’s office, and another go at the War Department sealed rooms. There just wasn’t any other way. Panfild wasn’t going to store personal acquisitions on an open file. Well, they were both trained in

espionage and covert operations procedures. He just had to keep telling himself they'd be okay. Rick frowned suddenly. Everything seemed to be falling into place too easily, as though someone had already known. What was going to go wrong?

Rick looked up just then, and saw the cheery storefronts that were the Underground's cover. With a grin at the irony of such festive innocence covering over that solemn, military world beneath, Rick headed toward the building. Tamia wasn't going to like what he'd found out. But maybe he could soften up his news a little...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The compound halls were empty when Rick stepped off the elevator a short while later. Only to be expected, he guessed. He saw Carrissa Leads arrive earlier, when he was leaving the building, which meant Kelly was probably long gone. Matt and Jen were no doubt out and about – no point staying cooped up here when they weren't on assignment yet, and Matt chafed at confinement, anyway. Rick decided he'd check Tamia's quarters and see if she was in. It wasn't until he started down the hallway that he heard the unmistakable sounds of combat from the gym. Rick's brow furrowed. The Arena, he believed, as scenarios could be programmed into the screening systems there to provide training in weaponry and in hand-to-hand. The sounds of precision-drilled punches, and the rattle of chains, were coming from the gym, though. He knew that cadence, and the solid sounds were not those of a body being hit, but a very bruised punching bag. With a smile, Rick stopped before the gym door, and keyed the access pad, stepping into the room as the door slid open. His brow furrowed as he saw her, and took in her unusual workout attire. Gone was the skin-tight bodysuit she preferred, and in its place she wore loose sweats and a t-shirt emblazoned with the MAFT logo. He watched for a moment, wondering what led to the switch, and then called, "How would you go for a sparring partner?"

She stopped, and then turned to grin at him. "Depends. How much hand-to-hand

you been doing lately?”

He shrugged off his coat and discarded it on the bench, then rolled up his sleeves. His eyes glittered in friendly challenge as he grinned back. Ever since they came back from South America, Tamia had found excuses to avoid any intimacy between them, and it was driving him crazy. He knew her cool attitude toward their relationship was contributing to the new tension that hummed between them. Maybe this would help take the edge off those pent-up emotions. “Enough to put up one helluva fight.”

She laughed. “You’re on, hotshot!”

Rick stopped, looking at her bare feet, then down at his own feet, clad in heavy combat boots, and his brow furrowed. “I should take my boots off.”

She laughed again, and shook her head. “Don’t bother.”

He looked at her in concern for a long moment, and then sighed. “If you say so. I don’t want to hurt you...”

“You won’t,” Tamia assured him, flexing her fingers.

His footfalls echoed in the concrete room, covering the soft swish of her feet scooting across the floor. They fell into stances, measured each other for a long moment, and then began. At first, Rick’s moves were careful, and slow, afraid he might hurt her. Tamia’s eyes gleamed as she dodged and ducked them all with fluid grace, like a ripple on a calm lake, barely moving at all. Her perfectly measured, and perfectly controlled, blows hit him just solidly enough to sting, but left little doubt in him that, had she wanted to, those hits could have been lethal.

“C’mon,” she pressed him, ducking easily under his punch, bringing her foot

around to connect solidly with his side at the same time, “surely the great Ace Carinon can do better than this! I remember our last fight here being more entertaining.”

He saw the playful twinkle in her eye, and his hand shot out in a lightning-quick move, closing around her ankle before she could withdraw. She twisted free in a moment, but their match had suddenly changed. Rick pressed more, moved faster. He no longer worried about hurting her. Tamia was capable of taking care of herself.

He was good, Tamia decided as he blocked a kick no one should rightly have seen coming. At least, no one ever had before. But then, Rick always managed to anticipate attacks he shouldn't rightly have seen coming. He was very good, indeed, but not good enough to beat her again. That determination crossed her mind even as she pinned him to the floor in a move he obviously hadn't anticipated – her knees pressing his lower arms to the floor, her feet and lower legs successfully pinning his legs, her hand cocked, two fingers bent out, as if to deliver a killing blow to his neck. It was a maneuver few ever saw coming, a perversion of her training that had been born of necessity on the streets, a cunning move that had saved her life more times than she cared to count, for all that Kuron'd disown her if he ever saw it. “Give up?”

He grinned up at her. “Yeah. God, you're good. You've got forms I've never seen before.”

She rose gracefully to her feet, and then offered him a hand in rising. “I was trained by the best, and learned to use what I had available to stay alive in 'Frisco. Kuron'd roast me alive and serve me for lunch if he ever saw half of that, though.”

He stood looking at her, watching a bead of sweat trickle down her neck and under the loose neckline of her baggy t-shirt. Hunger tightened in his gut, and he wondered what it would take to convince her to join him in the shower. He wanted to see her naked again, it'd been way too long. Then, as she moved past him toward the bench where her towel lay, he shook his head, clearing it. Thank God he kept his head on missions. He sure as hell didn't keep it around her any other time. He turned to look at her as she picked up her towel and draped it around her neck, wiping at her face and neck, and his brow furrowed. Why was she hiding herself like this? When he thought back over recent events, he realized she'd started dressing like this ever since the evening he'd proposed. Surprise and dread wound together in his chest; but, before he could decide what the connection meant, she turned to look at him with somber eyes and asked, "So, what'd IA want?"

He sighed, moving to the bench near her, where his coat lay. He sat down, not looking at her for a long moment. "They gave us an assignment, Tamia."

"What kind of assignment?"

He rubbed his hand across his face. "Hell, I'm not even sure myself, babe. John Tolson isn't much help on *good* days, let alone during a crisis. All I know right now is that it's big and, like we suspected, it involves Panfild. What, exactly, 'it' is, we'll have to wait until we talk to some more people to find out. I've got a list of names, some contacts. We'll check 'em out, and see what's going on."

She frowned, and then closed her eyes. "So we play amateur detectives first, and

then do our real job? Dammit, Rick, why can't they ever make it just one or the other? What are we, some kind of Sherlock Holmes/Rambo team? I thought the FBI, or CIA, or *IA*, was supposed to do the spy stuff."

"Not this time," he said, and then reached to pull her down into his lap, giving her a small squeeze as he kissed the bare skin that peeped from the stretched-out neckline of her t-shirt. "But it's going to be real easy stuff, babe. Don't get so worked up over it."

Tamia felt Rick's hand against her body, moving languidly. Dear God, did he suspect? She was being so careful to keep him enough at a distance so he wouldn't guess. Nervously, she reached for his hand, surreptitiously moving it away from her body before the baby could move and give her away, and looked into his eyes. "So, how soon do we start?" She asked then, rising and reaching for her loose sweatshirt that lay on the bench. "What's the plan?"

His brow furrowed, and her heart lurched as she thought he might say something about her reaction. He sighed and shook his head. "I'm sending Diamond, Watchdog, and Chips to make some inquiries first. Beyond that, nothing's going to happen yet. Once we have some idea what we're really up against, there'll be plenty of time to plan."

Tamia nodded absently. Not as much time as Rick thought. She was beginning to show, just a little. Dr. Faulker said that, with her metabolism, she probably wouldn't get much bigger for at least another month, but it still worried her.

"Tamia?" She looked up, startled, at the sound of his voice. "Tamia, are you okay?"

“Yeah,” she murmured. “Just a little preoccupied with things. Trying to sort out some stuff, that’s all.”

His eyes narrowed. “What sort of ‘stuff’?”

Her heart flipped over. Shit. He did suspect. She tried to shrug it off. “Nothing important. It’s just...Ever since he called, I’ve been worried about Kuron. Hell, Rick, I haven’t seen him since shortly after David died, years ago. Kuron never just calls like that. I’m afraid...”

He looked at her for a long moment. “You need to go there, don’t you? To see him, make sure he’s okay?”

“Yeah. That would be great, but—”

“Then go,” Rick said quietly, taking her hand.

Her eyes widened. “I can’t just leave! Rick, we’ve just been assigned a mission. I have to be here.”

He shook his head. “Not for a while. Kathy’s going to be a good month or so in her interviews. Go see Kuron. Don’t lose the only family you’ve got for this bullshit, Tamia.”

Her heart lurched at his comment. *A month*. Christ, she was going to be in real deep shit by the time they got around to the actual mission. God, she really needed to talk to Kuron, to get his advice. She didn’t want to lose her baby, and she was terrified of what could happen. She needed the peace Kuron could provide her with. She needed his wisdom. With a small sigh, she nodded. “I’ll go see Kuron.”

Rick reached into his coat pocket, and smiled as his hand closed over the small, festively wrapped package hidden there. Still smiling, he pulled it out and handed it to Tamia. "I got something for you. Merry Christmas, honey."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked between the jeweler's box sized gift and his smiling face. She looked suspicious as all hell, and absolutely adorable. "That better not be what I think it is, Carinson."

"It's not," he promised, grinning at her. "C'mon. Take it, already."

She reached out warily, closing her hand around the small gift as if she feared it would bite her. Frowning as she studied it, she said, "I'll wait until Christmas."

His hand closed over hers, gift and all. He gave her a slow, wicked grin. "What happened to the Steel Doll? Open it now."

She shot him a glare, and he nearly laughed. She hated that nickname; he knew it from the Tankers she used to lead. But it was enough to goad her into tearing into the wrappings on the box. A small gasp broke from her lips, and her eyes widened, as she lifted the lid from the box.

"A *hololocket*?" She whispered in disbelief and denial. "Rick, these things are expensive!"

"And not worth near as much as your peace of mind," he returned gently, closing his hands around hers. "You seemed so upset, last night. I wanted to get you something that might help make things easier if..." He looked away, unable to finish.

Tamia freed one hand, reaching to turn his face back to her. Her mahogany eyes were sad. "You're worried, aren't you?"

He nodded, moving one hand to hold hers against his cheek as he stared into her eyes. “That blow-up last night wasn’t like you, Tamia; and you’ve been so distant lately. Ever since we got together, you’ve been talking about having a family; before Poco Nanches, I offered you all of that, and you still won’t even consider it. I thought, maybe it’s some fear of yours; maybe you’re afraid of being left with nothing again. So this,” he touched the hololocket, “was a small enough price to pay if it helps still that fear.”

She sighed as she sat down beside him, carefully lifting the small, silvery locket from its box. “Rick, there’s nothing I’m afraid of that this ‘locket can solve. There’s no heal-all for my fears.” She looked up at him, her eyes filmed with pain. “There’re things about me that you don’t want to know; things that make the kind of future I want one I can’t have. And,” her eyes closed, “I’m terrified of losing you.”

Rick took the locket from her trembling hand and fastened it around her neck. He leaned close then, drawing in a deep breath filled with her warm scent, before pressing his lips to the smooth column of her neck as he whispered, “I love you too much to ever let that happen, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Flight twelve-fifty-two, non-stop to Marshall International Airfield, San Francisco, now boarding at ramp Eighteen B.”

Tamia turned to Rick with a too-bright smile, her eyes shimmering with tears, as the announcement finished. “Well, that’s me.”

“Hey,” he said softly, pulling her into a tight embrace. “You’re not leaving forever, sweetheart.”

“I know,” she mumbled against his chest, her hands clutching at his back as if she couldn’t bear to let go. “But I’m not even gone yet and I already miss you.”

He smiled tenderly, tilting her face up to his.

“I’m going to miss you, too, babe,” he said huskily, staring into those sad mahogany eyes as his heart constricted. “You take care of yourself.”

With that, he bent his head and claimed her lips in a hungry kiss, knowing it would never be enough to see him through the long days, and even longer nights, ahead. But he couldn’t hold her here; she needed to make sure the old man was all right.

She returned his kiss avidly, as if clinging to some part of her life that she was about to let go forever, and the fear returned anew. Then she was pulling herself away, her eyes averted from him as she grabbed up her bag and turned quickly toward the loading ramp. And in a moment, she was gone, without a backward glance. Watching

her departing backside, Rick felt the emptiness engulf him. He hoped like hell that she'd come back, because if Tamia left him for good, Rick already knew that his life would be over.

Turning toward the terminal's parking garage, Rick forced aside his fears. He had a mission to get back to, and it was about time he did his job, before he went totally out of his mind.

Rick's phone was ringing as he entered his quarters thirty minutes later. Dropping his leather jacket onto the sofa, he snagged the portable unit on his way to the kitchen for a drink. "Carinson."

"Rick, it's me."

"Jean?" Rick, in the middle of opening the refrigerator door, stopped cold. Concern shot through him. Jean wouldn't have called, unless... "What's up, kid?"

"I can't talk long. Rick, there's something really weird going on over at Pier Forty. My preliminary interviews with Horner have been cancelled twice, and one of my sources has since gone underground. She's refusing to talk to me, anymore."

He frowned. "Jean, what have you gotten yourself into?"

"I can't tell you, Rick."

"Bullshit," he swore, slamming the fridge door shut. What was it with women and secrets, lately? "You just don't *want* to tell me."

"Rick, this is important. My editor wants this interview sewn up before anyone else knows about it. I'm not allowed to talk until I get the interview."

“And I can’t get authorization for a hit on US soil without hard evidence, Jean.”

There was a pounding noise in the background. “Rick, there’s someone at my door. I have to go. I’ll call you after I talk to Horner.”

“Jean, I don’t think—” But she’d already hung up, leaving Rick to swear under his breath, more worried than ever before. Jean was a naturally open, talkative person. She’d told him about all her assignments before Montreal. So what did it take to seal her lips, and her thoughts, against her oldest, and closest, friend? He was very much afraid he didn’t want to know the answer.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tamia stepped off of the global commuter, her eyes already searching. Her brow wrinkled in concern when she found only a sea of middle-aged faces, eagerly expectant of returning college kids. Then, as she scanned further away, she saw him. He was sitting at a small plastic table in the airport cafe, crinkling his well-lined face in disgust as he sniffed the contents of his teacup. A brief, wry grin crossed her face as she grabbed up her bag and headed toward him. As she neared, she put on her most dignified, respectful face, and sighed inwardly that he was so damned proper about filial respect.

He looked up as she approached, his piercing dark eyes framed in crinkly skin as he smiled. She offered him proper reverence, setting down her bag and bowing before him. “Grandfather.”

He nodded his approval. “And I worried that you would forget.” He looked at her severely then. “You are pregnant.”

She sighed inwardly. Of course he would notice. He’d trained her, raised her, and knew how she walked, talked, and acted better than any other person on the face of the earth – even Rick – did. It told her one thing; age hadn’t diminished his hawkish eyesight, or his uncanny perception. Shaung Ku-Ran had seen her when she stepped off the commuter, and he knew then that she was pregnant. Self-consciously, she stuffed her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket.

“Yeah.”

“And so you came to me.” She looked at him, startled, and he chuckled, then chided her good-naturedly, “Even a hermit remains aware of the world around him. It is a stupid man who prefers ignorance to knowledge. Do not look so surprised. I know of the American codes. You are in trouble and turmoil, so you came home. Like any lost child.” He held out his bony hands. “Show me your hands.”

She sighed, burrowing them deeper into her jacket pockets. “Grandfather, I’m not...”

“Your hands,” he said sternly, his craggy face setting.

With another sigh, she thrust out her hands to him, palms up, feeling like an errant child again. He frowned as he studied her palms. “Tell me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Kuron, I’m going to be here for a while. Can’t it wait?”

He scowled in disapproval at her for a long moment, and she winced. Some rebellious habits just never faded; including her penchant for reverting to the disrespectful Americanization of his name she’d taken to using in ‘Frisco. Then, he nodded tightly, and she knew she was in trouble, even before he said, “We will discuss this.”

Tamia opened her mouth to protest, but he was already gone. She blinked, then grabbed her bag and followed him. She’d forgotten quite what he was like. His jaunty step had already placed him far enough ahead that she had to jog to catch up to him.

“You should have been careful,” he continued, in his lecturing tone, as she fell into step beside him. “I taught you better.”

She rolled her eyes again, shifting the weight of the duffel bag to her shoulder. “I was careful. I was taking birth control shots...”

He didn’t look at her, but she saw his grimace of distaste, and knew what was coming.

“Bah,” he muttered, waving a hand, “chemicals. Corrode the body and mind. Like this!” He stopped suddenly, reaching to tap the inside of her left arm. “Mess with your head.”

“What else was I supposed to do?” She asked hotly, glaring at him.

He tapped his own head with one bony finger then. “Use this. Know your body.”

She sighed heavily. “I shouldn’t have gotten pregnant, Kuron, even without the shots. I wasn’t—”

He shook his head, silencing her. “You do not know your body anymore. You fill it with chemicals, let them control what you should be in control of.”

She sighed heavily. “Look, maybe this was a waste of time. I can go back to New York—”

“Nothing is a waste of time if it is done for a reason. You came here for a reason, so you have not wasted time. You only waste energy, by becoming angry.”

She rubbed her free hand across her face wearily. “How am I supposed to act? You’ve done nothing but lecture me since I got here!”

“Which was not so long ago. You always were the emotional one.”

Tamia drew a deep breath, forcing herself calm. “I’m sorry, Grandfather. I have a lot on my mind, right now.”

He waved her comment away. “Bah! Your mind is empty of concern. It is here,” he tapped his finger to his own chest in emphasis, “in your heart, that you are troubled.”

Tamia fell silent, her mind turning over what he said. As they boarded the transport that would take them to Qamdo, she remained mired in her own thoughts. Briefly, she considered the trip ahead. From Qamdo, it would be a day’s hike into the mountains where Kuron made his home. That, at least, would give her a chance to work off her nervous energy. Being around Kuron did that to her, made her nervous as hell. He read everything she did too well – she swore sometimes that he knew what she was thinking.

As the transport pulled away from the terminal doors, Tamia considered the old man’s words carefully. What he had told her, freed from the ancient clichés that were his stock-and-trade, was unsettling, to say the least.

She knew perfectly well what Kuron thought of modern medicine, and of drugs. She’d gotten that lecture about a million times now. *Know yourself* had been his drill for as long as she could remember. To know herself, in both body and soul – know what made her sick, and why, what made her cry, and why. She should know herself from her innermost organs to her outermost skin; from the deepest heart to the shallowest facade.

Kuron talked about it like a fact of life, and it sounded so easy when he said it. Tamia knew it wasn’t. It took discipline. Discipline she’d given up for lost years ago. She’d gotten messed up in drugs and sex for the sake of survival, though, hadn’t she? Just to stay alive.

If she reached deep down, she knew that hadn’t been the only reason. She’d been

scared, confused, and insecure. She let others decide who she was supposed to be for her.

By the time she came to understand who she really was, she was sickened by her own body, hating herself so much she actually considered suicide, just to get away from herself. She tortured herself, performed self-abuse through years of drug abuse and promiscuity; she used all the things that had made her hate herself to begin with to punish herself. It didn't make much sense now, but it had made a hell of a lot of sense then.

It had taken the stifling confines of the military, and the sobering reality of David's death, to make her understand herself and learn to accept herself again, even if she couldn't trust herself. She'd come running to her grandfather when David died, and the old man had promptly slapped her back into reality with his stern discipline, and set her feet back on *terra firma*. Her feet hadn't left the ground since.

Until now, that was. Now she felt as if she hadn't come any further than the streets of 'Frisco. She was confused and scared. She had no idea what to do. And Kuron, as usual, had managed to remind her, in the space of minutes, what was important. He was right, too. She didn't know her body anymore – or hadn't, until she got pregnant. Rick had helped her remember that she was alive, but pregnancy made her more aware of herself than she had been in years, both in body and spirit. She was scared as hell; she knew that beyond a shadow of doubt. Her hand moved to her belly as the baby moved, and she sighed. It was strange, having something alive inside her body. Strange, and yet, peaceful. She felt, on some level she didn't quite understand, as if she'd finally found her true self.

Hell. Tamia sighed, watching the landscape whiz past her window. Maybe she

should have stayed in New York. Kuron was going to run her ragged over this, until she knew exactly how she felt, and why. God, she wished Rick had come with her. She missed him so much. Maybe when they got to Qamdo she'd call him. Damn. What time was it in New York?

"Of what concern is time?" Kuron asked quietly from beside her. "Night and day do not recognize our concoction, time."

She started, a shiver lunging through her as she turned to look at him. "How did you...?"

"You forget all I have mastered in my life, Tamiasa. Besides," he chuckled at her discomfiture, "you were muttering like an old woman about her errands."

She relaxed then, no longer afraid that he was reading her mind. Hell, she didn't believe in that mind-reading crap, unless she was around Kuron. He had a way of making her believe he could do just what he said. It was uncanny, at times. Then, her mind latched onto something else he'd said. *Tamiasa*. He called her Tamiasa. Other than Hoshimiro, she hadn't heard anyone use her full name in so long she'd nearly forgotten it, herself. Even her military records just said *Tamia*. They hadn't realized that was a nickname. She'd gone by quite a few nicknames in her life, when she thought about it.

In 'Frisco, she picked up the street name of Mia Ku; she quickly laid that name, and the girl it had created, to rest, during Detox. David, in his rare, affectionate moments, had called her Tami. The rest of the time he'd either been too drunk to remember who she was, or he just cursed at her. She'd stuck to just Tamia since he died.

It was easier to bear. She shivered pleasantly. She loved to hear Rick say her name.

God, she wished he was here.

They hadn't had an easy relationship – her fault, mostly. She was afraid she'd lose him, that he didn't really love her. So she'd been a real bitch about things. She got angry at the stupidest things. Kuron was right – she flew off the handle pretty easily, always had.

She quickly learned to master that fury, to survive the unforgiving streets, and even then she did things she regretted afterward. In fits of anger, she let this or that rival of David's sleep with her. She got syphilis from one of those mistakes. Hell, like she cared at the time. Her body had already been shit, anyway. She was just lucky she hadn't contracted Garson's Gene. Anything else would have been eliminated during Detox. The Biological Detox –or BD – program could destroy even HIV, a mutating virus that had caused panic in the late 20th century. But BD couldn't cure GG. It mated to the genes, writing itself into the genetic code, and the only way to destroy it was to destroy the infected genes – about fifty percent of the genetic structure of the body. It was impossible to cure, and the mutations it caused to the body were horrible to look at.

Tamia shivered inwardly. It had been stupid of her to sleep with guys she didn't know anything about, but she'd been angry, trying to hurt David like he'd hurt her. She hadn't cared. A fuck was a fuck, back then.

She'd never do that to Rick, though. Even when she thought he was cheating on her, she never considered sleeping with anyone else. She loved Rick. She hadn't loved David. It was really that simple. Her throat constricted. She didn't know what she'd do

if Rick really married someone else. She didn't want to even think about it, not with the baby...

"You are troubled." Kuron's voice reached her then. "I have never known such agony in you that I could not rest myself, for your pain."

Her eyes turned down. "It's my problem, Grandfather. I won't hand it to someone else to solve."

"Yet no problem is ever solved by closing it up inside of yourself. Can you tell no one?"

She released her breath in a heavy sigh. "No. I made the mistake – I have to decide what to do now. How to...correct it."

He patted her hand. "Nothing is ever a mistake once it is done. Why correct something that was never incorrect?"

A bittersweet smile touched her face. "I wish I could tell myself that. I wish it was solved that simply. Kuron, I refused to marry the man I love, because he doesn't know I'm pregnant. He'd be in as much trouble as I am now, if I accept, but I don't think I can say no much longer."

"Is he the child's father?"

She nodded. "Yeah. We're both bound by the Code, though. I can't marry him, really. That would get him in deeper shit than *I'm* going to be in."

"Why?"

"Because he asked me to marry him. Because they're going to assume he already knew about the baby. Because he's my unit commander."

Kuron's eyes widened.

"Small wonder that you came to me for guidance," he said quietly. "But I cannot give it."

"Kuron!"

He shook his head. "Your only guidance, Tamiasa, will come from within. I would suggest meditating in the Wisdom Tree."

Tamia nodded slowly. The Wisdom Tree. God, it had been so long since she'd sat there in the branches of the ancient ginkgo tree, and *thought*. Kuron called it the Wisdom Tree because he said that if one sat there long enough, they would become one with inner wisdom. Maybe he was right. She had always felt strong, like she was in touch with a piece of herself, when she sat there. She'd always been able to make up her mind on even the toughest decisions.

Tamia stepped off of the regional transport at Qamdo, and nearly breathed an audible sigh of relief as she saw the bank of phones at one end of the station. Even after all the centuries that had passed, Tibet had frozen itself in time back during the twentieth century. Some areas still didn't even have electricity, though that was confined mostly to remote areas in the mountains.

Glancing at the old man beside her, she said, "I have to make a call, Grandfather."

"Very well." He nodded his consent, and then surprised her by following her to the phones.

"A *private* call," she amended.

He blinked, unfazed by her sharp tone. “You are calling the child’s father, yes?”

“Kuron—”

He cut her off with a stern glance. “A little respect, young lady.”

She stood her ground. “Respect for privacy, Kuron.”

“This is not an exchangeable good, Tamiasa.”

Tamia rolled her eyes. She was getting tired of these arguments. “Fine, whatever.”

She yanked up the phone as she pulled out her ID chip and swiped it through the phone’s credit reader. Tapping a series of buttons, she waited for it to process the overseas call. There was a static hum, and then a buzz as the line connected.

“Carinson.”

“Hey, Rick.” She winced at the overly cheerful tone of her voice. Rick would know something was wrong.

“What’s going on?”

Yep. He’d guessed. She sighed. “Can’t I miss you?”

“Tamia.” She heard the note of warning in his voice, and imagined he was narrowing his eyes.

“Okay, okay.” She shot a glance at Kuron, and lowered her voice. “This is the last chance I’ll get to talk to you before I leave for Kuron’s place. I wanted to make sure you’re not having second thoughts about this.”

She heard the sound of static in the line, telling her Rick was sighing. “Second, third... Ah, hell, honey, I’m wishing like crazy you hadn’t gone. But I know it’s

important; so as long as you come home as soon as you can, I swear I'll leave you be."

A soft, sad smile curved on her lips. Rick would keep his word, she already knew. God, how had she been lucky enough to find him?

"I love you," she murmured into the phone.

There was an indrawn breath, and then he said, "I never get tired of hearing that. I love you, too, Tamia."

Before she could respond, Tamia felt a tap on her arm. Turning, she saw Kuron holding out his hand, and blinked as she realized what he wanted.

"Rick, my grandfather wants to talk to you."

She could hear the laughter in his voice as he said, "Put him on, then."

Tamia rolled her eyes, and handed the phone to Kuron.

"Hello, Mr. Carinson," Kuron's voice was friendly but firm, and Tamia was surprised that he already knew the identity of her lover. "I wish to speak with you about my granddaughter."

Tamia sucked in a sharp breath. He wouldn't— "Grandfather!"

He ignored her protest. "It is my understanding that you have spent much time in her company."

He was silent for a moment, and Tamia felt mortification wash through her. What must Rick think? And what would happen if Kuron told him about the baby?

Kuron glanced at her, covered the phone, and said, "Go and collect your bags, Tamiasa."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off with stern glance.

“Go.”

And there wasn't anything to do but follow his instructions, and pray Kuron wasn't about to make her life even more complicated.

A week later, Tamia fixed her eyes on the pale face of the moon from her perch in the Wisdom Tree and sighed heavily. This wasn't working. Every time she tried to sort out how she felt about what was happening, she could only think of all the things that could go wrong, all the complications involved. She couldn't think clearly.

With another sigh, she laid her hand flat against the rough bark of the ancient tree, and closed her eyes. Her world was slowly crumbling. Small wonder she couldn't think straight. She'd been so happy for the past several months, even through some of the shit the Commandos had been forced to take on. She had Rick, she was back on the ground, and she was finally beginning to forgive herself for the hell she put herself through in 'Frisco. Now, *this* had to happen.

She moved her free hand to her abdomen as she felt the baby kick. God, she couldn't believe she could feel so happy and so scared at the same time. But she was. She wanted to tell everyone, particularly Rick, that she was pregnant; but she couldn't. She was afraid to. If word leaked to Rick, he'd be forced to issue her an abortion order, and then turn her over to Military Justice on a charge of treason. God alone knew what that would hold for her. Prison, at least. Possibly incarceration at the testing sites, or even death – hell, it was technically still wartime.

Damn. She wouldn't do that to Rick. If she'd fucked up back with the Troopers, or with

MAFT, she'd have taken her "punishment" accordingly. It would have been her fault, her stupidity. She would've been the only one to suffer for it, at all. But not now. Rick had lost too many people – she was the closest thing he had to family. She couldn't give him news that would only give him a moment's joy, before being ripped away; not again.

"You are still troubled?"

Tamia started, looking down to see Kuron standing beside the tree. Letting out her breath, she nodded, sliding easily from the branches into a crouch at the base of the tree, her back against its firm support. She regarded the ground for several minutes, silent, and then raised her eyes to him. "Is there such a thing as karma, Grandfather? Have my past mistakes and failures caused this to happen now?"

He sighed, and leaned heavily on his walking stick. "Tamiasa, you question too deeply of things which will not answer in words. Karma is only what you will it to be, as is your fate. Look inside yourself, Little One, and you will find all the answers you need."

She lowered her eyes again, shaking her head. "I can't. I'm too fucked up inside. I don't trust myself, anymore. Every time I thought I'd do something right, I screwed it up!"

"That is because you relied upon *this*, Tamiasa." Kuron replied sagely, reaching to pat her head. "Follow your heart instead. Your heart is never wrong." He touched her shoulder then, and his voice, when next he spoke, was gentle. "You have forgotten how to listen – that is all. You must listen to your heart, and let it guide you. You must trust it."

Her eyes closed as she fought tears. “I thought I was. But I don’t know anymore. If my heart is leading me to this, then why’s it been so damned hard? I keep flipping out at Rick for stupid things – things that aren’t even true, most times. Now I have to decide what I’m going to do about the baby... Hell, I can’t tell Rick, and I have to do something!”

“Why can you not tell him? If he is the child’s father...”

“It’s not that simple, Kuron. If it was, do you think I would have come all this way to think about it? Rick’s my unit commander. It’s his job to issue the order for the abortion, and he’s the one who’s going to have to sign the charges. I can’t do that to him. He never had a family that he can remember. He wants kids as much as I do. But, if I told him, he’d be forced to issue the order and, when I disobey it, the warrant of arrest. An abortion would feel like a betrayal to both of us.” She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. “What the fuck am I supposed to do? If I don’t get the abortion, I’ll face a charge of treason, and if I do get it, I’ll betray Rick, my child, and everything I thought I believed in!”

Kuron nodded slowly, his eyes full of understanding. “It is a weighty matter you struggle against, Tamiasa. You must ask yourself, now, which would be the greater betrayal.”

“I’ve tried that!” Tamia burst out in frustration.

“And?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged, despondent. “Both, or maybe neither.”

Kuron studied her carefully for a long moment, and then squeezed her shoulder

with one deceptively frail old hand. “I think, Granddaughter, that you trouble yourself too much over this. The conflict has already been resolved within you. Find it.”

Tamia watched silently as the old man turned and moved back toward the house. *Find it.*

How the hell am I supposed to do that, old man? Tamia asked in silent rebellion the words she could not summon in speech. *Hold a séance?*

Trust yourself. The words echoed at her from the distant past. Yeah, right. She was supposed to trust the only person responsible for her years of hell in ‘Frisco, the one who’d filled her veins with junk and fucked any and every guy who’d come her way? No way in hell she’d ever make that mistake again!

Follow your heart, not your head. Kuron’s words floated through her mind. She could remember all the lessons he taught her when she was young; particularly right after she watched her family executed. She’d been murderously angry, bent on inflicting pain upon, and destroying, anything she could, for her family’s death. Until Kuron had taught her that fury solved no conflict, and destroyed its bearer first. Kuron had made her understand that anger and fear were products of her mind. She could hate blindly, and die for her hatred, or... He had taught her how to meditate, how to find the still calmness of her heart beneath the seething fury in her mind, and listen to the calmness, let it soothe her. Let her heart guide her, and keep her alive. But she had buried that heart back in ‘Frisco. A heart, on the streets, was a hazardous commodity to carry. She’d learned to rely on her head again, on her reflexes, for survival, and on drugs for her sanity. Only, the drugs had nearly fried her brain, and her reflexes had landed her in jail, or suicide

slum, more than once. Did she even have a heart left?

Tamia drew a deep breath of clear mountain air and listened to the crickets chirping at the moon. She found a peace here that she had lacked for so long. She sighed as she felt it settle over her. It whispered the truth to her. She had a heart. Rick's face crossed her mind's eye, and she smiled softly. He'd shown her she had a heart left in there, shown her how to find it again. God, she missed him. Once, it hadn't bothered her to sleep alone; it'd been a relief, actually. But now, it felt strange to wake up without Rick there. It frightened her, sometimes. She wondered if they'd ever be able to have a normal life, and felt the flutter of movement in her womb.

Slowly, the night returned to her again, and she heard footsteps approaching lightly. She looked up at the old man, a frown of concern crossing her face. "What's wrong? I thought..."

"Someone wishes to speak to you."

It took her a moment to realize what he was talking about, and, when she did, her frown deepened. The phone? Who would know where to...? Tamia's heart leapt into her throat and she jumped up, heading quickly for the building. Only one person knew where she was, and she could think of only one reason he'd call her there.

Inside the building, Tamia picked up the phone and, breathlessly, said, "Yeah?"

"Hi, babe." Rick's voice reached her over the line, and she shivered pleasantly. God, it was so good to hear his voice. But...

"What's going on, Rick?" She asked as she settled herself on the floor. "You promised you wouldn't call, when I talked to you last week."

She heard his laugh. “Don’t tell me you’re upset I called!”

“No,” she said quietly, unconsciously smoothing a hand over her belly as the baby moved again. “I’ve missed you.”

She heard the swish of static from the other end of the line as he let his breath out. “Yeah, me too. Hell, Tamia, I know I said things were going to be dead for a while, that you could stay there as long as you needed, but we’ve had something come up, babe. Something big.”

She was glad he couldn’t see her as she closed her eyes and swore inwardly. “Damn. Now what?”

“Matt stumbled across a minefield that could blow up pretty damned fast. We’re going to have to make a move soon. Real soon.” He was silent for a minute. “I hate to do this, but how soon can you hop a flight back to New York?”

She drew a deep breath, thinking. “A couple of days, maybe less, maybe more. I don’t really know. The terminal in Lhasa doesn’t send any commuters outside of the region. I’d have to jump a flight elsewhere, first. If I’m lucky, I’ll be able to hop a local shuttle into Bombay. I can get a straight-through from there.”

She could almost see his nod of agreement. “All right. We’ve got a few days we can spare.”

“Can’t you go in without me?”

“Wish we could, babe. I wouldn’t have bothered you if we could. But we’re going to need everyone we got, and the more hand-to-hand skills available, the better.”

She didn’t like the sound of that, particularly his tone. Sighing, she nodded. “I

get the drift, Rick. I'll be home as soon as I can."

"See you soon, babe."

"Yeah. Bye, Rick." She heard the line click, just before she replaced the handset in its cradle. Wearily, she placed her fingers against her forehead. Looked like she wouldn't get a chance to work this out after all. She looked up as she heard Kuron enter the room. "I have to leave, Grandfather. I have to go back to New York. Sorry."

He nodded. "I knew you would."

Frown lines creased her brow. "Hell, Kuron, don't make it sound like that. I don't *want* to leave, yet. Yeah, I miss Rick, but I need to know what I'm going to do before I go back there. How can I face him? What am I going to tell him? What can I do? I've been meditating, and sitting in the Wisdom Tree for a week now, and I'm no closer to an answer than I was when I stepped off the commuter."

"And that is why you must go back to America, Little One. Your answers are not here. I knew that when I first saw you at Lhasa. You had to learn it for yourself."

"Then where are they, if not here? Where, Kuron?"

He sighed then, shaking his head as he turned toward his room. "I am old. I must rest."

Tamia gritted her teeth in frustration. Damn him. She hated it when he did this. He was telling her, in his own way, that he wouldn't do anything else for her, wouldn't help her anymore.

You must find your own answers, Tamiasa, came his voice from her memories. Follow where your heart leads, and you will find your way to the answer you seek.

Sighing, Tamia rose gracefully from the floor and went to her room. She would leave tomorrow, if she could get a flight. The day after, at the latest. It would be good to get back to New York, back to people who didn't speak in riddles. It would feel good to be near Rick again. God, it would feel good to have a life again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tamia saw him as she stepped off the ramp. With a laugh, she ran to him, dropping her bag to wrap her arms around him. She felt the missing piece of her soul slide into place as his arms enfolded her. It startled her. She hadn't realized exactly how much she loved him until she left, or how much she missed him until now. She was lost in shock that even Rick's voice couldn't penetrate for a moment. Then, she looked up at him as she realized he'd said something. "Huh?"

"Hey, babe, come back to Earth, here!" He teased, squeezing her gently. "Kuron space you out on Pixi Dust or something?"

She laughed then, pulling out of his embrace. "Pixi Dust? *Kuron*? You *have* to be kidding! God, Rick, it's a good thing you called when you did. Kuron kept telling me he didn't have any answers, then proceeded to hand me every proverb and cliché in the world! He was driving me crazy!"

He chuckled as he grabbed her bag and slipped an arm around her waist, before they walked toward the terminal doors. "If I didn't know how much you respect that old man, I'd swear you hated him!"

A wry smile crossed her face. "Sometimes, I almost do!"

Rick squeezed her waist gently. "So, did you find what you went for?"

Tamia shifted her eyes away nervously.

“No,” was all she allowed, and then glanced back at him, waiting to see if he pressed the issue. He gave her a long, sideward glance, but said nothing, nodding slightly. Inwardly, Tamia breathed a sigh of relief, then looked up at him and asked, “Now, what am I supposed to have come back for?”

He sighed heavily as they stepped out into the noisy, slush-covered streets of New York City. “It’s a long story; one that’d be better not to tell here. Hang on for a minute.”

She nodded, and her brow furrowed slightly. Those words had an all too familiar ring to them – *classified*. They walked silently to Rick’s jeep. A few minutes later, the bag hauled into the rear compartment and the doors securely shut, Tamia leaned her head against the headrest and gave Rick a sideward glance. “So, tell me?”

He sighed again as he started up the vehicle, then looked at her. “Matt hit the local ‘errand boys’ hard, got in on a major run, and got more hard information than we ever hoped for. Their ‘run’ was a hotel room in Soho, and their buyer was none other than the Colonel himself. One Martin Stuart Panfild.”

Tamia’s eyes opened wide, and she gasped slightly. “A buyer? *Panfild*? Rick, that’s crazy! Panfild wouldn’t be caught dead on a drug run – that’d be the end of his career if it ever leaked!”

Rick nodded, and pulled out into traffic. “Hell, Tamia, I know all the stats and shit like that, too. And I know it sounds insane, but Matt saw it all, and caught the whole thing on the recorder, too. We could sink Panfild in his tracks right now, if we had that luxury. But we need information on the deal from the seller’s side.”

“Like what?”

“Like, what he wanted, and why. He had a sealed message for the seller, and Matt never saw what it said, but Panfild has to be after something big, to take that kind of a risk. I’m seriously hoping it’s not your *Jaosantai*, or we’re looking at something even bigger than treason.”

Tamia nodded, then shifted uneasily. “Who’s the seller? Or don’t we know yet?”

Rick’s answering smile was grim. “Oh, we know, all right, and I don’t like it one bit. Not one damned bit.”

Something about that... “God, no. Rick, tell me it’s not who I’m thinking!”

He nodded. “More than likely. Horner.”

Tamia winced, and a shudder lunged through her. With a small groan, she leaned her head back, and closed her eyes. What a nightmare. Charles Horner. Known on the streets as the Big Man, he was the only man who walked both outside the law, and above it. Manhattan’s number one drug lord, with not even one shred of evidence to pin him to the wall.

He was a big businessman, with underlings in the Intelligence community, City Hall, and any other place of prominence New York City could possibly hope to possess. Charles Horner owned them all, one way or another. His “official” business was as the illustrious, world-famous public affairs officiate of the Broadway elite. He handled their finances, their contracts, their legal entanglements, and their addictions. For, underneath the elaborate masquerade of Broadway, Horner was little more than an elitist pimp. He dealt in people by daylight hours, and chemicals by night.

Horner’s far more lucrative business operated from the shoreline warehouses of

Pier Forty, patrolled by his own, hand picked, guards. Pherecaltropine, diacetylmorphine, sodium zelacromium... commonly known as Pixi Dust, heroine, and flyers, and collectively known as drugs; they were only a few of the many delights Horner kept stashed away from the nosy by use of armed guards and dogs – for high profits. You named it, and your price, and Horner would decide if he could get it for you...and if he decided he couldn't, then you'd have to leave the state to get it.

Tamia felt a dull, throbbing ache behind her eyes that she hadn't felt in years. The mounting pain of struggles remembered, to get free of drugs. God, it hadn't been easy. There were still times she was tempted to go back. Detox had taken the physical addiction from her body. Nothing had been done for her head. She'd had to do that one by herself, and it had been a long, hard road.

God, Kuron was right! She'd polluted her body with so many fucking chemicals that she was lucky she could still think at all. She tasted bile in her throat, and swallowed hard. Drugs, and hatred of herself, had eventually driven her to bulimia. She'd made herself sick so many times, forced herself to throw up, either by drugs, or whatever she had available, just hoping she'd drown in her own vomit and die. Anything to make the shame and pain go away. To this day, she hated getting sick. She puked her guts out in Detox, back before she was allowed to join the Marines. Between the syphilis and the withdrawal, she'd gone through hell over those three weeks. With a shudder of revulsion, Tamia forced the memory away. God, the last thing she needed right now was a confrontation with Horner. With everything else that weighed on her mind, drugs were something she didn't want to have to worry about. Besides, if Rick thought Panfild

would blow up in their faces, confronting Horner was nothing less than suicide.

“So, I’m assuming we’re hitting Pier Forty, and soon? How’s it going to go down?” She asked quietly, her eyes fixed on the road, not daring to look at him.

She caught a glimpse of his shaking head. His eyes stayed on the traffic. “I don’t know, exactly. It’s taking longer than I thought. IA wants it handled delicately. We piss Horner off too fast, and we’ll be looking at a major street war, with a hundred million plus innocent people caught in the line of fire. I hope we can get everything worked out within a couple of days, though. The longer we wait, the more chances this is going to blow, big time!”

Tamia nodded silently, turning to study the view outside her window. Even under “martial law”, as the blend of military patrols, S.W.A.T.-style police forces, and hard-core politics was called, New York City still held little that didn’t appear depraved, or deprived.

At least, that held true on the street-level. Fences peddled briefcases full of “liberated” goods along the busy sidewalks, and drug addicts and winos slouched against alleyway walls, looking perfectly embalmed, and ready for burial. The streets were filthy, and crowded with importantly dressed people who bustled from place to place without looking either right or left, pretending that what they didn’t see didn’t exist.

Tamia’s heart shriveled into the pit of her being. She’d been one of those nonexistent cast-offs, once. The setting had been little different. Old ‘Frisco wasn’t that much different from the Big Apple, at street-level. Hell, no city was. Maybe there were few less official-looking people in ‘Frisco, but everything else looked the same.

Her heart aching at the memory, Tamia turned her own eyes quickly away from the scene outside her window. She watched Rick silently for a long moment. He hated city traffic. Hell, any sane person did. Even with the strides made in technology since the Reaver War, overpopulation of cities was still a major difficulty, and growing more problematic every day. Especially in New York City, which was now the hub of most of the United States' government and military activity. Traffic that had been gridlocked in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was now dangerously congested. If it hadn't been so far from JFK International to the Underground, they would've walked home.

Tamia felt uneasiness stir through her as she studied the set firmness of Rick's expression. Grim determination. She sighed then. There was more than city gridlock on his mind. He still hadn't told her everything about this case. She had to ask, even though she was sure she didn't want to know. "What's wrong, Rick?"

He shook his head, and gave her a warm glance. "Nothing, babe."

"Don't lie to me, Rick. There's something wrong, and it sure as hell isn't city traffic!"

He reached to pat her leg. "You're too suspicious."

"Rick..."

He sighed heavily. "All right, already! I'm just a little worried about Jean. She said she'd get back to me after she saw Horner. But I haven't heard from her yet, and that worries me. It doesn't take this long to get an interview – even with Horner."

Tamia's eyes fell to her lap, and she toyed nervously with the edge of her jacket. "Horner? Why'd she go to Horner?"

He half-shrugged. “Hell, I don’t know. She sure didn’t want to. She’s a reporter, though, and she was on a job. She just goes where she’s sent.”

Tamia’s brows were furrowed with confusion when they rose to him. “But I thought Horner liked to keep a clean public image. Why would she have any reason to be afraid of him?”

Rick shook his head. “She didn’t say, but she was nervous as hell, and I got the feeling there was something very big going down. I just hope she hasn’t got in over her head.”

Tamia reached to touch his arm. “Give it a chance, Rick. I’m sure you’ll hear from her sometime. Maybe she just forgot...”

His head shook again, firmly. “Not Jean. She’s got a memory like a steel trap. She said she’d be back in touch, made it sound like something important. She wouldn’t forget. Especially since she called me. She never calls unless she’s real upset, or worried. Seemed almost like there was something she wanted to say, before ...”

Tamia sighed. “Maybe she hasn’t gotten the interview yet...”

He gave her an incredulous look. “Gimme a break! Tamia, it’s been over a *month!*”

“It’s possible!” Tamia shot back defensively. “Horner *is* a busy man!”

He considered what she said for a moment, then sighed and nodded. A half-smile touched his lips. “That’s true. Thanks. Guess it’s always better to share a problem – helps make it easier to bear, if nothing else.”

Her eyes turned away again, and she murmured, “Yeah, guess so.”

Inside, her heart was breaking. She had a problem, too, but she'd never be able to share it with him, or anyone else. Instinctively, her hand moved to her belly, as if to protect her child from her own troubled emotions. She still hadn't decided how she was going to hide this, and time was running out, fast.

Rick cast a sideward glance at Tamia. He was glad she was back. The Underground had seemed emptier, somehow, while she was gone. More empty than it'd been in years. His brow furrowed then, as he watched an uneasy expression cross her face. Her hand was pressed to her stomach. Was she sick? Was that why she'd been preoccupied, and why she ran off to China? His heart flipped over in dread. He'd never known her to be sick. Would she tell him if she was? He didn't know. She seemed more than a little preoccupied before she left, and very nervous as well.

Their match in the gym came back to him then. She'd been fighting as if to vent a frustration, relieve a tension, too great for her to bear. And her clothing – which had been loose on her before – was now getting tight against her body. How could Tamia be gaining weight so quickly? She trained harder than any of the rest of them, and her medical records stated plainly that she had a high metabolism – that'd been what had saved her life in Detox. He didn't understand, unless...nah, it *couldn't* be. She'd have told him by now. Jean hadn't. That'd been different. He hadn't spoken to Jean since Montreal, and she had no reason to care if he knew. Jean had no reason to want him around. Tamia wouldn't hide something like that, though; would she?

Rick sighed inwardly, his attention returning to city gridlock. God, he hated city

traffic so much. He'd tried to get the Underground located in a remote area, away from most of civilization, but it hadn't worked. No blasted cover. Besides, government regulation maintained that all headquarters, for any operation, must be centrally located and easily accessible to dispatcher personnel in times of emergency. Ever since Washington DC had been blown to smithereens during the Reaver War, the military had taken up residence in New York City. Why anyone hadn't blown New York first had been a mystery at the time, but now, everyone knew. With global economy no longer relying on the New York Stock Exchange for financial information, and since Wall Street had been flooded out of existence back in 2065 anyway, what had New York City offered terrorists? Nothing.

The United Nations had crumbled back at the start of World War III, been re-instated as part of the peace process, and had promptly refolded as the Polar Wars had taken over world view. That'd been what CEADS had been created to replace – and so had begun the first grumblings of the Divide, as far back as 2080. Anyway, there was little New York offered to terrorists anymore. With the crackdown of police and government after the Divide, a terrorist would have to be suicidal to even attempt to blow up the city, or even get into Military Headquarters. With Military HQ here now, the Commandos had no choice but to be here, too, no matter how much Rick might dislike the idea.

Rick sighed again. Well, at least they weren't on military Retrieval and Report rosters. They didn't have to file personnel reports unless there was a problem. Hopefully, that was enough security to keep them off Panfild's radar long enough for them to figure out what he was up to.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Well, everyone, we finally got the confirmation from IA that we’ve been waiting for,” Rick said, leaning forward to prop his arms on the conference table as he studied his team. “We have confirmation that Charles Horner is dealing in contraband drug tech. I have an official search-and-seizure warrant for Pier Forty, from IA, and a timetable for our raid. Since this is on US soil, we’ll only have a limited window of opportunity to do this, and our orders are very specific about what our targets are, and what kind of body count we’re allowed.”

Matt sat forward excitedly. “So what’s going down? I can’t wait to grease this sucka.”

“Horner’s off-limits,” Rick told him grimly. “In fact, he won’t even be present. We’re slotted to go in tomorrow night, at 2100 hours, while Horner’s ‘fleet’ is out of port for a campaign gala. We’re to go in, find enough hard evidence for IA to send in arresting agents, and then get back out. Minimal body count; only kill where you have to. IA wants to have enough living scumbags to hopefully find a few willing to squeal on the stand.”

“And Panfild?” Tamia asked quietly.

“If we find anything linking Panfild to Horner or that damned super-soldier drug, we’ll need to nab it, and quick. IA doesn’t want to know about it, though. Not until we

have enough to bring Panfild down completely.” He glanced at his watch. “Okay, everyone, it’s nearly 2300 hours. Kathy, you’re on Comms duty tonight. Everyone else, hit the racks. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

Rick paced restlessly in his quarters. He couldn’t sleep; he’d tried like hell, but his mind kept returning to Tamia, and the sight of her sitting in his jeep, her hand pressed to her stomach. He still didn’t know whether she was sick, or pregnant, and that bothered him. He’d tried to determine her condition for himself, but her symptoms were consistent with both tissue rot and pregnancy. He needed the truth, and he’d have to get it from her.

Rick swallowed hard as his mind flashed back to Porto Alegre. She’d been pregnant then, and his stupid mission has caused her to miscarry. He’d promised her – and himself – that he’d never let that happen again. But how was he supposed to keep his promises if he didn’t know what was going on? Damn it, he needed to know!

Determination flowing through him, Rick made his way to Tamia’s quarters and tapped the doorpad. She never locked her door; tonight was no exception. As the door slid open, reality settled through the frightened haze in his mind, and he sighed. She was probably asleep. Tamia needed her sleep; she’d been looking so tired for months that it scared him. She’d always been so energetic, until she’d come back from Poco Nanches that first time. He should leave her be, and he would, once he looked in on her.

At her bedroom door, Rick stopped, swallowing hard against overwhelming emotion as he watched her sleeping face. God, she was beautiful, and she looked so peaceful asleep. He wished he could give her that peace all the time. He ached to make

her his forever, to have the right to hold her every night. He wanted the world to know that she owned his heart and soul; he wasn't afraid of his feelings, anymore.

His pulse hammering, he moved across the room and eased himself carefully onto the bed beside her, trying not to wake her. Gently, he slipped his arms around her and closed his eyes with a sigh. He just wanted to hold her...

"Rick," she murmured sleepily, burrowing against him, and he felt his throat close with tenderness.

"Shh. Just sleep, sweetheart."

And, as she drifted back to sleep, snuggled into his embrace, Rick knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that having her beside him was all he wanted for the rest of his life. Now, if he could just convince Tamia.

Two hours later, Tamia sat up in bed, her head swimming. Damn. She'd hoped she wouldn't have any more problems with morning sickness – hadn't until now, either, though Dr. Faulker had warned her that it might happen, with her body chemistry. Feeling her stomach twist, she knew the doctor had been only too right. Damn it. With a small groan, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and bent forward as much as her six-months pregnant body would allow. No damn good. It only made the vertigo worse.

"Tamia? What's wrong, babe?" Rick's voice reached her, his tone concerned. Tamia cursed under her breath. She couldn't tell him what was wrong, that it was just morning sickness. He didn't know she was pregnant yet.

"I'm just a little dizzy, Rick. I'll be okay in a minute."

“Bullshit,” he said as he sat up and reached to turn her face toward him. “You’ve been sick like this for months, Tamia! You’re white as a sheet! What’s going on?”

She couldn’t look at him. Her head swam again, and she groaned, nearly collapsing against him. It was the constant stress; she’d stake a year’s pay on it. Faulker said that stress would complicate her pregnancy. The doctor didn’t know that this pregnancy was a *source* of stress, too. She tried to pull away from Rick. “It’s nothing, Rick. Really.”

He wasn’t listening, reaching to hit the switch on the bedside light, studying her closely. She refused to meet his eyes. She knew he’d suspected something for a while. She’d seen his worried look as he studied the obvious changes to her body whenever he thought she was asleep. And she was afraid he knew, now that she was starting to really show. He was asking directly, and she knew he wasn’t going to let it go. He wanted answers. Answers she didn’t want to give. She tried to ignore him, but the silence, and his piercing gaze, was too much.

“Damn,” she swore, turning completely from him. “I didn’t want to tell you, Rick. I’m pregnant.”

His eyes registered surprise, as if it hadn’t been something he’d thought she’d willingly tell him, and he didn’t move or say anything for a long moment. Finally, he quietly asked, “How long have you known?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “A couple of months. God, Rick, I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to have to get involved. If you want to break...”

“Shh,” he hushed her softly, drawing her against himself. Gingerly, he put his

hand to her abdomen, and his blue eyes were worried. “Mine?”

“Who else’s?” She returned quietly, feeling the baby stir inside her.

“Dear God, Tamia, I’ve wanted to hear that for so long,” he whispered, kissing her neck. He smiled at her then. “I thought you might be, but wasn’t sure until now.” His eyes turned suddenly concerned, and he held her close. “This mess with Horner might be tricky. You should stay here, where you won’t be putting yourself and the baby at risk...”

“Rick!” She pulled away. “Think about what you’re saying! I’m in a pseudo-military unit – I signed the Code to get here! I’m not allowed to have babies. If the brass finds out about this, they can have me imprisoned or executed for defying a standing order.”

His smile collapsed into grim worry. “Damn. You’re right. Hell, Tamia, there’s got to be some way to get around all that. I’ll have to fight harder, get JAG to agree to it. Damn,” he swore again, “if only there was some way to...hey!” He brightened suddenly. “Kuron’s a hermit, right? There’s no one who lives anywhere around him?”

“Yeah,” she conceded warily, watching him carefully. What was he getting at?

“He already knows about this, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, but...”

“After this thing with Horner’s wrapped up, I’m going to put you on recuperative inactives. I’ll find a reason. You go stay with Kuron, until the baby’s born. In the meantime, I’m going to bend every rule in the book to find a way around that damned Code.”

“Rick, I...”

He looked at her in sudden worry. “Kuron’ll put you and the kid up for a while, won’t he? Just until we can smooth things over?”

She saw the look in his eyes – a hope, and strength, she’d never seen in all her years of service. He’d fight for the repeal with everything in him. But... “What if they refuse to repeal it, Rick? I won’t get an abortion, but I don’t want to have a baby that’s going to grow up orphaned, either.”

“If they won’t, then, dammit, let them court-martial me!” He swore, pulling her against himself securely. He looked down at her with fiercely protective eyes, and she nearly drowned under the weight of that look. “Hell, they can let me rot in prison, for all I care. Just swear to me that you won’t give up the baby.”

She felt his arms securely around her, and felt her heart rising on wings toward the sky. He wasn’t going to hold her to the Code! She could keep her baby. Kuron’d been right again. Somehow, the old man had known that her problem wasn’t as difficult as she’d believed. Her heart fluttering wildly against her ribs, she covered Rick’s hand with her own where it rested against her belly, and closed her eyes as she murmured, “I promise.”

Rick looked at her in worry, then. “Is this why you’ve been so evasive about getting married?”

She nodded against him.

He kissed her neck, and then drew away. “Tamia, if you have a problem, just tell me. Don’t play with me, making me wonder whether you love me or not.”

“I wasn’t playing with you.” She snuggled against him, kissing his skin. “I *do* love you.”

“Then talk to me. Tell me what’s going on with you. Otherwise, I’m left to draw my own conclusions.”

She lowered her eyes, nodding. “I’m sorry, Rick; there’s just been so much on my mind, lately. I was afraid, before. I didn’t want to give up the baby, and I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t put you through the pain and uncertainty I was going through. I love you too much.”

“But you won’t marry me. Hell, Tamia, what was I supposed to think?”

She raised her eyes to him. “Hopefully, that I love you, and that the reason I said no was because I love you enough to want to protect you from getting caught up in my mistakes.”

He looked down at her with a frown. “You love me, but you won’t marry me because you’re pregnant with my child? You’re trying to protect me from something we both had a hand in? Tamia, that’s crazy!”

She ran her hand up his arm. “I know it seems that way, but it’s not. I’m afraid, Rick.”

“Yeah? Well, so am I. I’m afraid I’ll have nothing to come back to from this mission. I want to know we’re going to have something more solid than this. I want my kid to have two parents, and my last name. What I *don’t* want is to be like my own father. I don’t want my kid growing up with the same baggage I did. I want to know that I did the right thing for everyone, and not just the easy thing. But, more than anything, I

want to see a smile on your face and a ring on your finger, to know I have a reason to live through this.” He reached over and picked up the leather box from the nightstand, his expression determined.

She knelt up before him, her mahogany eyes glimmering in the dim light, and touched her hands to his face. “I’ll be here, Rick. I just don’t want to be your widow, because of something I should have handled. I don’t want to deal with that kind of grief and guilt. Everyone would watch me grieve, and never know how much it hurt. God, Rick, can’t you understand?”

He moved his head to kiss her palms, then covered her hands with his own, lowering them from his face. “That won’t happen, babe. We’re a team. Nothing’s going to pull us apart.”

She wanted to cry, deep inside, because of what was pulling them apart. Her pregnancy. She hated herself for her next words. “I can’t, Rick. I’m sorry.”

“Tamia,” she felt his hands stroking her hair, “please. I’m not going to give up on you, or the baby. I promise you, I’ll do whatever I have to.”

She sighed, knowing he was warning her. She didn’t want to do this to him, but she stood to lose him either way, now, and she couldn’t stop it by holding back. So, giving him a soft smile, she said, “I love you, Rick, and I *do* want to marry you. I just...”

“Shh.” Rick touched her lips gently, his cobalt eyes bright with hope. He opened the small leather box in his hands and, taking the ring from it, looked into her eyes for a long moment. Then, smiling, he bent his head to kiss the skin beneath her ear, whispering against its softness, “Right now, just tell me one thing. Do you or don’t you

want to marry me?”

With a small shiver of need, she pressed against him, murmuring, “I do.”

She felt the smooth warmth of the gold band slip onto her finger, just before she slipped under the sweltering tide of his kiss. She wondered, as she felt his hands on her, how she could feel so cherished, and hate herself so much, at the same time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was 2100 hours. Time to move. Rick sighed as he turned to face his team. “All right, everyone, this is it. We’ve got exactly one hour to ferret out whatever evidence we can find. Don’t waste your time on criminal evidence against Horner. If it’s street drugs, leave it. We can give the DEA whatever tip-off they need to make that an official investigation, later. What we’re looking for are any stockpiles of unusual drugs, like *Jaosantai*, and hard evidence that Horner knows he’s dealing with Panfild.”

Kelly ran her hand over the selector of her thermal-pistol, and then slipped it back into its holster. “What about playmates?”

“Keep it as quiet as possible. If there’s a way to get around the guards undetected, do it. We’re not in this for a body count.” Rick glanced around. “Okay. Hood, Watchdog, I want you to scout out the main warehouse. Crimson, Chips, you take the offices. Gypsy, Cat, take the tower positions. I want everyone alerted when that fleet comes in. Blade and I are going underground. Remember your codes. Diamond’ll need them, back at base.”

Everyone nodded, and split up, heading for different areas of Horner’s docks. Rick glanced at Tamia then, to find her mahogany gaze fixed intently on him.

“We’re not just looking for evidence, are we?”

He shook his head as he started slowly down the ramp wall into the basement

level of the pier. “Keep your eyes and ears open for some sign of Jean. If Horner’s got her, she’ll be down here somewhere.”

Silently, the two Commandos slipped through the shadows and down into the twisting labyrinth that formed Horner’s underground storage facility. As they moved along, Rick’s attention was focused on his surroundings, but one eye was on Tamia, as well. Damn. He wished he could have talked her into trading places with Kathy, so she’d be safe at the Underground. But she hadn’t wanted to hear about it. He only hoped she knew what she was doing; his gut was churning with the memory of her last miscarriage. That time, she’d been barely pregnant, and spontaneous abortion hadn’t done any damage. She hadn’t told him how far along she was now, but it had to be about six months, and that could be a problem for both her body, and her mind. It was certainly on *his* mind.

A low noise from the room to his right drew Rick’s attention. Tapping his comlink, he said, “Blade, I think I’ve got something. Cover me.”

“You got it. Go ahead.”

Rick tried the door. Locked, damn it. Why wasn’t he surprised? Pulling a thin, polarized file from his utility belt, he wedged the lock-pick between the magnetic seals, and heard them pop open. Nodding to Tamia, he pushed the door aside and stepped through the entrance.

Quickly, with eyes trained to take in a scene at a glance, his gaze scanned the room. Unmade bed, cluttered desk, and an open doorway into the head; bare concrete floors, except for a spill of bedding, a crushed cell phone, and...*blood!*

Rick's gaze flew up to the wall, and he froze in place as a quiet oath slipped through his numb lips. "Mother of God."

Tamia was by his side in an instant, her gun training for threat. As she took in the scene before her, she sucked in a small, sharp breath. "Ace, we've got to help her!"

Rick stared, frozen, at the woman chained, spread-eagle and naked, to the concrete wall like some kind of damned sacrificial animal. Her head hung forward, and long, copper-colored hair obscured her features. But Rick didn't need to see her face; he already knew who it was.

"Ace? C'mon, snap out of it," Tamia ordered briskly, moving to the other woman's side in three long strides. Her lock-pick was in her hands, and she propped her weapon against the wall and went to work on the chains immediately.

As the realization that Tamia was now nearly as vulnerable as the woman on the wall penetrated the fog in his mind, Rick mobilized, snatching a blanket from the strewn pile and moving to catch his friend as Tamia released the last lock, wrapping her securely in the blanket. The woman groaned, and he cradled her close.

"Jean? Come on, kid, wake up."

Jean O'Neil's eyelids fluttered, and she stiffened in fear. "W-who...?"

Rick ripped off his mask, so she could see his face. "It's me, Jean. My God, what happened?"

"H-Horner," she managed, shuddering, and then groaned again. "That was who... at my door. They brought me here, kept me... locked up. I...I tried to call you, but he found out. They ch-chained..." She sobbed suddenly, turning into Rick's chest as

she broke apart.

Rick looked up to see Tamia remove her mask as well, her mahogany eyes sad. “Diamond’s calling for a med-cruiser to meet us at Ninth Avenue, Ace. We need to get Jean out of here; Diamond says the fleet’s on its way in from sea.”

Rising, with Jean once again unconscious in his arms, Rick nodded briskly. “Put your mask back on, Blade, and let’s get the hell out of here.”

And, as they navigated their way back out of the tunnels, Rick made a silent oath that this wasn’t over. Whatever it took, the men who’d caused all this suffering were going to pay; in life’s blood.

Ten minutes later, Tamia cast a worried glance at Rick as the med-cruiser pulled into the street, lights flashing and sirens screaming. He was too quiet.

“Rick?” She laid a hand on his arm, drawing his attention for a split-second.

He turned his eyes quickly back to the med-cruiser, watching the flashing lights retreat into the night. “She tried to call, Tamia. She tried to get help. Dear God, she didn’t deserve what they did to her...”

Tamia felt her own throat constrict. He was right. That poor woman hadn’t deserved what’d been done to her – no one deserved that kind of treatment. Tamia knew it only too well, from when she’d run with the street gangs of old ‘Frisco. “Gang rape” was the media’s politically correct term for it. To Tamia, there was no “politically correct” term. It was a death sentence, handed down from the truly brutal, and only the very strong, or the very unlucky, survived it. So far, Jean O’Neil was still among those

few. Tamia fought down a wave of illness as she recalled how they'd found the woman – chained, spread-eagle, on a wall, blood running from her arms, legs, nose, and privates. Milky white semen had dripped down the inside of her thighs, and she had the lacerations of whipping, and the bruises of repeated beating, all over her. Near-by, on the floor of the room, they'd found her cell phone, broken as though knocked away and then stepped on. She'd obviously tried to call for help. Weak from her ordeal, Jean had been unconscious when the med-cruiser had arrived.

Tamia drew a deep breath, and looked at Rick again. God, this must be hurting him so much. “She’ll be okay, Rick.”

He closed his eyes.

“Don’t lie to me, Tamia. I know the fatality rates.” His head shook then. “Even if she lives, she’ll never be ‘okay’. God, I...”

She watched his eyes close again as he fought his emotions. He pulled a snapshot from his jacket pocket, and stared at the smiling face there. After a long moment, he whispered, “Tiffany. Jean said her name is Tiffany. How am I going to be able to tell her if her mom dies?”

Tamia turned her head away at the grief in his voice. Quietly, she asked, “She’s yours, isn’t she?”

He nodded absently.

“Jean said she wanted me to know. Thought it was important enough to track me down at Walsh’s, that night. She was scared as hell about this interview. God, I wish she’d decided not to do it. She didn’t deserve that...” he choked on the words.

Tamia moved to hold him. Her heart stung with the bitter return of her angry words to him the night she'd seen him and Jean together in Walsh's. She hadn't believed Rick when he said Jean was only a friend. She only wanted to hurt him as she thought he'd hurt her. It stabbed Tamia to wonder if this had been her fault, somehow. She'd wished, in that instant she first left the pub, that the other woman would disappear. The logical part of her brain told her that her fear was irrational; her wish hadn't caused this. But that didn't stop her from feeling responsible. Especially not when she could see the hurt in Rick so plainly. Jean was his friend – the closest thing, perhaps, that he'd ever had to family before the Commandos. Silently, in her heart, she prayed that Jean would be okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tamia glanced worriedly at Rick as they entered the sliding doors of the Justice Department Complex the next morning. He'd been withdrawn and grimly silent ever since the med-cruiser had whisked Jean away last night. She understood why. Rick shielded himself from dealing with loss by shutting off his emotions completely. But understanding that didn't make Tamia feel any less hurt by his retreat from her.

"Talk to me, Rick," she pleaded quietly. "Please."

He turned to look at her, and as his eyes met hers, he must have read something of her pain there because he reached for her hand, giving it a light squeeze. "Sorry, babe. I'm just—"

"Worried. I know," she assured him softly. "But hiding from this isn't going to help." She glanced anxiously around the lobby. "God, Rick, I shouldn't even *be* here! What if someone notices?"

"You were there when we found Jean," he reminded her in a raspy voice that told how little sleep he'd managed. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "John Tolson wants to talk to both of us about what happened."

"I'm six months pregnant, Rick!" She hissed in an undertone. "Do you have any idea how dangerous this is for both of us?"

"More than you know," he replied cryptically, giving her an once-over. "But

you've gotten damned good at hiding it, and John's going to be too busy worrying about other things to even suspect there's anything different about you. Relax, honey."

She smiled wryly at that. "You're the one who needs to relax, Rick. You've looked like you want to jump out of your skin ever since you talked to Tolson last night. And," she laid a hand gently on his arm, "worrying about Jean isn't going to change anything. Dr. Matnes said she'd let you know as soon as Jean's stable."

His answering smile was grim in a way that knotted Tamia's stomach with dread. But he drew a deep breath, and made a visible effort to relax. "You're right."

Tamia turned her attention to their surroundings as they walked down the long corridor toward the IA wing. With a shake of her head, she mused, "I never did understand why IA's in the Justice Complex."

He shot her a wry smile. "Because the FBI doesn't like to admit that it has competition." He gestured toward a door marked EDIA. "This is it."

A shaft of anxiety shot through Tamia, even as she felt the baby kick. She barely resisted the urge to place a hand against her belly to calm both herself and her child.

As they entered the spacious office, the salt-and-pepper haired man behind the desk leapt to his feet, causing Tamia to draw back in surprise.

"Carinson! Damn it, what the hell happened?"

Rick sighed. "I'd think that was pretty obvious, John. I warned you months ago that this would happen if you didn't take Horner out."

Tolson stopped dead in the middle of the room. "What've you got? Do you have evidence?"

“Not yet,” Tamia said, glancing Rick’s direction. Her brow furrowed as she saw the cold rage glinting in his eyes. “But we will as soon as we finish going through everything we found.”

“And this reporter you found?” Tolson’s eyes shifted to Rick, and he swallowed, his gaze moving swiftly back to Tamia. “Is she going to cause us a problem?”

“Problem?” Tamia blinked, confused by his choice of phrase. Just what was the head of Internal Affairs implying? “She’s in Intensive Care at—” She stopped, her gaze jerking Rick’s way as she felt his hand against the middle of her back. The dark fire in her lover’s eyes was enough to freeze Tamia’s blood. Rick was beyond pissed.

“How did you know she’s a reporter?” Rick’s voice was deadly quiet as he faced Tolson down. “Nothing was reported to the authorities about her occupation, and I certainly didn’t tell you. There’s only two ways you could know. You’d either have to have a spy in my Commandos, which I happen to know you don’t, or you’re on Charles Horner’s payroll.”

Tamia gasped, her eyes flying to Tolson in time to see him swallow hard as his eyes grew huge. He backed up a step, confirming his guilt in his instinct to flee. “That’s preposterous!”

“No, it’s not,” Tamia murmured as realization dawned. “Our authorization for the search of Pier Forty was for above ground structures only. We weren’t even supposed to be in the basement level.”

Tolson’s gaze flickered between the two Commandos in panic, before an icy coldness settled over him.

“Why couldn’t you Commandos just follow the damned orders as they were given?” He drew a small, sleek weapon from his pocket, and Tamia gasped as she realized he was holding a Saber – an energy weapon developed in the closing days of the Divide, and never produced in large quantities. As Tolson flicked off the safety, and the unmistakable hum and crackle of energy gathering filled the air, Tamia braced herself. She’d read about what Sabers could do, and she’d always been glad they hadn’t come into use in the Divide; that war had been bloody enough. One beam from a Saber was supposed to be able to sever a limb, or slice anything less armored than a Tank clean in half.

Tolson aimed the deadly end of the weapon Rick’s way. “You were supposed to do your job, Carinon, not play superhero again. You should have found the evidence to take Horner and Panfild out of the picture. But you weren’t supposed to find the girl.”

“Why not?” Tamia wanted to know. “She was interviewing Horner when she disappeared.”

“No,” Rick supplied quietly, his glare never leaving Tolson. “She wasn’t. It didn’t make sense at the time, why she was frightened by an interview with Horner. And our last conversation, on the phone...” He shook his head. “None of made any sense until I remembered our last mission conversation, John. You said you were under pressure to do it quietly. And then all the pieces fell into place.”

Tolson scowled. “Someone tipped the bitch off to the *Jaosantai* project. She had to go.”

Tamia gasped as his words sank in. “You’re the moneyman for the *Jaosantai*?”

Tolson laughed darkly. “Hell, no!”

“But it was your job to make sure that no one ever found out, wasn’t it, John?”

Rick took a step forward, his eyes glittering dangerously. “But then you got greedy.”

As Rick took another slow step forward, Tamia caught the flicker of his gaze toward his pocket. Finally, she understood why he’d slipped that small polytech throwing knife into his jacket pocket before they’d left the Underground. He’d been prepared for this. What did he know that she didn’t?

“You decided the kickback from Horner wasn’t enough,” Rick said quietly. “You wanted the power, too; you wanted to be known as the man who made the arrest of the century. But that meant no one could know what you’d already done, and Horner couldn’t ever learn what you were doing.”

Tamia grimaced. Rick was right; it all made perfect sense. But it still didn’t tell them who their Mole was. Tolson was greedy, but he didn’t have the connections to pull off a weapons heist, or half of the moves the Mole made. Either he wasn’t the Mole, or he had an accomplice in a place of real power.

Tamia kept her eyes trained on Tolson’s weapon as she slipped up beside Rick and slid her hand surreptitiously into his jacket pocket. Her fingers closed around the smooth handle of the knife even as Tolson’s finger tightened on the trigger.

“Go ahead,” Rick growled. “Kill us. But you’re going to have a hell of a time explaining that weapon, and two dead Commandos in your office. We don’t sweep under the rug as easily as one reporter might.”

“I’ll come up with something.” Tolson flicked the discharge button.

Rick dropped down, even as Tamia whirled to the side, narrowly avoiding the pencil-thin beam of superheated energy that sizzled past her arm. In one smooth motion, she hurled the palm-sized blade, sending it sailing across the office to lodge in Tolson's right shoulder. He screamed, dropping his weapon as he clutched his wounded shoulder.

Rick had the Saber and was on his feet even before Tolson's scream died out. Pressing the weapon against the other man's head, Rick turned to Tamia. "Call security up here, and Pete Wilson at the FBI building. He's going to want a chat with our old friend, here."

And, resetting the weapon's safety, Rick brought the smooth titatone implement across the back of Tolson's head, sending the older man crumpling to the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The phone was ringing insistently as Rick and Tamia entered Rick's quarters that afternoon, following hours of questioning by the FBI. Rick snagged it immediately, and listened intently to the caller. The grim, ashen look that crossed his face told her who the caller was, even before he disappeared into the bedroom with a quiet, "I understand."

Tamia waited tensely, her eyes closed and her heart pounding harshly in her chest. The call was about Jean. She knew it without having to ask. Hands against her body, reassuring herself through even that contact with her child, she prayed that Jean was awake, and getting better. Tears slipped loose as she felt memories rush over her. She knew exactly what Jean O'Neil was going through. Gang rape was an old and familiar demon in Tamia's psyche; her very first sexual experience had fallen into that category, and the memory still had the power to make her wretched with fear.

It seemed a lifetime before Rick emerged from the bedroom, still with the same grim look on his face, but his eyes less clouded than before. Hope blossomed in Tamia. Hope that Jean would prove as strong as she was; that the redheaded reporter who was Rick's friend was also a survivor.

Tamia watched silently as Rick hung up the phone. Finally, she drew a deep breath and asked, "Well?"

He sank down next to her on the sofa with a sigh as he reached for her hand.

“She’s still on critical, but they think she’ll survive. Maybe even get over the trauma, eventually.” He played with her fingers absently, his eyes fixed on what he was doing, for a long moment before speaking again. “I never thought I’d see this happen to Jean. Not after the war was over.”

She squeezed his hand gently. “When’d you meet her?”

He shrugged. “Long time ago. We went to high school together, back in Boston. She was the smart one, the talented one. How she ever got stuck hanging around idiots like Tom and I, no one could figure out. Tom McCormac was my best friend, and she was his girlfriend, so she got included in a lot of the stuff we did. Wasn’t long before I started thinking of her as nothing more than ‘one of the guys.’ She was easy as hell to talk to – like a buddy. We kind of hit it off that way, but there was never anything romantic about it. We were friends.”

Rick grimaced, regret flashing in his eyes. “Only, Tom didn’t see it that way. He blew up at me one day, and accused me of trying to steal his girlfriend. Stupid kid shit. But I made the mistake of laughing in his face; I knew Tom had a hair-trigger temper, and I should have known better.” He shook his head with a sigh. “Things got out of control so fast I don’t think I could tell you exactly what happened next. We never could work things out, either. Not even after the truth came out. Jean tried to smooth things over, but even she couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Tom was too proud to admit he was wrong, and we were both too damn stubborn to back down.”

A wistful smile crossed his face. “Jean never gave up on either of us, though; she was still trying long after we gave up. I quit school, came to New York, and enlisted when I

was sixteen. Didn't care a whole helluva lot about anything back then – at least, not until I got my first look at combat. Didn't like it a damned bit, but I just kept going back. Jean and I kept in touch, sort of; I needed someone to talk to back then, someone who understood me. Then, one day, she called to tell me that Tom had dropped out, gotten mixed up in some drug ring on the South Side, and had been shot in a bust. Hurt like hell to hear that, and I regretted every moment of that stupid fight, but I was glad Jean had called me; I couldn't have taken that news from anyone else. Didn't matter much in the end, I guess. I lost myself in missions, to kill the pain. Jean graduated, went on to college, got a degree in photojournalism. I still got letters, occasionally, but they'd go unopened for months at a time. I'd told myself I didn't care anymore, but the truth was, Jean reminded me of Tom, and that memory hurt too much. We lost touch, eventually. She moved here to New York in '08, got a job with the *Times*. We only ever saw each other in passing, plus an interview or two she did. But we never talked about Boston, or Tom; like it was an unspoken rule of communication. I read everything she wrote, kept an eye on where she went. She was the only real friend I had left, and I just couldn't bear to lose her, too. Then she got assigned to cover the Guidia epidemic in Africa, right before the Divide. I thought I'd never see her again, sure she'd been killed."

He looked up at Tamia then. "You remember the SEALs' big fiasco in Montreal?"

She nodded, watching him.

"We were there to see to it that bomb didn't explode. It did, and most of the fucking team died." He drew a deep breath, and released it in a bitter laugh. "But not

me. No, I was already bulletproof. Only, I wanted to die so badly after that. Just shoot myself, or something – I didn't care how I went, by that point. Jean stopped me. Hell, I didn't even know she was in Montreal until she called me that day. We got together, talked for hours about what'd happened, how it felt. I got plastered, I guess. Wouldn't have talked so much if I hadn't been."

His eyes closed painfully. "Every time I looked at her, I kept seeing your face, and I just wanted..." He sucked in a breath, and shook his head. "Jean drove me back to the hotel, and helped me into bed, and," his eyelids squeezed together tighter, "I was so goddamned drunk. I saw what I wanted, what I *needed*, and one thing led to another. God, we both knew it was wrong. We couldn't touch each other, couldn't even *look* at each other, the next morning. She left for Boston immediately – said she was confused and had to think things through. I hated myself for what we'd done, hated us both.

"I threw myself into the next battle to come along, but it didn't do any damned good. I still hated myself. With every team-mate I watched die, I closed off a little more, still remembering what I'd told Jean about watching my buddies die. Christ, Tamia, they decorated me with medals that didn't mean shit to me, promoted me until they couldn't promote me anymore, and all the rest got forgotten. Those guys were the real heroes, not me! I got sick of it, and handed back my commission. I put together the Commandos then, at the brass' insistence that I do something. In a way, this team was as much Jean's idea as mine. She was the first one to suggest it to me, when we talked in Montreal."

There were tears on his cheeks. Tamia cradled his head against her breast, smoothing his hair lightly. It hurt inside to watch him hurt. She felt his arms around her,

heard his hoarse whisper. “We didn’t speak for seven years. She never told me she was pregnant. Then she finally told me about Tiffany, and now...”

Tamia stroked his head, her heart breaking. God, she wished she could help. She’d accused him of being unfaithful when she saw him with Jean. She felt the stab of those bitter words returning, now. He’d been faithful to the core, and not only to her, but also to himself, and to the woman he already hurt once before. Jean was his friend, and he’d never betray that trust, or the trust Tamia put in him. In a strange way, Tamia felt a kinship to the red haired woman she never really met. Jean would’ve understood what Tamia had gone through – the guilt and hellish torture she put herself through over her pregnancy. Tamia could see what Rick didn’t; she knew why Jean had kept her pregnancy from him. Rick was a man who lived and breathed a code of honor that bound him as much to his mistakes as to his promises. Jean hadn’t wanted him to feel responsible, or obligated. She waited until she made peace with the past, and then she told him, when there was no obligation left to fulfill.

Looking into Rick’s cobalt eyes, Tamia managed a smile as she said, “Jean will come through. She’s come this far, and once she hears that one of the men responsible for what happened is looking at life on Mars, if he’s lucky, that’ll bolster her courage to go on. I know.”

He swallowed hard, his eyes closed, as he drew her closer. Tamia cursed herself for reminding him that she’d walked in Jean’s shoes, as a girl. He tortured himself over what he couldn’t possibly have stopped. It was time for a subject change.

“Speaking of the men responsible, I don’t think we’re done, yet.”

His eyes opened. “I figured you’d catch onto that one.”

She smiled, shrugging. “It doesn’t make sense; I’m not sure I ever believed it was just one person. There were too many different deals all going down at the same time. No one person can juggle all of that without screwing up big time. And, until Tolson, there haven’t been any screw-ups.”

“That was my thought,” Rick concurred, his eyes warm as they met hers. “And I think we need to focus our sights on Panfil. There has to be a few more skeletons in that closet.”

She grinned. “Time to call the team together and let them know what’s going down, then.”

He met her gaze, and a ghost of the smile in his eyes flickered at his lips. “You’re a slave driver, Kuan.”

She winked at him, already rising from the soft. “You have no idea. Now get your ass in gear, Commander. Let’s go catch us some more bad guys!”

Twenty minutes later, gathered around the command center’s round table, the rest of the Commandos shared astounded looks as Rick related what had happened at IA that morning. Finally, with a low whistle, Jen sat back, shaking her head. “Can’t say that I’m terribly surprised, but Tolson wasn’t on our list. Does this mean we have to expand our search again?”

“Not totally,” Rick assured her. “We have a profile, now. We’re looking for—”

“Powerful men in key positions who would have access to Intel, military coding,

and large sums of money,” Jen finished, laying her hands flat on the table. Frowning, she looked at Rick. “What did Pete Wilson say about charges? Anything?”

“They’re going to charge Tolson with attempted murder, rape, and conspiracy to commit treason, unless he cops a plea by providing information,” Tamia supplied, sliding a thin file across the table to Jen. “John Tolson was apparently the one handling the cover-up and dirty work. They’ve already IDed him as one of Jean O’Neil’s attackers.”

“But he wasn’t the brains of the operation,” Rick said grimly. “Or the funding member of the espionage conspiracy.”

“I’m guessing he’ll squeal who is, though,” Kathy said from where she leaned against the Comms room door. “If he hasn’t already.”

“Probably.” Rick flicked a brief grin and wink at Tamia. “Pete Wilson’s working real hard on that end.” He looked over the gathered Commandos. “In the meantime, I want background Intel profiles done on anyone matching the personality type Jen mentioned. I want you all to turn up the heat under your sources, looking for that link. We’re finally on the right track.”

There were grins and murmurs of assent from them all. They were clearly glad to finally have a clearer target. No sooner was the order given than the command center emptied as Commandos headed out to confront this no-longer-anonymous enemy.

Turning as Tamia rose to her feet, Rick smiled softly in apology. “Sorry I didn’t tell you what was going to go down at IA,” he said softly. “I was acting on a hunch.”

She smiled wryly up at him. “I think I’m glad I didn’t know.”

He let his eyes drift over her, thankful that his gamble hadn’t cost him something

precious, like the lives of Tamia and their child. “How are you feeling?”

She gave him a soft, almost shy, smile that made his heart do a strange jig in his chest, as she reached for his hand. As she placed his palm flat against her swelling middle, he felt the sudden jerk of something connecting from the inside, and his eyes widened in surprise and wonder. “It kicked!”

“See?” Her smile bloomed, stealing his breath away. “We’re just fine.”

Pulling her into his arms, he breathed her warm scent, feeling fierce love sing in his veins. For this woman, and the child she carried, he would gladly lay down his own life. There had never been a question in his mind. No matter what the coming days held for them all, Tamia’s love would be enough to see them all through.

THE END