



Into the Mist

Sharon G. Clark

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Prologue

Okinawa, Japan, May 2, 1945

LIEUTENANT KASEY HOUSTON dug herself deeper into the muddy foxhole, a medical kit held tensely against her stomach as she waited for the barrage of weapons fire to end. The hot muggy night magnified her discomfort. She heard the rumble of thunder in the distance. There would be a storm soon. Kasey doubted it could wash away the stench of the dead, and the dying that filled her nostrils, tugging furiously at her remaining threads of hope.

Here she was in this hell, a world from home. Instead of laughter, she heard the weeping of frightened men, kids, really, just barely old enough to shave. Rather than Tommy Dorsey, she heard the beat of fired mortar shells.

This was the glory, the adventure promised in the photographs at the post office. She'd seen the publicity and got caught up in the fervor; so had the soldier beside her. Private Jimmy Dalton, a boy of twenty who had become like a little brother to her, his unseeing gaze directed heavenward, blood still draining from the gaping hole in his chest. Next to Jimmy lay the field

radio, destroyed by the same bullet that killed him. *Damn it Jimmy, you were supposed to be invincible*, she wiped away the tears.

Kasey had no idea of the exact location of the men. How many were still alive? The ever-present anger coursed through her. In answer to the flood of rage, she grabbed Jimmy's grenade, pulled the pin, and hurled it toward the enemy.

There was an ear-splitting explosion before the cough of bullets stopped. Kasey slung the strap of her bag over her shoulder, clutched Jimmy's M-1 rifle to her chest, and slowly raised her head until her line of vision rested just above the foxhole. There was no sign of the enemy, but she knew they were out there.

Watching. Waiting.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," she whispered. The soft sound of her own voice roared harshly in her ears.

Kasey squinted, looking for movement. The nights still belonged to the suicidal Japanese, who had no qualms about walking straight into American foxholes. Their desperation made the troops trigger-happy. The shortage of ammunition made the effort futile, as well as wasteful.

She had to do something for Jimmy, for all the "Jimmy's". The injured men depended on her. If she could creep through the darkness and take out the machine gunner, the unit might make it through another night. She might make it through the night. The hope of one small victory and the welfare of the men gave Kasey the needed incentive.

She slithered out of the foxhole and elbowed her way through the mud. It caked her stomach and boots, splashed on the medical bag, all weighing her down. The stench of decaying vegetation, death and blood turned her stomach, but she moved forward. Her one objective: Destroy the enemy before more men died. Only one machine gun held them down. An eternity ticked by until she reached the cave. Kasey was no heroine, just a nurse, and a psychiatric specialist at that. *I must be crazy*, she thought. *This was nothing like sport hunting with her father*. She knew the odds of her coming out of this alive were slim to none. Though she never regretted her breach of the "forbidden" (to all female personnel) upper deck, she did wonder what had possessed her to sneak off the *USS Comfort*, a medical transport ship, to assist the men in the field.

Just ahead were the bodies of the two men who had already tried to locate and enter the hidden chamber. Kasey used them to shield her from view. Hoping those in the cave hadn't noted this attempt, she took her time: inching slowly forward, stopping, forward again.

She took her field knife out of its sheath; then slowly slipped into the shelter's meager opening. Inside, the cave was low and narrow. Toward the back she saw a flickering glow from a small lantern.

Kasey gripped the knife firmly in her hand and crept cautiously until she came upon a lone enemy soldier, crouched behind his machine gun and surrounded by crates. If all of the boxes were loaded with ammunition, there would be enough to hold Jimmy's unit for an eternity. One glimmer of hope--his back was to Kasey. A sound came from behind the boxes, and Kasey pressed flush against the cave wall to get closer.

She saw a small section cut out of the rock, almost like a porthole, and noted five men in a lower bunker. These men--scientists, she assumed--were working with laboratory equipment and methodically making annotations to blue colored hardbound notebooks. Every few seconds, one of them would shout something to the others as he added a chemical. After one such chemical was added, one of the beakers burst and a smoky substance filled the chamber. At that moment, lightening pierced the room and a loud crack of thunder sounded above them. The men below

began to yell frantically. A strange greyish mist filled the rear of the cave. She didn't know what the mist was, nor did she care.

The enemy soldier she had avoided so far turned in her direction, his hands folded tight against his chest.

So much for having hope on my side.

Despite the desperate need to destroy the enemy, Kasey hesitated. This soldier couldn't have been much older than Jimmy. She wasn't trained for this. She was trained to save life, not take life. As they faced each other, the greyish mist filled the cave. Kasey had to strain her eyes to see. That's when she noticed the grenade clutched in the boy's hands.

"Crap!" She turned and ran like the hounds of hell were nipping at her. Less than a foot from the entrance, a powerful explosion roared through the cave, the force flinging Kasey to the ground. She covered her head with her hands as a hail of rock rained down. She was going to die, but not without a fight. She clawed at the debris above her, barely aware of the pain from the shrapnel biting into her flesh.

Kasey glimpsed a small pinpoint of light before unconsciousness replaced it.

Chapter One

Okinawa, Japan, May 2, 2036

CAPTAIN ANDREA KNIGHT jumped from the hover-jeep before the driver brought it to a complete stop. Robotic Air Lights, RALs, with built-in recording devices, illuminated the night and the destruction. The west half of the Civilian Freedom Force Militia, "CFFM", Headquarters building housing the barracks for "non-essential" personnel lay in chunks of plasticrete, a recycled plastic and cement mixture used for buildings. The still-intact section of structure housing the political personnel, unaffectionately referred to as "suits", was intact and being guarded by the Militia, which was a waste of manpower. The Scepters had the expertise and wouldn't hesitate to eliminate the remaining portion of building. *Why'd they choose this part of the structure? Why not the section with the officials and their computers?*

She intended to get these questions answered as soon as all the bodies of the people housed in the west wing were located and unburied. She doubted there were many survivors, but if a chance remained that even one person might have survived the blast, it was her duty to give her full attention and strength to finding that individual. Andrea realized survivors were found as pain-filled cries filled her ears.

The hovering RAL re-circulated dust from the debris. Bright light from the robotic unit poured down and created a hazy greyish cloud as she worked rapidly to locate people buried beneath the debris. A clicking sound alerted Andrea to a probable malfunction. *Yippee*, she thought, *I hope that means the recording unit isn't able to monitor every move I make.*

Andrea continued working as she called to the device. "State your number, RAL."

"RAL-42WX." The vocal device on this unit used a male baritone.

"Run internal diagnostics, 42WX. Relay findings."

Sweat and dust combined mercilessly with the tropical humidity and caked her face, hands and clothing in a mucky mess. Breathing heavily from the exertion, Andrea stopped for a moment to wipe the moisture from her forehead. She noticed a slight movement in the rubble and dug frantically. She bent closer, her heart pounding with hope. Fingers, barely moving, poked through and sent a tiny shower of stone raining onto her boots. Desperate to bring air to the survivor, Andrea dropped to her knees and clawed into the debris as if her life depended on saving this one person. The islands foraminifera sand, called Makiminato Limestone in this area, contained colonial coral that sliced and tore the flesh of her hands, but she didn't stop.

Uncovering an arm, then a shoulder, Andrea recognized the material of the uniform as sateen greens. This was a Military Advisor, which spurred her to work faster, her mind racing. She'd been told she was the only Advisor on the island. Who could this person be?

Andrea cleared the debris until a human head was finally in sight. She brushed at the dirt on the other woman's face and noted that she appeared young, and Andrea guessed she had a sense of humor from the laugh lines on either side of her well-defined lips. Her hair was dark, even with the heavy powdering of dirt. She dug until the upper torso of the woman was unburied. Andrea believed that cleaned up, this woman would be more than attractive. But who was she?

Andrea tried to move her a little, but stopped and winced at the woman's involuntary cry of pain.

"I've completed diagnostics and am ready to relay findings," came the baritone of 42WX.

"Not now, RAL. I have a situation!"

"Shall I institute repairs?"

"You're the damn computer, you figure it out," she snapped, bending once again to the woman.

Andrea hollered for a Medic Unit.

A few seconds later, the Meds at her side, Sergeant Garcia of the Militia was with them.

"I've got the manifest," Garcia said. "Who've we got?"

"I don't recognize her." Andrea moved out of the way for the medics. "She's in battle dress, yet without the armor."

Garcia frowned. "An Advisor? I was told you're the only one here."

"So was I."

The medics were cutting away clothing to identify the full extent of the woman's injuries. Andrea moved closer as they examined her, her attention held by the wound to her leg. The injuries looked painful, but not life threatening. What protruded from the leg was the curious thing. It looked like metallic shrapnel, which was odd considering the plasticrete material. An olive colored bag hung across her shoulder. The medic staunched the blood flow, and put on a temporary bandage to cover the injury during transport to the hospital. "Vitals are good, Captain. We'll get her secured and you can come by tomorrow for questioning."

"Did her TAP tell you who she is?" Andrea asked as she placed the odd shrapnel in a plastic bag and into her jacket pocket.

"Isn't one, and I didn't find a DataCard, either," the medic said as he and Garcia placed the woman on the gurney hovering beside them. The TAP--Thermal Automated Personal-Identifier--would have been surgically placed into the wrist for identification. However, because of the chip's accessibility to personal information, it was a major security breach for soldiers.

Everything personalizing an individual was obtainable by the enemy. The DataCard had the same function, but was a lot easier to dispose of in the event of capture. "Could be in the debris, I guess. Wait, got something, Captain." He pulled a metal chain over the woman's head and handed it to Andrea.

"Hunh," Andrea mumbled. Something about this woman's very presence was odd. Her personal identification consisted of old-fashioned dog tags, and a uniform she shouldn't be wearing. She glanced at the tags: Houston, Kasey, A70436221. The first conclusion Andrea reached was that this woman worked for the Scepters, which explained the lack of proper identifying papers, and adequate armor; however, Andrea didn't believe the obvious applied here. The woman didn't look like a gang member, and wasn't exactly the usual age, either. Something peculiar was transpiring here and she intended to decipher the clues before the "suits" had a chance to muck this situation up, too.

"Garcia," Andrea said, getting his attention. "Position someone to guard her tonight. Don't let anyone talk to her until I get there. Isolate her if you need to. Look in the bag she's wearing, too. Understood?"

"Aye, Captain."

Andrea watched Garcia follow the medic before she returned to the search for other survivors. The entire time she worked, the features of the injured woman hovered in the back of her mind like a misplaced RAL. She would resolve the curious situation; however, in the pit of her stomach, Andrea hoped her assessment was correct and the woman wasn't a threat.

Four hours passed. One man found was barely alive. Two corpses were identified. Not usually one to shirk responsibility to duty, something nagged at Andrea not to disclose the circumstances of the stranger, this Kasey Houston. It seemed cosmic fate since the expected video footage from the RAL didn't exist to corroborate her recovery from the debris. For once, Andrea was happy to have a device malfunction. She'd also received an update on the woman's condition and recovery expectations.

After a quick shower, Andrea made her way to the hospital.

Thanks to Garcia's report, Andrea was able to go directly to the room she needed. No one questioned her presence at this time of night, since most the staff knew her by sight. She was surprised, however, to find Sergeant Garcia had appointed himself as guard in front of the closed door. She gave him a "thank you" smile as she approached. "Any change?" she asked when close enough to whisper.

"She's been laser-stitched, medicated, and her beautiful body put in one of those wonderful hospital gowns," he reported with a mischievous grin. "Made sure she had a private room. Other than that, she hasn't fluttered an eyelash."

"I'm sure the lady would appreciate you duly noting her body," she said, uncomfortable with the quick surge of anger his summation invoked. Why should she be concerned with a stranger and her lack of privacy while unconscious? Andrea shook her head to dispel the emotion. "Anything to report that's business related?"

"That bag," he said in a hushed tone. "It has archaic medical stuff, a military antique. I stowed it in the closet for you to look at. No one's tried to see her, though. Would you like me to resume guard?"

"I'll take it from here," she said. "Get some rest." As soon as he was out of sight, Andrea opened the door and walked into the darkened room. She heard steady breathing coming from the hospital bed and made her way to the chair against the wall. Picking it up and quietly placing it beside the bed, Andrea plopped down and gazed intently at the sleeping woman.

This stranger was beautiful, in an understated way. The standard white sheet that covered her body left nothing to the imagination, caressing every curve and line. Andrea could tell she had full breasts, a hint of the areole appearing through two thin layers of material. Her hair had been cleaned of the dusty debris and Andrea wasn't surprised it was a silky black. Andrea guessed her

to be about five-foot-nine. Kasey shifted, moaned in sleep as she flung an arm across her chest. Andrea became aware of long slender fingers, free of any adornment, such as a wedding ring. An image of those very hands touching, holding her, flashed in her mind and Andrea's pulse quickened.

In an attempt to dispel the visual, Andrea stood and went to the closet. She took the bag off the hook and gave it a cursory glance before she raised the flap and opened it. Just as Garcia had noted, the contents were antiques from a different era. Each item was in pristine condition, as if new. Stitched into the lining was the same name as on the dog tags. After replacing the bag, Andrea pulled her mini-ACRN, the handheld version of the Automated Computer Research Network, accessed the military "eyes-only" grid, and punched in: Houston, Kasey. As the system ran the query, Andrea returned to the chair by the bed.

It wasn't long before she received the results. She had to read the findings twice before accepting what she was reviewing; even then, it didn't make sense. The woman in the hospital bed--if indeed the same woman who all the paraphernalia belonged to--was formally reported as Missing in Action on July 11, 1945, from the USS Comfort, stationed off the coast of Okinawa, Japan, during World War II. The report gave a date of birth as April 14, 1917. Andrea did the mental math. The injured woman didn't look to be pushing 120-years. Knowing time-travel didn't happen except in old movies, she was about to wake this "Kasey" and get some truthful answers, when the door swung open and the doctor walked in. She got up and joined him by the door.

"Ah, Captain," Dr. Peters whispered, "I see you're looking after our perplexing patient."

"Perplexing how?"

"Well, had I not personally performed the examination, I'd say we're glimpsing history come alive. Although I found nothing to conclude how it's possible, everything," Peters shoved his hands in his pocket and leaned in closer, "dates to the 1940s or earlier. Unfortunately, the tests didn't explain any better than I am."

Andrea frowned. "Who else knows about your results, Doctor?"

He pulled his hand from his pocket and, taking her by the elbow, walked them both to the foot of the bed. "I gleaned from the personal guard that this woman was important to you. After seeing that old medical bag, I took samples and handled all subsequent tests, mostly because I couldn't believe what the analyses were telling me. There are no formal records, yet. Somehow, I don't suspect there will be. Do I get an explanation from you? Anything?"

"I wish I could I give you something, Doc." Andrea shrugged. "She was under the debris from tonight's explosion. Never saw her before," she glanced to the unconscious woman, "and I would definitely remember her if I had. I ran a mini-ACRN query and she comes up as MIA 1945." She returned her attention to Peters. "Now, you suggest to me all the items, and her very person, are authentic for someone snatched from the past. What am I supposed to do with that? With her?"

"For now, Captain, I'd do nothing. All my records will confirm her as Kasey Houston, Military Advisor. She'll be awake soon. I suggest you get answers from her, though you'll probably get little more than we already know." He picked up the computer chart hanging at the foot of the bed. "Go easy, please. Implausible as it seems, if she's really 120 years old, she's gonna be frightened, and feeling quite alone."

"I understand," Andrea said, extending her hand. "Thanks for all your help. I'll keep you apprised of events. I may need your help with this. Okay?"

Shaking her hand, he replied, "Anything you need from me, you know that." He walked to the door. Holding the handle, but not opening it, he directed toward the bed, "I've put a DND on the chart." Andrea remembered a "do not disturb" would give her privacy until about nine in the

morning. "You should use it to get some rest. Oh, and you're right about that earlier comment." Andrea looked at him, not knowing which comment he meant. Grinning, he said, "I wouldn't forget a looker like that either."

Once the door closed behind Peters, she locked it and went back to sitting in the chair and studying the patient. Myriad questions about Lt. Houston ran through Andrea's head; however, the foremost was: How does a person jump 90 years through time? Rubbing the tension and fatigue from her forehead, Andrea closed her eyes and tried to envision scenarios to explain this bizarre circumstance. She found no answer that didn't sound like a plot from a science fiction novel, she attempted to speculate on answers she'd get once Lt. Houston woke.

Andrea was startled awake by a sharp intake of breath, and then, "Dear God, where am I?" With the sheet clutched to her chest, Kasey anxiously stared around the room as she tried to get to a sitting position. Andrea moved closer. "Relax, Lieutenant, you're safe," Andrea said. "You're in a hospital. You had injuries that needed attending."

"I should be dead."

"You should be a lot of things," Andrea mumbled, then louder added, "Dead wasn't in the cards, I guess. How do you feel?"

Breathing a bit more evenly, she answered, "Shocked. Disoriented. Too many emotions to tally." Still holding the sheet close, she shifted to a better sitting position. "How did I get to a hospital so quickly? Who are you?"

With what she hoped was a pleasant smile, Andrea reached for the bed's controls, "Here, let me raise this for you. Some answers will have to wait, I'm afraid." As the bed rose, she noticed Kasey adjust herself and allowed the mattress to support her frame. "Name's Captain Andrea Knight, Military Advisor."

Kasey frowned first, before she scrunched her features in a grimace. "Advisor, like a lawyer? Am I to be court-martialed for leaving ship?" Then, more resignedly, she added, "I accept any punishment the State Department deems fit, of course. Will you perform my debriefing? Is this it?"

Nodding, Andrea explained, "A debriefing of sorts, yes. Lawyer, no. If you could indulge me a bit, I'd like to ask a few routine questions. Do you feel up to it?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Name?"

"Houston, Kasey, Lieutenant, United States Army, Service Number A70436221." As Kasey spoke, Andrea nearly laughed aloud, noticing Kasey's shoulders automatically stiffen and draw backward, eyes focusing straight ahead, as if speaking at military attention.

Though Andrea didn't intend to do so for the official records, she pulled out her mini-ACRN to give the impression of note taking. "What's the last thing you remember? Maybe you should summarize events leading to waking here in the hospital?"

Kasey took a deep breath and started. "Guess I was getting cabin fever, since we women aren't allowed on the upper deck. Private Dalton was a kid I met who kept talking excitedly about how he and his wife recently had their first child. He told me how he was going to capture the island so fast that if I blinked I'd miss all the action. We probably got closer than we should have. He was like having a little brother for the first time." Kasey smiled at the memory, and Andrea noted the tears building in her eyes. "I couldn't just sit around, waiting to evaluate the poor kids and their mental health without doing something; so, I talked Jimmy into lending me a uniform and I snuck onto the LCT--"

"LCT?"

"Beg your pardon, Captain. Landing Craft, Tank." Kasey shook her head in memory. "Do I need to remember the Tank number?"

Andrea shook her head in the negative.

"Well, there were so many troops, all of them so absorbed in their own thoughts, they didn't even notice I didn't belong." Kasey shifted slightly on the bed. "Guess I could take that personally, not distinguishable from a male, but I was the least of their worries."

Only fear and the rush of impending battle could account for that reaction. There was no mistaking her for a 'him'.

"As it was, I had some adrenaline excitement, too," Kasey continued. "Anyway, we landed and did what needed to be done. With night and a storm coming on, we were held at bay in a foxhole by an enemy gunner." The tears, so far held back, dripped down her cheeks. "Jimmy must have known what was coming for him. While pinned down, he begged me to promise to find his family, and give his wife and child his love. Jimmy was killed, took a bullet in the chest. I took his rifle and expecting I'd die, too, infiltrated the enemy bunker." She shuddered.

"Take it easy. No hurry, Lieutenant," Andrea told her, curbing the impulse to comfort her with touch. "We can continue later, if you need to."

Kasey shook her head. "Thank you, Ma'am, but I need to get this over with. Problem is I'm not certain what, exactly, happened."

"Just tell me what you do remember."

"In the cave, scientists were doing some kind of experiments. There was an accident and then this strange grey mist in the cave. I ignored it, for the most part, trying to sneak up on the soldier, but he turned and pulled the pin on a grenade. Last thing I remember is trying to get back to the top, so my corpse could be found, just as the ceiling collapsed on top of me," Kasey sighed heavily, "then waking up here. How'd I get to a military hospital so fast?" she asked, before her eyes went wide. "How long have I been unconscious?"

Andrea knew the truth--about a hundred years-- would not go over well. "Not as long as you think," she told her. "What year is it?"

Frowning, Kasey answered hesitantly, "Nineteenforty-five. Ma'am, is--"

"Do you have family we can contact, let them know you're all right?" Andrea asked, hoping to give some semblance of normalcy.

With a shake of her head, Kasey replied, "Just my mother, but she didn't want me enlisting, so we had a bit of a falling out."

"Sorry to hear that." Andrea chided herself for the attraction she felt toward Kasey, when she should be all hard-core emotions. Inwardly, she laughed at the idea that she was getting a crush on a much older woman; though Kasey would be younger by a couple of years had her jump in time not occurred. *If this was all truly real*, she thought.

"You should get some rest," Andrea said when she noted Kasey trying to stifle a yawn. "We'll talk more, later in the morning. I'll be here, should you need something."

Kasey laid her head back, closed her eyes and was soon asleep. Her breathing leveled. Returning to her chair, Andrea followed suit.

Chapter Two

KASEY WOKE WITH a feeling of apprehension and slowly recalled being in a hospital bed. As she opened her eyes, she immediately recognized the captain from earlier, sleeping in a chair pulled close to the bed. Even with the captain's eyes shut, Kasey remembered their strange grey color. The first time Kasey awoke, she thought she was dreaming when she noted the eye color, assuming it an illusion from the explosion's aftermath. She would have believed herself still unconscious if the aches weren't in her bones, or the hunger increasing in her belly. She had to laugh at herself for the acknowledgement of the last. One thing hadn't changed from the conscious to the unconscious world--food was still her body's first consideration. To prove the fact, her stomach rumbled loudly.

In response, Andrea's eyes snapped open and she straightened in her chair.

"Good morning, Captain Knight," Kasey said, hoping she didn't look as embarrassed as she felt.

"Sorry I woke you."

Glancing at her watch, Andrea shook her head. "Apologies aren't necessary. Lots to do today, and we should--" A booming shudder rocked the room.

Before the explosion had fully registered, Kasey felt herself pressed into the mattress by Andrea's body. The tinkling sound of glass fragments hitting the floor, which apparently launched Andrea into muttering curses into the bed pillow just above Kasey's head. She didn't expect they remained in the position for long, as the moment Kasey became aware of the heat from Andrea's body, the captain was standing beside the bed.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

For the second time in as many minutes, Kasey felt the flush of embarrassment heat her face, this time from the trembling their contact created. "Fine, Ma'am," she said, surprised by the crack in her voice. "Are the Japanese bombing the hospital?"

With a shrug, and hastily turning away, she heard, "Something like that," as Andrea strode to the closet and pulled out a uniform and tossed it onto the bed. "You should probably get dressed, in case I need to get you out of here in a hurry. Your boots are under the bed. I'll need to check that explosion out." Andrea went to the door and released the bolt. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Lock this door, stay away from the windows, and don't let anyone but me into this room. Understood?" Grabbing at the clothes, Kasey began to dress. "But, Captain, I may be able to help. This will be quick."

Hesitantly, Andrea shook her head. "Lieutenant, you don't fully grasp the situation."

Kasey laced her boots and stumbled, "With all due respect, Captain, penalize me later. Right now, there are men and women who need our attention. I can't let others suffer because I had a lapse in judgment."

She heard Andrea heave a sigh, noted she made her way closer. "That very well may be, Kasey. What you don't understand--as I can't explain myself--is that you aren't in 1945."

Finished dressing, Kasey stared at her in confusion, "Coma? Shouldn't there be some muscle atrophy or something? How long have I been unconscious?" She stood in front of Andrea. "We should hurry, correct? Can you explain on the way?" Kasey attempted to control the trembling of her hand as she grasped the door handle. "So what year is it?"

She knew Andrea was a hairsbreadth behind, could feel warmth from the words on the nape of her neck. "The year is 2036."

Dizzy with disbelief, Kasey used the door to keep from collapsing into a heap. Nervously she mumbled, "Ridiculous, that would make me over one-hundredyears-old. I'm the same as when I went into the cave on May second."

Kasey felt a hand on her shoulder, apparently meant for support or reassurance. "And yesterday was that very day," Andrea said, "only ninety-two years ago. If I could explain it, I would."

"That's not possible," Kasey whispered, too frightened to turn and look the other woman in the eye for fear this was part of a nightmare. "That only happens in books. This is residual from my conscious. Jimmy was fond of that writer *H.G. Wells*, and this is a result."

"I only wish it were, for your sake. Best you see for yourself." Andrea placed a hand over hers, and assisted Kasey in opening the door, before stepping close beside her. "Let's go."

The medical team on the floor barely contained the pandemonium. Patients capable of ambulatory movement were hysterically demanding answers from the staff. Kasey wanted to scream, *you think you have pressing questions*. Andrea stayed close to her, blocking the path with her own body when someone got too near. At the counter, Andrea got the attention of one of the staff who hurried to her. "Do you know what happened?" she asked.

The male nurse nodded while whispering near her ear, "Bombed the mess hall next door. Only a few people, cooks mostly, were inside at the time. One's dead, three injured and presently in OR."

Andrea thanked him, and they moved to the doorway marked stairs. Kasey still felt some soreness in her muscles, but the activity made tension secondary as she observed her surroundings. Despite what Andrea told her, not much seemed to have changed from her time up to this alleged future. Hospitals still had the same smell and look. It wasn't until they reached the bottom and exited into natural daylight that Kasey was once again near collapsing from the shock--this time visual.

People were scurrying about, understandably frantic. None had green skin or anything bizarre protruding from them. They were wearing typical clothing, though some outfits exposed more than should be viewed outside the home. What did, however, defy logic was the vehicles were floating just above the ground, and small cylinders hovered out of reach above their heads. She pointed.

"RALs," Andrea explained, "are robotic air lights. For night work, mostly, but fitted with cameras that usually aren't working. Unless you want them broken, then the video is fine."

"Ah, of course," Kasey said before returning her attention to the surroundings. Another relatively familiar site for Kasey was the fact that men and women in uniform were carrying weapons. She made a mental note to ask Andrea about the outcome of her war as well as the current one.

However, Kasey knew it would have to wait. One of the soldiers supervising the removal of rubble from the sight of the destruction had caught sight of Andrea and was rushing to them.

"Captain Knight," the soldier said, "we pulled out all the people that were supposed to be in the building. As a precaution," he paused and gave a quick glance in her direction, "we're verifying and making sure there aren't any unexpected bodies materializing out of thin air." Andrea nodded. He switched his attention to Kasey. "Glad to see you up and about, Lieutenant."

"Glad to be here." She grimaced. "I think." Seeing his name on his jacket, and the rank insignia on his collar, Kasey added, "Sergeant Garcia."

"Very good, Ma'am," he said.

Andrea smiled at her, "Some things are recognizable, at least, and should make transition easier for you."

Kasey felt a chill rush through her body. "You believe this--situation to be permanent?" There was a note of fear in her voice that startled Kasey. What was the alternative? In her time--if this wasn't part of a coma-induced nightmare--she was buried under cave rubble and probably dying, or dead. She shuddered.

"We should return you to the hospital, get a doctor to make sure you're okay," Andrea said. "I'll be right back, Sergeant."

Shaking her head negatively, Kasey said, "It'll pass, Captain. I want--need to help, if I can."

"Commendable, Lieutenant." Andrea grinned cautiously. "Are you certain?"

At Kasey's nod, Andrea gave her shoulder a quick squeeze and both resumed attention on Garcia and the update. Kasey focused on listening, in case these were important clues in removing herself from a comatose mind. However, she still felt the heat from the quick contact.

"Granted I'm a simple soldier, Captain," Garcia said, "but I truly believe the Scepters are toying with us. There's been ample opportunity to do some major damage, or even take out some very important people. It's been minimal, considering." He shook his head sadly, while indicating they should follow him into the section of mess hall that remained intact. Once inside, he explained,

"Captain, the RALs are active."

"Yeah, I figured they would be," she said. "Didn't expect I'd get that lucky twice."

"Why the importance?" Kasey asked, believing a visual recording of any damage from the blast would come in handy later.

"Because you don't exist, Lieutenant Houston, and are a Scepter spy," Andrea's voice lowered as she finished with, "or you're a space alien."

Kasey flushed, "Given a choice, which is best?"

With a chuckle, Garcia replied, "I'd be the alien."

"So, this is where you put me in confinement for interrogation?" Kasey gave a nervous titter,

"Guess you can't be certain I'm who I think I am, right?"

Andrea sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. "I won't do that to you, Lieutenant."

Rubbing tiredly at her eyes, Kasey asked, "Would you please call me Kasey? All this acknowledgement of rank is making the transition most frustrating."

With a shrug, Andrea continued, "I promise to keep you safe until we figure the whys and how to fix the situation." She pulled her notebook, or what Kasey had believed to be for notes last night, and began pushing little buttons on what appeared to be a miniscule typewriter. "Garcia, should questions arise, you've seen Lieutenant Houston working with me from time to time on previous occasions. Am I correct in that?"

Garcia gave a mischievous grin. "Yes, Captain. Believe the three of us have shared a pitcher of beer on one specific occasion."

With a smirk, Andrea replied, "You don't have to exaggerate to that extent, Sergeant."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I do. Need bragging rights at the barracks." Andrea laughed aloud, but Kasey was a bit lost within the conversation. "What else do you need from me, Captain?"

"That should be all for now. I'll take care of official documentation." She gave him a serious look as she added, "I do owe you for this, Julio. Actually I do need to ask just one thing," she said. At his frown, she added, "That you fill me in on the stories so I won't be too surprised later."

"Aye, you got it." Garcia gave a quick glance outside the building. "If that's all, Captain, I'll get back to duty." At her nod, he left.

"Why are you protecting me?" Kasey asked.

"Obviously, you're putting a lot of effort into my care." Andrea didn't answer immediately and Kasey began to panic, wondering what would be the next phase of this nightmare.

"Can't imagine you asked for this to happen to you," Andrea said, "and evidence can't prove you're lying. With all the rest of the shit in this world, why bury you in it?" Andrea unfolded her arms and dropped them to her side. Her voice got menacingly low as she added, "Make a fool

out of me and my-- concern, I'll truly make life a living hell for you. If this is an elaborate charade, you'd best come clean now."

"Captain, I don't know if I'm in a personal nightmare or not, but I assure you, I'm exactly who you know me to be." Unexpectedly, Kasey's stomach growled loudly.

Andrea laughed. "If this is a nightmare, I'd think your stomach would wake you. Let's go. I'm hungry too. What do you eat?"

ANDREA DECIDED TO call in favors she probably wouldn't have under any other circumstance. Using an officially secured line, Andrea punched in the number. Luckily, Sue Frampton picked up after two rings, and Andrea was able to get straight to the point. "This is Andrea Knight, Sue. I need a big one."

"Andi, baby." Andrea rolled her eyes at the nickname. Sue had given her the name just to aggravate her. "You can have nearly any body part you want."

"Won't want to deprive Janine of anything she's become accustomed to."

Sue's tone became serious. "Wouldn't have anything to get used to if you hadn't intervened. Don't know why the government has to be so difficult." Andrea heard the hitch in her breath as Sue fought emotion. Out of necessity, to save lives, Andrea had used her rank and position to open an unused clinic to treat a small town during an epidemic. "What kind of excuse is 'need a representative to authorize use of facilities' when everything was there?"

"Well, it all turned out okay." Andrea said.

"Only because you're stubborn," Sue said. "So how do I repay saving the lives of me, my partner and the rest of the town?"

Andrea briefly explained what she needed. She was able to get Kasey into the system as an Official Military Advisor with the informal rank of Lieutenant. They gave Kasey a vague background should someone decide to snoop, and Sue had the authorization forwarded for a DataCard to be ready at the local HR office. Part of the pseudo-history had her working for Andrea on previous occasions, and subsequently requesting Kasey's transfer to handle the position of "Advisor, Second-Command" while sorting out the Scepter issues that had risen on Okinawa.

"All done," Sue said. "I know things are crazy for you, Andi, but I expect you to join Janine and me for dinner. Then you can explain the mysterious Kasey." Sue chuckled. "Oh, maybe she can come, too. Is there a juicy story here?"

"None that I'm going to acknowledge right now." Andrea cleared her throat. "Um, I gotta go, Sue. Give my best to Jan."

"You got it. Matter of fact, Andi, I'll give her a kiss smack on the lips and tell her it's from you." Andrea heard her laugh as the line was disconnected.

NEARLY THREE MONTHS had elapsed since Andrea found Kasey buried beneath the rubble of the barracks and, for most of that time, both had expected her to vanish. It hadn't happened, yet. Kasey concluded that she had to complete a specific mission as retribution for jumping ship in her time and upsetting the natural order of things cosmic. Since Andrea didn't have a better explanation, she accepted the reasoning, at least until a better one came along. They did agree that whatever experiments the scientist worked on beneath the cave probably explained a huge portion, if not all of the events that brought Kasey to the future.

The hardest part was explaining all that had transpired from 1945 to the present. With the use of an ACRN, Andrea brought up the archived files to show how the United States had won World War II, which seemed to bring a sense of relief to Kasey that Jimmy hadn't died in vain. She explained the TAP and DataCard. Kasey watched footage and read articles on the destruction of the Twin Towers, a time now historically remembered as 9-11. The Iraq War followed, with its terrible drain on human life and resources; and, the first African-American President, voted into office for two consecutive terms. In fact, he instituted a United President system based on the United Nations policy for equality.

Explaining why the world had replaced the military with the CFFM proved more difficult.

"Had you stayed in your time for a couple more months, you would have known about the first nuclear test, Trinity, in the United States. The British testing followed in 1952, called "radioflash", their term for electromagnetic pulse, EMP. Despite the EMP Commission and their Critical National Infrastructures Report, the thought of disaster by this means wasn't taken too seriously." She described how the United States and many other parts of the world had begun to change positively--until a newly elected president, Raymond Defosset, brought on the 2020 War. "Guess things were going too well, and negativity was his priority." Andrea shook her head and leaned back in her chair. "It started with downsizing the military, and using mercenaries in their place. Easier to control people who don't care what they do, just show them the money. Everything's about control in power positions. Then he actually abolished the military in 2030, stating we needed to make the first changes in not appearing warlike."

"So who was defending our borders?" Kasey asked.

"That's just it, no one, really. The people were furious; as were any military folk, though we were also quite confused, too, as to the reasoning." She shrugged. "Then it appeared we got our answer: In all the major cities of the world, high altitude, uranium series, nuclear explosions were set off simultaneously, Radon 222. The fallout from this was quite extensive. They included EMPs, that's electromagnetic pulse, which brought down anything electrical. We had come to rely so heavily on electrical power that this assault left us without the ability to mobilize and coordinate emergency systems. The half-life of Radon 222 is 3.82 days. Long enough to contaminate and get folks sick. Water, food, fuel, transportation, and so many more services were set back to the dark ages. And it's not that we hadn't any warning, either. A report had been sent out by the EMP Commission in 2004 and again in 2008. No one paid much attention, I guess." Kasey grimaced. "The world was vulnerable."

"Not to mention, so many people were subject to starvation, disease from lack of proper water and food, and at the hands of ruthless thieves. Because of the devastation worldwide to necessary resource, technology kinda hit a brick wall."

"Okay, I don't want to sound ignorant," Kasey said, "but how did this Defosset manage to convince the United States--and the world, essentially--to get rid of their military?"

"Not a bad question. There are times I don't understand, either." Andrea typed Defosset's name into the search line, pulled up video archives, and they watched a few of his speeches. "As you can see he was attractive, and eloquent in his speaking. Some referred to him as charismatic. Well, it seems that wasn't the appropriate category for him."

"What would be the right description?"

"The simple term would be crazy narcissist. However, the specialists finally labeled him as a psychopath." Andrea shrugged. "That was the clinical definition, anyway. When it was over, it turned out that he was just another cult leader. There was one major difference, though--Raymond Defosset was the first cult leader to truly rule the world."

Kasey shifted her attention from the screen to Andrea. "So, I get that this psychopath convinced people to disband the military. Is this when he started the militia, or rather the CFFM?"

Andrea nodded. "He explained they would work just like the military, but more personable and without the aggressiveness, or the whole trained to kill part. After all, we'd managed to combine the world's nations by uniting presidents, uniting churches. Why not combine defense under a single militia."

"How did he get away with all this? Surely someone figured out he wasn't entirely sane?"

"As you know, being a psychiatric nurse, sometimes that's how this mental stuff is, Kasey.

There's no remorse or guilt for the psychopath. They captivate with words to confuse and convince you to their beliefs, so much so that even they believe in their own lies. Most of his followers were lost and alone, needed something and someone to believe in.

Their emotional needs were met, for the time being. Once Defosset was seen as a god-like figure and idealized by his followers, they were manipulated and exploited to meet his needs. By the time the truth was recognized, it was too late to stop the damage he'd created. Not to mention, I was out of a job."

Kasey shook her head. "And since his caring concern wasn't honestly for them, neither were any of his promises."

Andrea scrolled through a couple more articles and came to the first reference of the Scepters.

"Correct. Then, out of nowhere, Barbarous Billy and his gang of terrorists took responsibility for the EMP attack and explained how we, as a nation, will bow to him."

"I don't understand why the military wasn't reinstated," Kasey said. "Or why the militia didn't stop the Scepters before they got a foothold."

"Not many of us former military understand either, since there was obviously a need. Maybe because it would give the appearance of the United States showing unwarranted force. As for the CFFM, they had hearing issues. They didn't want to listen to the suggestions of the advisors, and usually the first to get killed or harmed was one of us. Defosset didn't have any requirements for the militia, other than wanting to join. There was no boot camp or basic training obligation to complete, no educational qualifications to meet, just anyone who wanted to carry a weapon legally. So what do you get? Folks who aren't much better than the people they're supposed to protect civilians from."

"And the Advisors?" Kasey asked.

"The final twist of the knife, we weren't supposed to teach the CFFM more than how to defend, and to offer 'strategies' when needed. But we would never be a branch of the military again. "

Kasey nodded. "All right. That leaves one more question: Why the rank structure if no longer military?"

"So it would be easier to distinguish and establish structure. Because of my job as an Advisor, I get to retain my former rank, though it will probably never change. No promotion for me unless someone wises up and remembers there's a good reason to have a military presence." Andrea grinned. "Wow, we better get a move on. We promised to be at the enlisted club to meet with Julio.

True to his suggestion, Julio used the beer story and no one credited him with the validity--until all three went to the Militia Club together. They chatted and laughed over a couple drinks, before Julio had to cry off for guard duty.

With her own sordid history, some of which she had--unexpectedly--shared with Kasey, and being a loner usually, Andrea realized she enjoyed Kasey's company. She wasn't as bothered as she had expected. In fact, Kasey seemed to understand the disappointments of family. "My

mother actually refused to have any contact from me, just because I joined the military," Kasey said. "It only took three returned letters for me to get the hint and stop writing."

"And why is it we women seem to try harder to meet perceived expectations?" Andrea asked. Kasey shrugged. "Maybe we're gluttons for punishment." They had begun building a bond with the strength of a lifelong friendship. Kasey was able to listen, ask the right questions at the right time and Andrea answered before she realized she was doing so.

However, an unforeseen situation had Andrea totally off guard. As was common in any club Andrea had been to, the noise was almost deafening. She leaned in to catch what Kasey was saying, while reaching for her glass and accidentally brushed the curve of Kasey's breast. The contact had Andrea's skin tingling, her heart beating irregularly, her thoughts going in paths best left alone. It was taking all Andrea's mental effort to ignore her physical reactions to the time traveler.

"Are you all right?" Kasey asked. If she had been bothered or noticed, Kasey didn't let on. Andrea decided an apology would just raise questions if Kasey hadn't noticed the contact. She did note that Kasey shifted closer to her. "Yeah, fine."

Andrea had wondered how she would handle Kasey just disappearing. Now she was anxious daily, wondering how she would survive if Kasey died while under her protection.

Chapter Three

Okinawa, Japan, August 19, 2036

AN OCCASIONAL FORTY-WATT bulb lit the debris-cluttered hallway leading to the Blue Conference room. Captain Andrea Knight and Lieutenant Kasey Houston, both in full battle armor, shared a look of disgust at the mess. The underlying stench from old blood and death overpowered the musty scent of mold attached to the ceilings like a black curtain.

At the end of the hall, a young corporal stood guard before a door marked in bold red letters, Security Access Only. A blinking yellow light above the sign switched instantly to red.

"You are in a Security Zone," came the computerized voice. "Place your wrist over Thermal Scan for identification."

"We have DataCard ID," Andrea said. A pause, then the voice returned sounding more clipped.

"Please place cards in slot and right thumb on Thermal Scan."

"What a surprise, a computer with attitude." She tossed a quick wink at Kasey as she placed her thumb on the designated spot, feeling the laser-heat scan her genetic code like a brand.

After complying, the door swung open. The brightness from the rooms' interior, a sharp contrast to the hall, made them squint at the onslaught. Andrea stepped into the room first, keeping her back straight. Two military units cluttered the room, either leaning against walls or standing in groups of three or four. The blue letters CFFM on the right breast pocket of their uniforms identified them as Militia Personnel.

At a long, oriental-carved table sat three "suits"-- the term applied to all government officials regardless of their gender or position. Even the mental use of the word made Andrea's skin crawl in disgust. Reflex made her clamp her teeth hard, rewarding her with the bittersweet taste of blood. She hated most government people.

The smallest man, Hank Brodie, rose when they entered and pointed toward two empty seats across from him. "Please, Captain, Lieutenant, sit."

Once they had, Hank Brodie continued, "You might not know Officials Hanako and Sherman." He pointed to the two at the table, one on each side of him.

With a quick nod, Andrea acknowledged them, her gaze remaining longest on the woman, Hanako. She was slender, her features Asian, except for her blue eyes. Those same eyes caught Andrea staring. Andrea had the courtesy to blush, a polite smile given in return.

"As you know, terrorists are attacking all continents," Brodie said, "including this little island, accumulating munitions along the way. The reason the two of you are here is simple. Their Leader Supreme, Barbarous Billy, came to Okinawa the night before last."

Kasey groaned, shifted position in her chair, crossed her arms, and mumbled, "That's the ticket, Suits, perfect example of government *bull*reaucracy."

When Official Sherman glared at her, she responded with a bright smile that showed even white teeth. Kasey snorted softly when the man's face burned red with anger. Andrea cleared her throat and Kasey looked in her direction. She gave Kasey a knock-it-off look and replied to the group, "You could've simply said that over the phone. Instead, you tell us--It'll all be explained later--right after you cancel our tickets home without explanation." Andrea shrugged indifferently.

"Besides, you get rid of the military and replace it with the mercenaries, and then the Militia. Now I'm expected to get all gun-ho and fix your problem?" From the glares she received, Andrea knew her point hit home.

"That's uncalled for, Captain," Brodie said.

"And insubordinate as hell," snapped Official Sherman. "No wonder we got rid of the military and started the CFFM."

"You know most of us weren't in office at that time. The present body of officials had nothing to do with it," Official Hanako said with a small shake of her head.

This, Andrea knew, should be a job for the Military, not civilians. By rights, the Militia never should have existed. It started as a slap in the face to wake the government up to what was really going on around them; something that couldn't be solved with the head-in-the-sand method. Instead, the government decided they would rather turn the other cheek than deal with a real and threatening problem. *A pacifier for big babies*, Andrea thought.

So here Andrea was, an Advisor, with better things to do than babysit a bunch of civilian hotheads. She wanted to escape; the stench of so many bodies in one room made her light-headed and in desperate need of fresh air. "I believe Military Advisors are to do just that--advise," Andrea said, "but here Lieutenant Houston and I sit in battle armor. You don't even let the Japanese Advisors deal with this because it's 'our problem'. I wonder why the Japanese government isn't offended and refusing to let us on their soil. Not to mention, why not just reinstate the military services again?" She motioned to the closed door. "It would give us something better to do than play door-jockey. This is as serious as any declared wars battled previously," Andrea said, leaning forward in her chair, finding it hard to keep the bitterness from her voice, "More so. These atrocities perpetrated in our own homes, to our own families. Do any of you even remember our history? Does Fall of 2001 ring any bells?"

Andrea was a seasoned officer, forced to retire from six years of active duty service, two years earlier. Though only twenty-six, she'd had a distinguished military career, with enough medals to put many career military men to shame. She ran her hand through her short auburn hair, knowing the thin filaments would fall into place, and wishing she were anywhere but here.

"Some things just have to be, Captain," Brodie said with a shrug. "Like it or not."

"I don't see why we have to take orders from them!" one of the militia shouted, moving from his position by the wall. He pointed accusingly at Andrea, his comrades mumbled in a cacophony of disjointed sound, forcing him to raise his voice further. "They don't wanna be here and we don't want 'em here." Theodore Carlisle was a heavy man, though not obese. A bad enough trait for any soldier, Andrea thought, knowing Carlisle's didn't stop there. His temper, never really in check, made the nickname 'Teddy' more comical. His thin lips became so compressed he appeared not to have any.

Hank Brodie seemed to ignore Teddy's show of temper by pulling a pipe from his suit pocket. With so much negativity lately, in gangs running uncontrolled in the streets and average people barricaded in their homes, banning smoking from public places no longer seemed important. He lit the bowl of the pipe and puffed indifferently. The sweet smell of cherries filled the air. Andrea wished she'd learned a similar way of stalling for self-control, like cigarettes, maybe. Hank rubbed a hand casually over his balding head and glanced at the Advisors. Brodie put a smile on his lips that didn't reach his eyes and turned to Carlisle. "Because," he paused, as if savoring the dramatic effect, "The CFFM Main Office will not sanction this direct assault, or any other, without them. You need Military Advisors present, or it's a 'No Go'. Understand?" He waited for the fat man to drop his arm. "Before you begin with the details, Captain, I feel it only fair to warn you. Last week's assault on this complex resulted in the loss of six LTN's."

"You let them get LTN's?" Andrea said, surprised. "They were supposed to have all been destroyed."

Official Sherman slammed his fist onto the table, turning all gazes in the room toward him. "It's not like they were just handed over, Captain. We lost a lot of men trying to repel that attack, as well as you know."

"What the hell are LTN's?" Carlisle said. Hank Brodie answered, "Limited Tactical Nukes. These have a range of twenty square yards in radius."

"Nukes?" Fear danced on Carlisle's face. "No one told us about any radiation."

"Not from these," Brodie said. "The more dangerous radiation problem was eliminated three years ago from limited weaponry. It's only a problem with the heavy stuff."

"You'd probably get more radiation from microwaving popcorn," Andrea said.

"Besides, your food is irradiated before going to market. So relax." He turned his back to Carlisle. "I think we should continue, Captain. Are you ready to explain the details of this assault? This would be a good time to move on."

Andrea nodded and clutched the helmet she held just a little tighter in the hope of suppressing her rising anger. Her gaze traveled around the room counting nineteen in total, if she didn't count herself and Kasey. She gave the details in a controlled and clear voice. "We'll have two units in the field for this assault. Carlisle, you'll take Bravo Unit and start at the beach, working inland." She looked into his eyes, daring him to argue. It was the worst job to get if you were reaching for glory, but Andrea wouldn't let his temper ruin the mission for the rest of the team. When he only flared his nostrils, she finished. "I, with Lieutenant Houston, will take Delta Unit and wait at the city limits. Any questions?" No one spoke. "Then move 'em out. The trucks are ready."

"Just a minute, Captain," came an accented command. Official Hanako didn't continue until all Militia personnel had cleared the room. "We are aware of what the capture of this gang leader means to you."

"No, ma'am. I don't think you are."

"However," Hanako continued, ignoring the comment, "After the completion of this assault, good or bad, we've other duties for you that don't include being an Advisor."

Andrea placed her hands on her hips. "And they are?"

"Not necessary for you to know at this time," Sherman said harshly. His features set into hard lines showing years of disappointments. Or was it just hate? Andrea wondered. She returned her attention to the other woman.

"You'll be appropriately briefed after this mission. That's all for now, Captain Knight," Hanako said.

Kasey followed her from the room and Andrea gained some comfort from her lieutenant's presence. "Wha'd'ya make of that?" she asked nodding her head toward the blue door they'd just left. "Like something out of one of those spy movies from my time. I expected the interrogation to start at any time." Kasey started punching one fist into her open hand. "Where were you at midnight last Tuesday? Come on. Spill it." She gave a menacing glare, "We got ways to make you talk."

"Is that how you spent your evenings?"

Kasey grinned wickedly. "Not if I could help it."

Andrea responded with laughter. "Just when I think I'm getting to know you, I'm not sure I ever will." She wondered if she'd get the chance to know Kasey, before "cosmic chaos", in whatever formed of the gray mist, returned Kasey to her own time. Andrea hoped so. She'd become so accustomed to her presence, almost believing the background they'd created for the displaced nurse from the 20th century. She mentally recited her new mantra, *You're her commanding officer*. Both walked toward the exit taking them to the trucks. Andrea's laughter died quickly. "Let's get this over with. I can't wait to see what's in store next."

"Don't worry, Captain. I'll protect you," Kasey said.

Though she said it in jest, Andrea began to understand in her heart Kasey would do just that. What she didn't know was why the simple statement worried her.

THE TEMPERATURE LINGERED at eighty-six degrees, the humidity a drenching ninety-four percent. The material of Andrea's sateen uniform stuck to her damp back and her perspiration soaked hair became plastered to her head. Annoying, she thought, reaching to wipe the sweat from her brow and upper lip. Night surrounded the city; the darkness broken only by a few streetlights and the occasional flash of weapons fire half a mile away. The bright flares of light were common in any city anymore.

Andrea and Kasey crouched silently in a depression left by bombs exploded the week before. It served as the perfect foxhole and the closest position to the spot where their enemy would exit. At least Andrea hoped so. Delta team sat in position, ready. She could hear the constant hissing of the radio receiver in her ear beneath the helmet. Sporadically, distortion replaced the monotone voice issuing commands from headquarters. Only an occasional spurt of gunfire broke the quiet of the inky-black night. Not so patiently, they waited.

"I'm hungry," Kasey whispered.

"You're always hungry." Andrea crooked her gaze from the small city, only recently evacuated, to the woman lying beside her. Even in the dim light, she could define Kasey's well-toned body, but could not completely distinguish her features through the haphazard lighting falling from the few street lamps still intact. "Don't you ever keep your mind entirely on business?"

"Why? You're doing enough worrying for both of us, Captain." She shifted to face Andrea.

"Heck, probably for the whole Unit."

The remark from anyone else would've been considered sarcasm and justification for anger, but not from Kasey. A strong bond of friendship had grown between them this last couple of months.

In that short span of time, Kasey had come to understand Andrea better than anyone. Actually, Andrea thought with a sigh, Kasey was the only one who comprehended what this mission was doing to her emotions. She was torn between the need to catch Billy, but afraid of what she would, or wouldn't do, when she did.

Kasey's mumbled curses caught her attention.

"Now I know why we refer to this island as 'The Rock'. It's no picnic living here." She pulled something from the material at her thigh. "Since when have a million prickly little balls surrounded by a few thin blades of green stuff been considered grass?"

Despite herself, Andrea chuckled softly. "Be glad it's not one of those damn Habu snakes that you're pulling out of your uniform." As if talking about it might invite one, she looked cautiously around them. *That's all we'd need, poisonous snakes joining a poisonous enemy.* A cheerful thought to keep them company while they waited in the darkness, Andrea mused.

Then it came, notification from the computer unit tracking field activity barking quickly over the radio. The enemy was drawing nearer. Tension knotted Andrea's stomach. She signaled Kasey of the enemy's approach from the left. Both were ready.

It wasn't a long wait; the enemies' advancement heard before seen. Once free of the dense foliage and rock formations that surrounded the small city, the enemy force spread out in all directions with a bloodcurdling yell, their course and weapons fire sporadic. Sadly, though many of the gang had been military before the disbandment, clearly these weren't trained in any of the military disciplines. When obvious all had emerged, Andrea yelled the command to close in and attack. She and Kasey, weapons locked and loaded, left their cover and converged with Delta Company. Bullets whipped past and bodies fell. From her left, Andrea heard Kasey shout a warning just as she felt the cold steel of an enemy's knife rip into her left shoulder. Hot pain shot down her arm. She became vaguely aware of the blood running from her arm to her fingers. Her reaction was pure instinct. She slammed the .45 caliber pistol she carried into the knife-wielding enemy's stomach and fired twice. The stench of blood and gunpowder assaulted her nostrils. Spatters of blood hit the front of Andrea's armor. Impulsively she wiped at them. Kasey moved to her side before the body hit the ground. They watched as blood flowed from the bullet exit holes in his back. The knife fell from his lifeless fingers, clattering on the stone and rubble-strewn surface. Kasey's eyes, when their gazes met, spoke the words of concern she would never voice aloud. These were the fortunes of war; they knew it, but it didn't take away the terror of an injured comrade.

Kasey reached into a uniform pocket for battle dressing, tore open the package, and applied it through the rip in Andrea's jacket. "Do you think we could get this armor with sleeves?" she teased. Andrea was a bit surprised to hear the worry in Kasey's voice; the humor she knew to be Kasey's defense mechanism. Kasey failed miserably. Andrea's mind demanded she ignore the concern in her lieutenant's eyes. *Of course she's concerned,* Andrea chided herself, *I die and she's in charge. That responsibility would disconcert anyone, let alone someone out of their time,* she reasoned, knowing it grossly unfair to Kasey.

Looking around, Andrea realized, "I can't find Barbarous Billy. We have to find him or the mission's a scrub." Delta Unit had the area under control. She addressed Garcia, a couple yards away, "I want you to wrap this up and call in the medics. Lieutenant Houston and I will go farther out to collect strays."

Orders followed, she turned back to Kasey. Kasey's strained expression showed her emotions. Andrea felt as uncomfortable as Kasey did. *Friendship is one thing,* Andrea thought, *but I'm her Commander first.*

"Let's go this way," Kasey said, clearing her throat and directing Andrea to the right. "I saw a small group go toward Makiminato City. I only hope Carlisle's group doesn't find him first." So did Andrea. Although she didn't fear the confrontation with Barbarous Billy, the most violent of all gang-terrorist leaders, she did feel anxious about how she'd react when face to face with him. Not a local national, but an American Marine gone terribly sour after a Bad Conduct Discharge in 2015. Rumor had it he wasn't entirely at fault in the charges made against him. That was then. He'd become so evil, no one would believe him previously innocent.

Darting from building to building, careful to stay well behind cover, they made their way into the city proper. The structures, mostly plasticrete on the outside, were full of paper-thin wood shutters and furnishings, and they burned quickly. Smoke billowed skyward. Grey wisps settled around them and stung Andrea's eyes. The wound in her shoulder throbbed. Without pausing, she reached for a small canister hanging from the ammunition belt at her waist and placed the tiny opened end into her mouth, drinking deeply of the pain medication it held.

Any doubts she'd fostered earlier about Billy's whereabouts were quickly abandoned when she noticed movement 35 yards away. She stopped and grabbed her field glasses: ahead, barely visible amid his Scepters, stood Barbarous Billy.

The members of the Scepters believed themselves the reigning symbols of a ruling world power. They didn't look so powerful now. Like animals in a pack, they surrounded him. Their colors of gold and green, openly displayed on the left shirtsleeve, marked them. Instead of looking dangerous, they looked cornered.

Kasey noticed it too. With a sad shake of her head, she said, "They're ruthless killers in a pack against scared civilians, but give them some real combat--" Her whisper, laced with repulsion, stabbed her point home.

"Some of the others may be inexperienced, Kasey, but don't write off Billy's ability so quickly." Andrea squinted slightly to get a better view of the man within the circle of people. He's far too calm, she thought, trying to get a better view of the object he held. It appeared to be an old logbook. Lost in her own thoughts, she stared at the leader through her field glasses. Andrea's gaze locked with Billy's, his seemed to probe her soul. Could he really see her from there? How could he possibly know she was there? Or did he? It had to be something else.

"Something's not right," she said, unconsciously seeking cover.

Newly forming habits warned Kasey to do likewise. Andrea followed Kasey into the shadows as she scrutinized the group. Billy definitely didn't look cornered. The light supplied by the street lamp cast eerie shadows, but what Andrea noted wasn't illusion. Billy's lips curled into a smile so smug she could feel his superiority. She surveyed the area, intent on checking the fallen structures and vehicles left abandoned. From what she could tell, no enemy lay in wait, no traps set, but the smoke made it hard to be sure. "So what's got Billy grinning?" she said.

Kasey appeared not to hear her. Andrea touched her arm and paused listening to something coming over the radio. "Carlisle's group is coming. They've radioed that Billy's in sight and that they intend to move in," she whispered.

Seconds later, the Bravo Unit came into view. From the way they entered the open area, it was obvious the unit believed the group to be harmless.

"What's he doing?" Kasey said. "Carlisle should know better than to march into the open like that."

"Damn fool. He's seriously underestimating Billy," Andrea said through clenched teeth. Her thumb jammed down on the frequency button attached to the lining of her jacket. "Pull back Carlisle. It's got to be a trap."

"Knight?" Carlisle's voice seemed annoyed. It made Andrea's skin crawl. "The area's clear. We can take 'em, Captain," he said sarcastically. He had the channel open, and Andrea heard him calling to one of his men. "Harris. Get that kid outta here. Hurry. The area's supposed to be evacuated of civilians." Carlisle's attention returned to the radio, "Relax, Captain. We've got Barbarous Billy in our si--"

A bright light exploded, then a blast shook the area, cutting off his transmission. "Shit!" Instinctively, Andrea shielded her eyes with an up-flung, right arm and crouched close to the structure she'd been stationed behind. It wasn't soon enough. She cried out as pain shot through her head, the brilliance abusing her pupils. Immediately, she heard shots fired and agonized screams filled the night air. Before the debris stopped falling and the humid breeze stilled, Andrea stood and, despite the near blinding light, moved forward.

The radiant brilliance disappeared as fast as it came. Able to see once again, Andrea saw that Billy and his men were gone. Stiffly, she moved through the charred remains of Carlisle's entire Bravo unit, only two Scepters among the dead.

Kasey moved ahead and scanned the outer area, looking for visible signs to show the path of Billy's retreat or that of his people. "Rats," she mumbled, when she'd returned to Andrea's side. "It's like they vanished into thin air."

Andrea slumped on a large slab of concrete, away from the corpses. Pain and anger surged through her. However, above those feelings radiated helplessness, hot and blinding as the explosion had been.

Kasey, as if sensing her emotional torment, placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, careful of the recent injury. Andrea wanted to laugh, needed to laugh, to shut out the horror around her. Part of her needed to remind Kasey of her second too-personal slip of the day, but she didn't. Stupid as Carlisle had been, neither he nor his men deserved to have ill-timed laughter mocking their deaths. Kasey's touch felt too good to spoil it with even a mild reprimand.

A few moments passed before Andrea trusted herself to speak. She stated the obvious, hoping to regain the restraint she was famous for. "Billy's escaped, and Carlisle and his whole unit are dead." Her voice echoed strangely in her own ears, coarse from the smoke and pain of failure Andrea felt ripping through her soul. "Why couldn't I stop this?"

"What were you supposed to do?" Kasey said, needlessly. "No one could've prevented what just happened. Certainly, no one else would have been fool enough to go in sooner than you did. You followed every rule. Carlisle didn't. He didn't even have the courtesy of heeding your warning." How many more times was she supposed to stand by and watch useless, pointless deaths? It had to stop. She couldn't go on like this. Andrea felt raw anger, with herself and with Kasey for not understanding it was Andrea's fault, as team leader. Maybe understanding Andrea's frustration was too much to ask, especially for someone from Kasey's time. Did only men have a need to fight? Impossible. Not all women had a need to nurture.

A voice on her radio receiver sharply cut off Andrea's contemplation. Once the usual hiss of the radio replaced the voice, she heaved a sigh and stood. "The jeep's coming for us." She purposely paused to regain the last shreds of her military bearing, ashamed she'd let it slip, afraid she was getting soft. "Delta Unit apprehended seven men and two women from the Scepters, we lost three from that unit."

Andrea looked into Kasey's eyes. Even in the bad light, she could see their dark-green color. They appeared soothing and coolly tranquil. She wished that looking into their depths would take away her pain. Tears formed and she rapidly blinked them away. Tears no longer had a purpose in her life. "He used a child as decoy, Kasey, a child." Andrea focused on a point just beyond

Kasey, not wanting to witness her lieutenant's reaction to her pain filled memory. She groaned, her teeth clamped shut, and hissed, "Just like he used my sister, Marlee."

Chapter Four

THE JEEP WHIRRED to a stop in front of CFFM Headquarters, it settled on the ground of seashells and gravel with a crunch. Andrea took one look at the cold, inhospitable building and knew she couldn't go in after the stress and disappointment she felt with tonight's mission.

"I'm not up to this, Kasey. The report will have to wait until morning. Right now all I can handle is a shower and a drink." Andrea groaned, feeling weighted, oppressed, and older than her years. "Need to remove these awful chest-plates and leggings," she added, removing her ammunition belt and dropping it on her lap.

"As you say, Skipper," Kasey replied, whirling the steering wheel and heading the jeep toward the barracks.

Minutes later, standing beneath the showerhead, Andrea knew she'd made the right decision. This had to be heaven, she decided, water cascaded over her body washing the mission's grime down the drain, along with dried blood from the gash in her shoulder. If only she could get the horror-filled memories to wash away as easily. Earlier, a field medic cauterized and mended the wound with a laser scalpel. Scowling, Andrea touched the puckered skin, hating the thought of another scar; thankful she could hide this one, too.

The water turned lukewarm, alerting Andrea she'd been in the shower too long and her ration almost used. Not all the tension had eased from her muscles, but she did feel better. Shutting the valves and reaching for a towel, she dried off and put on a blue jumpsuit, standard issue for military cadets since 2020 and the most comfortable clothing she owned.

Sounds of recorded voices from the outer compartment told Andrea she wasn't alone. Only one other person had computer-authorized access-- Kasey. She entered the main compartment, a room comprised of the basic military size of eight by eight, the design quite plain. There was a cot on the far side, opposite the entry door and a television sat at its foot. A door led to the bathroom, which had a toilet and the shower she recently vacated. In the corner by the door sat a booth used for eating, reading, or anything else one might need. Currently it held Kasey, seated casually on one side, a bottle and two glasses on the table. The waiting drink beckoned her.

Kasey, cheerful as usual, greeted her. "Hey, Skipper. Feel better?"

"Much." Andrea noted Kasey's slightly damp hair and didn't halt the urge to tease her. "Either I spent a terribly long time in the shower, or you rushed through yours." She took a swallow of whiskey before she sat opposite Kasey.

"I had rationing before coming to this time, remember?" Kasey raised an eyebrow. "I excelled at speed and accuracy."

"I'll need to remember that." An image flashed in Andrea's head, and she blushed. Once comfortably arranged in the booth, twirling a half-filled glass between her palms, Andrea felt the remaining tension slip away. She'd learned, in the last few months, Kasey didn't need entertaining. Just the idea of Kasey being here was enough for her, and Andrea knew Kasey felt likewise.

Looking at Kasey now, with her eyes focused on the television screen, Andrea felt comfortable and at peace, lucky in calling her friend. Kasey sat with one leg propped up on the padded, bench-type seat, an arm slung casually on top of her knee. Her black hair combed back from her face, Kasey looked sensuously attractive. It still staggered Andrea's imagination that this woman came from a very different time. Since their meeting, they shared private thoughts and memories of themselves, recognizing they could tell each other anything. Well, almost, Andrea mentally corrected. If the current situation were different, Andrea would have probably shared more than just the emotional bonding. Kasey would make someone very happy someday.

Watching Kasey's hands as she filled their glasses with the remaining contents of the bottle, Andrea wondered how it would feel to have those same hands caress her. Guiltily, she looked away. *Whatever possessed her to think that?* It must be the strain of the mission finally catching up with her. *Remember your mantra: You're her commanding officer, so no fraternizing.*

Those types of thoughts always tortured a soldier after battle, the wanting--needing--to feel life and love, to enjoy intimacy with someone you could trust, like Kasey. However, those things, usually taken for granted by civilians, could not be for them.

Gulping the remaining contents of her glass, Andrea reminded herself how that simple satisfaction would be the worst thing to do. She could hear her father now, "Never get involved with a junior officer, especially one you command." *Hadn't that been one of the lessons he'd tried to drill into my head ever since childhood?*

If only she weren't Kasey's Commander.

So many times, during the last months, Andrea had thought about Kasey as she did now, wondering what kind of person would interest her. She didn't even know Kasey's tastes. *Damn, why do I even care?* Andrea chided herself.

Andrea tried to concentrate on the HD Flat Screen, the standard thirty-inch dual-screen, so different from those of her early childhood. The main screen showed constant commercials and the smaller screen, in the upper left-hand corner, the movies and other programming. Andrea knew Kasey loved classic old movies since, for her, they were new. Andrea knew it almost broke Kasey's heart when told there were no new films, even digital ones, in almost fifteen years. She was about to ask Kasey what they were viewing, but a knock at the door interrupted. It had to be business. No unauthorized personnel, or civilian, could make it by the Barracks Guard. Andrea slid out the seat to answer and wished the barracks could be equipped with the high-tech computers in Headquarters. It would alleviate the physical necessity of getting up. After commanding the computer to unlock the door, she manually turned the knob and pulled it open, and immediately wished the computer department had fixed the damaged video. Official's Brodie, Hanako, and Sherman, and the corporal from Headquarters stood at her door.

Hank Brodie grinned and came inside, followed by Hanako and Sherman. "We agreed to hold the briefing here. It's more informal than Headquarters," he said.

"Did my not filing a report tonight help you decide?" Andrea closed the door, when it was obvious the corporal would not be entering.

Brodie sat in Andrea's recently vacated spot and raised the empty bottle from the table. "Oh, I see we weren't soon enough to join you. Pity."

Andrea silently watched while Kasey gave her seat to the other two, Sherman on the inside, Hanako the outside, before making herself comfortable on the cot.

"Please sit, Captain," Brodie said, the cot being the only other place for her to do so. Andrea declined the offer, aware his gaze followed her every move, and bade him continue. Was he waiting to see if more than friendship existed between Kasey and herself? Or were her own

thoughts earlier making her overly suspicious? Andrea did not intend to feed Brodie's curiosity. She noted the amused look he wasn't quick enough to conceal, when she continued standing. After a quick glance at Hanako and Sherman, Brodie began. "I'll start by saying that this next project is just as--more important than catching Barbarous Billy. No, Captain, let me finish." He raised a hand to forestall her interruption. "Terrorism isn't the only crisis ripping Earth to shreds. We have a deplorable lack of belief, faith if you will. We need faith back."

"You're talking religion, Official Brodie. What has that to do with the military? The former military," she corrected, "and with Kasey and me?"

"That's where I come in," Hanako answered. "I know your reputation, and require your particular skill. I need you to protect our ambassador of the Church and escort him to Washington, D.C. for a meeting with the United Presidents. Because of previous threats made upon his life, this would be a most needed and dangerous mission."

"Why us?" Andrea asked.

"Specifically?" Hanako said the word slowly, as if gauging the answer to give. "Because the ambassador requested you, in particular, Captain."

"Why?" Andrea turned questioning eyes toward Kasey, as if she had an answer. Kasey shrugged, looking as mystified as she felt.

"You'd have to ask the ambassador," Hanako said politely.

"The Militia doesn't approve either, Knight. You have every right to deny this mission. It's not a job for military advisors." Official Sherman said, loud and harsh.

"She's the best suited for the job, and her lieutenant, of course," Brodie responded with a quick wink at Kasey. Then, his voice leveled, but held a bit more force, "We're all well aware of your objections in this, Sherman."

"You may be, but they aren't," Sherman said, stabbing a finger in Andrea's direction.

It would be tempting to accept the mission in order to annoy Sherman. Andrea wasn't sure if this job was right for them, even if Barbarous Billy hadn't been a factor for refusing. If she took this assignment, she'd be no better than the corporal guarding her outside door; a figurehead along for the ride, no matter how glorified two of the officials tried to make it sound. Andrea couldn't do that. "Other advisors are just as qualified," she said.

Official Hanako rose from her seat and stood facing her. "Don't make a final decision yet. Meet with the ambassador," Hanako pleaded in a whisper meant for Andrea's ears only.

"I won't change my mind, Official Hanako," Andrea said in a matching tone, shocked by the finality in her own voice.

"Please, call me Mykael," Hanako said, as if ignoring the negative portion of Andrea's response.

"You don't trust us. How could you possibly trust anyone political?"

Andrea felt her face heat. Maintaining the whisper became difficult. "It's unwise to trust anyone these days, isn't it?"

"I've read your record, Captain. Don't be alarmed," Hanako added quickly, with a--your secret's safe with me--smile. "I've no intention of using it against you. Just letting you see we've done our research. At least give the ambassador a chance to change your mind." Hanako looked at her watch. "My apologies, Captain. It's past two o'clock in the morning. I had no intention keeping you so late. Get some sleep. I can send a car for you and the lieutenant at sixteen hundred hours. Meet the ambassador, finalize your decision then." Without waiting for a reply, Hanako walked to the door and turned to Brodie and Sherman, "Coming?"

After the men left the room, Hanako turned to Andrea. "I'm sorry if I have angered or embarrassed you. It wasn't my intention." She paused. "I'd like an opportunity to talk further with you, hopefully become friends."

Andrea couldn't tell if it was a genuine statement, or a carefully spoken threat. With a quick smile that made the Asian woman's strange blue eyes appear to dance, Mykael Hanako left. Once the door closed, Andrea turned to Kasey, who looked as confused as she felt. Not to mention, just as tired. "We should get some sleep. This should be clearer in the morning." "Couldn't be muddier," Kasey said with a gentle laugh.

Drained, Andrea stood before the other woman, feeling different than she had on the battlefield a few hours ago. Kasey moved forward, an odd look crossing her face. Quickly, and tenderly, Kasey leaned forward and kissed her directly on the lips. Startled by the unexpectedness, Andrea stiffened. Kasey pulled away with a soft smile, like it was an everyday occurrence to kiss her commander. "See you tomorrow, then."

Andrea heard, rather than saw, Kasey leave. She stood in the middle of her room for a long time before she mechanically removed her jumpsuit and prepared for bed, her thoughts riotous, confused. Was it her imagination, or was her straightforward and regulated life actually disintegrating around her?

Hours passed. Unable to doze, Andrea pushed her mind from her troubled questions and thought of Barbarous Billy. She wondered where he was, and what terrible travesties he was committing, now, as she fought for sleep.

A JUMBLED CACOPHONY of sounds bounced off the walls within the airplane hangar once owned by the Air Force Base of Kadena. Inside, people with strips of colored gold and green material hanging from each left arm, grouped together. Some drank liquor, some sniffed and shot drugs into their already abused veins, while others indulged in open displays of sexual intercourse. Each person made his or her own noise, entirely oblivious and uncaring what another individual said or did.

All but one.

At a large throne-like chair at the far end of the hangar, Barbarous Billy sat with one leg slung carelessly over the arm, unmindful of the scuffs and scarring his boot-clad feet made upon the dark wood. Opposite him stood two of Billy's many followers, looking like court jesters.

"So, what do we do now?" Blades asked.

"Yeah. What now?" Scat parroted.

Billy grinned wickedly. "We wait until they decide to join the ambassador."

Behind his chair, lost in the dark shadows, came a voice. "How do you know they'll accept? What if they continue refusing?" From the gruff tones, Billy knew the speaker actually feared recognition by the Scepters, and inwardly laughed at the man's ignorance.

"I know Andrea Knight better than anyone, even better than she knows herself. When the time comes, I'll take care of her, the new watchdog lieutenant, and I'll gladly kill the ambassador."

Blades unsheathed two knives and ran the razor-sharp edges over each other; the scrape of cold steel rang menacingly in the acoustics provided by the hangar. It slashed through the noise of the filled room as easily as the blades could slice flesh. "Be a pleasure, Barbarous Billy. Put her in check." Glints of the steel reflected in Blades cold eyes.

Scats' laughter, bordering on hysterical, followed as he played with the switch producing the lethal blue light of the stun gun he held. "Won't let them goodiegoodie's hem us up, man."

The shadowed form moved restlessly. "What if you're wrong, Billy?"

A maniacal laugh broke from Billy and echoed around them. All noise stopped instantly. Faces, only moments ago consumed with only ribald laughter, now filled with fear and anxious anticipation. Some showed dread.

All turned toward him.

Billy knew complete control. And no one would, or could, change that fact.

The sight prompted him to laugh harder. Even the shadowed form, the "inside" man, jolted in panic from the sound. The Scepter leader cocked his head, his voice rumbled like peals of thunder. "I'm never wrong, especially where Captain Andrea Knight is concerned."

Chapter Five

ANDREA STOOD WITH Kasey in front of the barracks, impatiently waiting for the vehicle to take them to their interview with the ambassador. The sun shone brightly, the air heavy with humidity. Even with the destruction evident around them, the Ryukans busily went about their lives, as if oblivious to the rubble of their once bustling and productive island.

Having spent a restless night trying to understand the reason, other than the obvious, behind Kasey's kiss, Andrea felt tired and out-of-sorts. She was grateful Kasey didn't bring the incident up. Kasey looked relaxed, standing beside her in full dress uniform. Not that it should strike her as odd, since Kasey exuded calm under the worst of circumstances.

This time Kasey's attitude seemed changed somehow. *As if pleased with herself*, Andrea noted with irritation. Obviously, the kiss didn't weigh on Kasey's mind, acting like it was an everyday occurrence. *Why did it bother her, then?*

Although a case of few and far between, Andrea had kissed before. She would never understand people; wasn't sure she wanted to comprehend them. *Then again, I could be trying to read something in her attitude that isn't there*, Andrea reluctantly admitted.

The cold, hard fact was she would never forget the feel of Kasey's firm lips pressed against hers. She could feel their warmth even now, and it was such a quick kiss. Andrea's blood raced at the memory. Had she ignored emotional entanglements for so long that a friendly kiss seemed like so much more? Was she desperate, wanting what she painstakingly avoided?

Thankfully, the arrival of their transportation interrupted Andrea's thoughts and she could once again concentrate on work. "Surprise. They let the boy off the leash," she said dryly to Kasey, noting the driver as the guard from yesterday.

In short time, they arrived at the Okinawa Sheraton Hotel. Not up to standards with hotels of its American counterparts, but it still maintained an air of elegance; although, in this day and age neglect reached everywhere.

Once in the lobby, Andrea and Kasey, along with the corporal, received only a visual inspection by Hotel Security. She wondered why no electronic security measures were in place. "No weapons," the guard said in clipped English, his hand outstretched. Andrea looked at the corporal. He shrugged before relinquishing the pistol from his utility belt. Grudgingly, Kasey and Andrea did the same. She met Kasey's gaze, silently agreeing not to reveal the small blade concealed within a flap of leather in their boots.

On the third floor, Official Hanako greeted them pleasantly. The corporal, again, remained on guard outside the door. "It's so good of you to come," she said. Mykael wore a kimono, her dark hair gracefully pulled up and secured by pearl pins in the standard Japanese fashion. "Please sit." Andrea had half expected the room to be in total oriental design, surprised it wasn't. In the corner stood a large silkscreen depicting the four seasons, common decoration in Japanese establishments. On top of the tatami mats lay a rug with a giant dragon in the center, a design of dragon-boats in each of the rugs four corners. Instead of the expected low table and futon pillows, there sat a couch, two cushioned chairs and a coffee table. They sat on the sofa, Andrea at one end and Kasey the opposite. The air smelled stale and cold from the air-conditioner meant to keep the humidity and mildew at bay. It wasn't working; the ceiling held the telltale black smudges. Hanako smiled. "Ambassador Caughley will be with us presently. Can I get you anything to drink while we wait?"

Both responded in the negative.

"I hope, after meeting the ambassador, you take this mission," she said.

Andrea frowned at the woman's persistence. "I've given my answer. The only recourse left to you, and the ambassador," she said, "is to have my orders officially drawn. Then I would have no choice but to comply. But you know that, don't you?"

Hanako nodded. "Ambassador Caughley would not approve of that avenue. He is insistent you openly agree." Hanako sighed. "I wish you could realize his success or failure is very important, and I don't mean that on any small scale."

Hanako sat in the chair facing them, her posture erect from the confinement of the kimono and from self-acquired dignity. Andrea couldn't help but be amazed. Official Hanako might appear soft on the outside, but the inside was made of sterner stuff. Although Andrea appreciated the combination, she didn't care for being subjected to the mix.

"I still don't see how my assistance will make any significant bearing on the matter," Andrea said, perplexed at the tenacity. "If you know more about this matter than I, please explain it.

Otherwise, I can't understand why you and the ambassador are so insistent," she said, irritated by the bureaucratic snow job.

"We speak of a global need, not just a personal one, among all of the official Delegates of the World," Hanako said.

"Still doesn't answer where I fit in."

Kasey shifted slightly. "It's common knowledge political emissaries are threatened regularly by opposing factions. It's par for the course. Have specific threats been made against the ambassador?"

"Two attempts on his life since the arranged meeting was set with the United Presidents Committee. They were thwarted, however." Hanako paused, her gaze shifted from Andrea to Kasey. "It cost three lives to save his one." Sadness filled her blue eyes and Andrea read the real pain held in them. "My father was one of them."

"I'm sorry," Kasey and Andrea consoled simultaneously.

"You'd have liked my father, Captain," Mykael said, eyes distant with memory. "He was strong and proud and loved his job. His big, Swedish body and his remarkable blue eyes enraptured my mother the moment she saw him. My eyes are my only birth legacy from him. Everything else I got from my mother. As such, he requested I take her name, the better to fit into politics." Her voice cracked with the emotions she tried to suppress. "Rich--Ambassador Caughley, was instrumental in making my mother's final days tolerable when cancer overtook her. Both my parents were strong in the church, believers in the unification of governances to hold the church

to legal and moral rules and regulations. As you know, we can never define one religion, however, we can define the guidelines with which they will be accountable. The ambassador is determined to keep the church answerable for their actions. I, too, believe in his vision, and have dedicated my services to Ambassador Caughley."

From an area behind the couch a door opened. A tall man in dark dress slacks and shirt entered. A black ribbon held back his sandy-blond hair, accenting the square jaw line and classic nose. Andrea noted his green eyes, lighter than Kasey's, assessed them as they stood to formally greet him.

"Thank you for coming," the ambassador said.

"No problem, sir," Andrea said, awkward and self-conscious under his intense gaze.

The ambassador laughed. "It is a problem. I understand the two of you desire to be elsewhere. I appreciate you giving me this much of your time." Standing before them, he clasped her hand in reception.

His grasp proved strong, his hand warm. A strange feeling of serenity washed through Andrea.

"It has nothing to do with you on a personal basis, ambassador," she said, uncomfortable when he didn't release her hand, "or a matter of your situation being low priority. The other situation, however, is a priority."

"And a personal one?" he asked, releasing her. He shook Kasey's hand then, as if an afterthought of remembered politeness and protocol.

"Yes." Andrea's face flushed.

"Well, then," he began, forearms raised slightly, in a supplicative gesture, "I guess we needn't detain you any longer."

Kasey glanced from Ambassador Caughley to Andrea. As she caught her attention, Andrea glimpsed a strange sparkle in Kasey's eyes, a darkening to her features. Andrea hadn't seen the look before now. "That's it?" Kasey asked. She crossed her arms over her chest when no one answered. "Something's wrong. Giving in awfully easy, aren't you?"

"Not really," the ambassador said. "I can't expect you to put your knowledge into a job you haven't put your heart into. It's that simple."

"That simple?" Kasey said. Andrea knew she wasn't going to let the subject drop, not if the situation didn't feel right to her. "If you'd already conceded, Ambassador, why not just accept our word via Official Hanako?"

"It's Richard, please." He smiled. "I had a desire to meet Captain Knight, personally."

"Then we're done. Thank you for your time, Ambassador, Official Hanako." With an irritated glance, Kasey nodded toward the door, not moving until Andrea followed.

Andrea didn't move, though confused by the frustration in Kasey. She had known this was a wasted trip even before stepping in the hover-jeep earlier. Did the ambassador think she would change her mind because he capitulated so easily? *Shucks, Sir, since you're being so nice--.*

"Why me?" she asked. Richard laughed nervously. "Some reasons have to remain unspoken, I fear. Not even Mykael, whom I tell everything, knows my reason," he said, sealing it with a grin.

"Right," Kasey said, jabbing her hands in the uniform pockets.

Richard glanced at Andrea. "The topic is dropped. Other arrangements will be made." Andrea realized she must have scowled, when he continued. "Trust me, Captain. No one will fault you for the refusal."

Mykael nodded at the remark as if she understood an underlying meaning. Andrea wished she comprehended what had transpired. She rose, anxious to conclude this questionable interview. Strange things went on and Andrea wasn't the least bit sure she wanted to know what they were.

"Thank you for your time, sir," she said instead.

The ambassador smiled and moved with them as they prepared to leave. Andrea heard the scuffling in the corridor the second they reached the door. She pictured the corporal, who stood outside, alone. Instinctively, she reached for her weapon, remembering belatedly she'd had to leave it below. Her gaze darted to the door and then to Kasey. She was already on the move. Turning to assess the specific location within the room of Official Hanako, Andrea grasped the ambassador's sleeve and nudged him toward the bedroom, while directing Official Hanako to follow. "Do you have any weapons here?" she asked.

"A ceremonial blade over the bed." Richard pointed to the wall.

"What's happening?" Mykael asked, her face paling.

"Just stay here." Andrea ran to the sword and pulled it from the scabbard. It was an imitation in plastic. "Damn," she said, throwing the useless article to the floor. "Just stay here," she repeated, leaving them in the back bedroom.

Quickly, she returned to Kasey at the door.

"There's no way of telling what's going on out there," Kasey said in a low voice, but with a note of excitement.

Adrenalin rush, Andrea knew. It ran through her own body, heightening her senses. "Yes, there is, the old fashioned way."

Reaching into her boot, she removed the small four-inch blade, noting Kasey had already done so. Andrea moved to the computer panel. Lights displayed the door locked. Andrea's finger hovered over the board. "Ready?" At Kasey's nod, she released the code key and they rushed into the hall.

Only the red exit sign lit the hall. She could barely make out two figures restraining the corporal. Another laboriously attached something to the wall. It could only be one thing--an explosive.

"Get him," she ordered Kasey, pointing to the man by the wall.

The minimal light from the open door alerted the figures of their presence before she had a chance to close it firmly behind her. They started to make a run for the exit. Free of his attackers, the corporal fell to the floor in a heap.

Andrea dove, knocking the two fleeing men onto the carpeted hall floor in a mass of twisted arms and legs beneath her. Untangling herself from the men, who were still trying to get their own bearings, left her an opening. She took it. The knife handle clenched tightly in her fist, Andrea drove her punch into one man's jaw. He sprawled to the floor, dazed and moaning, a trickle of blood darkening the corner of his lip. She hoped it kept him woozy long enough for her to deal with the other man.

She grabbed the second man's hair with her left hand and held him firmly in place. With a swift arching motion, she drove the small blade through the base of his skull. His gurgling breath filled the hall.

The first man, seeing his partner's fate, scooted away on his buttocks. His moans from a moment ago turned to whines of fear. His gaze darted about for a weapon. Andrea dropped the dead man, turned, and stood over him. Panic overcame his fear. Before she could register the swiftness his terror elicited, he jumped to his feet. He broke through her defenses and grabbed her throat. Light-headed from lack of oxygen, she jabbed her knife forward, heedless where it landed. The knife made contact with his stomach, but his grip didn't falter. She released the handle, leaving the weapon embedded in his flesh. Grasping his arms, she thrust her knee hard into his groin. He gagged, releasing his grip on her and fell to his knees. Darting forward, she pulled the knife from his bloodstained stomach and, with a quick slicing motion, slit his throat.

Andrea stared in disgust at the dead men, shocked to see the gold and green streamer on their sleeves. *Scepters. But why?* She turned to alert Kasey.

Kasey roughly held the explosives man against the plasticrete wall. The man grunted from the impact and Kasey hit him again. Andrea recognized how difficult this was for Kasey, whose profession was to heal not harm. She stepped forward to intervene, realizing there wasn't a need. Holding the man's head firmly in her hands, Kasey twisted sharply, rewarded with a snap. Neck broken, the body slid lifeless to the floor.

Andrea grabbed Kasey by the arm. "Look." She pointed to the secured explosives. Red digital lights flashed. Six seconds and the bomb would go off. From the floor, the corporal groaned. "I'll get him, you get the door," she said. She pulled the corporal, dazed but conscious, to his feet. Kasey kicked in the door that had locked upon their exit. Tugging the corporal with her, they made their way toward the bedroom.

"Get down!" Andrea yelled before the explosives went off.

The corporal flew from her arms. The explosion propelled her straight onto the ambassador. Shielding him with her body as debris chunks and dust rained down around them, Andrea held her breath and waited for it to end.

A wail of sirens filled the hall. Ambassador Caughley coughed from the dust. "Are you all right, sir?" Andrea asked.

"Quite. Thank you," he said.

Andrea turned her head to scan the room, needing to survey the ruin. Kasey, Mykael, and the corporal were moving about. A good sign. She stood and assisted the ambassador to his feet. "Is everyone okay?"

When they all responded positively, she moved out of the room, Kasey instantly at her side. Noting the extent of damage, she looked at Kasey. "It was Billy's people. I saw the streamers. Why would they want the ambassador dead?"

"Perhaps they knew you were in here," Kasey said.

"Maybe so, but it just doesn't make sense." She turned back around and saw the ambassador and the official standing together uncertainly beside the corporal. *Or were the two involved in some sort of conspiracy?* Andrea wondered with annoyance.

The corporal suffered the worst, blood flowing from wounds inflicted in the fight as well as the explosion. As she stared, Andrea saw a green vapor encircling Richard's hand where it touched the younger man and seeming to steady him.

She squeezed her eyes closed to clear her sight. When she opened them, the vapor was gone. Had there been more substance, she might have thought the vapor was here to retrieve Kasey--who Andrea wasn't ready to relinquish yet--but she remembered the original had been grey colored. Andrea credited the odd haze to the residual effects of the blast and summarily dismissed it. She had other concerns to occupy her attention.

"Kasey, check the area," she said.

Kasey left immediately.

"We have to get you out of here, Ambassador," Andrea said, scanning the rubble.

Richard nodded, staring at her.

His gaze made her feel unsettled. Uncomfortable, Andrea pulled her own gaze away.

"It's clear," Kasey said when she returned. As they carefully made their way to the lobby, Andrea came to a bitter conclusion. Somehow, Billy was involved with the attacks on the ambassador.

This had little to do with her. She knew Billy could get to her anytime. *Maybe he meant to get*

them both--two enemies, one bomb. Either way, she felt sure there would be other attempts. If she agreed to protect the ambassador, she would have another chance at Billy.

The decision seemingly made itself. "We'll see you safely to the United Presidents."

Ignoring the startled look Kasey gave her, Andrea grabbed the discarded weapons, took point and led the way to the hover-jeep.

KASEY, STARTLED BY the announcement, was angry. Her ire increased when she noticed the exchange between Ambassador Caughley and Official Hanako. They wanted Andrea to accept this mission, and then had been so accepting of her refusal. Glancing at them now, they looked like they'd expected this outcome all along.

A knot clenched tightly in the pit of her stomach. Kasey didn't trust what was happening. Did the ambassador have something to do with this attempted assassination? Preposterous, right? He was a man of the church, so he wouldn't set up such dangerous schemes. Too many things could go wrong. He would have had no way to control the safeguards needed if she and Andrea had failed to stop the men from the hall.

A new sense of determination left Kasey resolving to keep a closer eye on her commander. Somehow this all had something to do with Andrea; and Kasey wasn't about to let anything happen to her. She'd solve this peculiar puzzle. No matter the cost.

Chapter Six

"YOU SCREWED UP!" Billy shouted in outrage.

"The other Scepters fouled it up," Blades said.

"That's no excuse. You and Scat were to make sure it went off without a problem. You failed me!"

Anger radiated from him. He saw it as a tangible weapon. Billy sensed the raw fear in Blades--expecting, dreading, punishment would be unleashed and he'd never avoid it.

Billy knew Blades wanted to run. Every jerking muscle in his poorly carried posture shouted the need. But he'd taught his people well. Any show of cowardice would mean instant--and painful--death. Billy watched Blades nervously shift weight from one foot to the other. Sweat poured down the sides of Blade's face and moistened the soiled shirt he wore, the collar darkening visibly. The stench of fear nearly overpowered the ripe odor of old perspiration newly dampened. Keenly aware of his power, Billy decided not to give Blades the satisfaction of punishment. At least not right now. Better Blades should squirm like a slug, never knowing when it would come.

"What now?" probed the voice from the shadows.

Billy wanted to grab the darkened form and yank him into the open. Prove to the coward his theatrical attempts at concealment a waste of time. The Scepters didn't give a damn as to who he may be, as long as their mayhem continued.

"She'll take Ambassador Caughley to the United Presidents," the voice said.

"Of course she'll try," Billy said, disgusted with everyone's ineptitude. Did this fool think him an oaf? One who needed explanation of how the situation stood? Didn't he even comprehend the power Billy held? Or the demonic energy a flick of his finger could unleash?

"Then what do you suggest?" came the measured reply.

This traitor knows so little, Billy mused. The man had spoken calmly, unaware of the restraint Billy maintained in not using his dark powers to send the fool into oblivion. Once he found the rest of the logs the little Jap scientists made, Billy would control time as well.

Billy frowned at the exertion, running a hand back and forth over his brow to alleviate the pressure quickly forming into a nasty headache. "We go to the Americas and stop them." Specific plans of action darted quickly in his head. "Get us their route," he said to the shadow. "I'll follow them. Rid us of this problem, once and for all."

"As you say," came the response, before leaving the hanger.

Cautiously, Blades took a step closer. "How do you know that one can be trusted? The shadow could turn on us," he said.

Billy was still angry, but the fact hadn't registered with Blades. If it had, he would never have spoken. Billy repressed a sigh. Yes, he would have still spoken. The introduction of Mr. Brains and Mr. Blades never happened. Billy doubted Blades would recognize a self-made thought if he did ever have one, which explained Blades undying loyalty. Billy knew all his men to be loyal, even if they were stupid. His group bonded like family, only stronger. Punishment meant death in this family unit.

His deadly black eyes locked with Blades. "I know. Never trust anyone who turns on their own." Billy smiled wickedly. "When the need is no longer there, we'll dispose of this shadow, sending it into the darkness it covets so fiercely."

"What do we do now?" Blades asked hesitantly.

"We take our best warriors and follow Knight's route." He glanced at the throng of people.

"Captain Knight's the only worthy adversary in their ranks. I'll be sorry to see her die."

Billy watched the man frown, his head bent slightly. He knew pride in an opponent's skill went beyond Blades comprehension. Way beyond. Power did have its drawbacks. At the top, few appreciated the skill and cunning required in maintaining it.

Such is life.

"I want you and Scat with me," he said.

Blades smiled, raised his head and breathed a heavy sigh. "That way," Billy whispered conspiratorially. "I'm sure you won't screw up again." He would kill Ambassador Caughley and Andrea Knight--if she left him no other option.

THE GROUP OF five made it to the hover-jeep with no further resistance, Kasey driving them to Headquarters with the corporal in no shape to handle his usual task. After leaving the corporal with a medic to tend his injuries, Andrea dispatched another soldier with a summons of appearance for Officials Sherman and Brodie. She then made her way to the Security Briefing Room.

Andrea smiled to herself, remembering the conversation with the corporal minutes before. Embarrassed to talk to her at first, he capitulated when he realized she wasn't leaving the room until she was sure his injuries were seen to.

"Are you feeling any better?" she asked while waiting for the medic to finish tending him.

Andrea was startled to see the injuries looked healthier, even before the medic treated them. They'd looked more serious immediately following the blast. A vague image of green vapor teased at her memory, but she pushed it away as insignificant, brought on by the strain of the moment.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied in a shaky voice.

"Well, you did good work today, Corporal. You manned your post well."

The corporal seemed hesitant, like he wanted to say something else but was unsure how to begin.

"Ma'am, seeing as you're going to escort the ambassador and all, I was hoping you'd call me by my name. I--I mean you aren't really in the military anymore, right? Rank seems so impersonal when addressing someone regularly."

With a great effort, Andrea resisted the impulse to smile. "What's your name? Other than Corporal," she said, with a mock frown.

"Greg. Greg Mitchell," he said with a broad grin.

"All right, then, Greg. Get yourself fixed up and rested." She smiled back at him. "I expect to see you better. That's an order. I'll check on you after the briefing."

Andrea made her way to the Briefing Room and noticed Kasey leaning against the wall watching her. Andrea knew Kasey worried about her, though she usually acted playfully. Nothing seemed to ruffle her feathers. Not even being lost in time had managed that feat. Andrea envied Kasey's ability to shrug everything off.

"How's the kid?" Kasey asked.

"Doing well, I guess."

"You just hate to see us bright ones get down, don't you?" Kasey smiled mischievously.

"Guess so."

"Why are you going through with this?"

The frankness threw Andrea off guard. "What do you mean?"

"Granted, he's a church ambassador. Granted, Billy sent someone to kill him. But we--well, you specifically--really aren't necessary." She dropped her casual lean on the wall and faced Andrea squarely. "Something doesn't smell right."

Andrea knew what Kasey meant. She'd begun to doubt her rash agreement, too. If she hadn't reasoned it as impossible, she'd have believed it a setup in order to obtain their compliance.

"Something's going on with the ambassador. Whether it's something good or bad doesn't matter. Either way, I don't care now. Hopefully," she said, wanting to squelch further argument, "the two of us will have it figured out before it happens. Whatever the it is."

Interrupted by the approach of Hank Brodie, Andrea turned from Kasey and they entered the room. Richard and Mykael were sitting quietly at the table.

Hank Brodie followed directly behind them. He glanced at Mykael and Richard before turning to Andrea. His features set quickly into a scowl as he surveyed the room. "Where's Sherman?" he said.

Nobody knew.

"This is an atrocity," Brodie said to Richard. "Ambassador Caughley, sir, please accept our apology. If we'd known of this attack, I assure you we'd have had more security, no matter the hotel's policies."

"We fared very well with Captain Knight and her lieutenant," Ambassador Caughley said. "It was an unfortunate incident. Besides, a remarkable event has occurred," Richard added, grinning.

"Captain Knight agreed to take up my cause."

If Brodie was jolted by the news, Andrea couldn't see it on his face.

"Well, all is not lost then," Brodie said as if satisfied with this twist of events. "Plans must be made to get you safely to the United Presidents Meeting. They're not going to be pleased with this last attempt." Hank pulled his pipe from a pocket before sitting at the table and lighting it.

"I'll have to send word right away. Yes, right away."

Official Hanako left Ambassador Caughley's side to sit at the table across from Brodie. "The details of Ambassador Caughley's stay were supposed to be secret." Her Japanese accent grew stronger. "How was he found?"

Brodie sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Obviously, we have a leak."

A bold statement, one that should have caused him to show more concern, at least Andrea believed as much. "How many people knew?" Andrea asked, and waited for Brodie's reply.

"As far as I know, just those of us here, Sherman," he added, counting with his fingers as he listed the names, "and Corporal Mitchell, of course. You don't think--" He left the sentence unfinished.

Warily, Andrea answered, "No, I don't."

"Then who?" Hank said worriedly.

Andrea didn't know 'who', but was sure going to find out. Heaven help the person responsible. She never did trust the political people she'd had to deal with--an observation Hanako made last evening-- and no way would she trust any of them now.

KASEY SCOWLED AND didn't care who noticed. She had different reasons for not trusting these people. Strange things continued to happen and too many pieces didn't fit properly. Other attempts had been made against the ambassador, so this one shouldn't have been a surprise. Ambassador Caughley and Official Hanako had their own reason for wanting Captain Knight involved. Those reasons seemed strange at best, considering Kasey didn't know what the motives were. So many things remained unanswered. She'd rectify that problem. "I need answers before we form another plan of action." Shock-filled gazes turned toward her. Kasey ignored them. She kept her voice controlled for Andrea's sake. *No use being labeled a hothead and dropped from this mission*, she mused sarcastically. *That might only instigate an exploration into my past*. With a barely perceptible nod of support from Andrea, Kasey continued, "What we have so far is zilch-point-nothing. You want us to transport Ambassador Caughley safely to the United Presidents and we understand that. Do we get a valid reason? No. What, precisely, do the Scepters want from the Church? How deeply are the Scepters involved? Don't get that, either. Now we believe there's a leak in the department, but no idea who."

"We're all at a loss here, Lieutenant," Brodie said.

Kasey furrowed her brow and smirked. "If Andrea and I weren't involved, this situation would be laughable."

"You find this situation amusing?" Hanako said with raised eyebrows.

"Leaks are common to the political system. You don't dare turn your back on anyone. You suits are all alike," Kasey said matter-of-factly. "This proves it. I, for one, don't like being caught in the middle of it. Lab specimens--here, rat, head that way; no, go there, rat."

The tension Kasey expected didn't come. Her comment should have hit a raw nerve, but no one contradicted her. Andrea would never have voiced these concerns. It would've been unprofessional, in Andrea's eyes, and she would refuse to speak them. As Second, Kasey could get away with indiscretions. Of course, she wouldn't mind Andrea slapping her wrist later. Kasey smiled. If Andrea was upset with her voiced opinions, Kasey always had the out-of-time-period excuse until she could make amends to the beautiful captain.

"We must continue with a course of action to get Ambassador Caughley to his destination,"

Andrea said after awhile. "How long do we have before--" The abrupt entrance of Official Sherman cut Andrea's question short.

He looked his usual angry self, his appearance less than neat. "What's going on?" Sherman said.

Brodie seized the job of enlightening the tardy official. "Another assassination attempt on Ambassador Caughley. We're formulating a plan of action." Kasey caught a wicked gleam in Brodie's eyes. Did the others see it? "Where have you been, Sherman?" Brodie asked slyly. Sherman's face burned red. "What are you implying, Brodie?" he growled said through clenched teeth. His body stiffened, ready to physically battle the insult.

"Nothing," Hank Brodie said, almost too casually.

Richard remained silent, as did Andrea and Kasey.

Official Hanako didn't seem so inclined. "You were also unavailable for a time, Hank. We could ask you the same question. It may only be chance that has Sherman late in returning."

"This isn't important right now," the ambassador said. "Arrangements must be made if I'm to continue. Now that Captain Knight and Lieutenant Houston are obliging us with their assistance, I think we should get down to business."

From the stark look of shock turning Sherman's face pale, it was evident he felt alarmed with this newest outcome. Much as it looked like he would say something, he remained quiet, blankly staring at Andrea.

ANDREA GRABBED THE opportunity to regain charge over the situation. "Would you take a seat?" she asked Sherman in a commanding voice. He complied with a huff. All gazes centered on her. She'd become accustomed to conducting meetings with other military personnel, even with the Freedom Force civilians, but this was more nerve wracking.

Andrea felt her throat go dry.

In the last two days she'd seen an entire unit destroyed, Billy had slipped through her clutches, and she'd taken charge of an ambassador for the Church. Topping it off, Andrea thought with impatience, she received a kiss from Kasey, the adorable woman from the past who fit so perfectly in this time. That kiss kept replaying in Andrea's head. This mission became a burden, weighted too much with secrets and untold truths. Andrea felt like hiding her head in the sand and just letting someone, anyone, blow her back end away.

"Plans have to be made to assure Ambassador Caughley reaches his destination," Andrea said more confidently than she felt. "It's abundantly clear, after today, Barbarous Billy and his Scepters are involved. Also, that the leak is right here in this room."

"The corporal isn't here," Brodie said, his remark much too casual, again.

With a scowl to silence him, she continued, "We have no choice or time to delay. Plans must be set for the route we're to take."

"What of the informant?" Kasey whispered.

Andrea's gaze pleaded for Kasey to follow her lead on this. Kasey clamped her jaw so tight in response that Andrea heard teeth grind. "We'll assume no security breach has been made and move forward. It's entirely possible, knowing Billy's cunning, other means were employed to gain the necessary information."

After several hours, multiple contingencies considered into exhaustion, everyone was tired and ready to retire for the evening. "Kasey and I will alternate guarding the ambassador and Official Hanako."

"Wait one minute, Captain." Brodie shook his head emphatically. "I'm quite capable of issuing a guard."

"They're my responsibility from this moment forward. If that's not so, let me know before I waste any more time on this matter," Andrea said.

No one disputed her command.

Shortly after, Andrea placed Caughley and Hanako in the same room to tighten security. Kasey took first turn at changing from her tattered dress uniform into battle uniform, before relieving Andrea. "Stay sharp," Andrea said, "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"What are you up to?" Kasey asked.

Andrea simply winked and closed the door behind her.

Three hours later, Andrea returned to find the ambassador and Mykael still asleep.

"Took your time," Kasey said softly.

She raised the backpacks she now carried. "I've got extra weapons, though."

"What's up in that pretty head of yours?"

While handing over one of the 9mm pistols, Andrea whispered, "I'm not giving anyone the chance to screw this mission up." With a calculating grin, she added, "I've arranged passage on a freighter. We leave in half an hour."

"A freighter?" Shock registered plainly on Kasey's face. "Glad some things from my time still exist."

Andrea's excitement had her pulse quickening, giddy with the fresh surge of adrenaline. "It's the last place anyone would expect." She smiled playfully. "And you're wrong, only you still exist from that time. Everything else is a sad replica."

Kasey swatted her shoulder good-naturedly. "You know the point I was making." Then, more seriously, she said, "You've changed the plans."

"They expect us to be direct and get the mission over with. Besides, if a leak does exist, the wrong plans will be passed on to Billy, and we buy a little time."

Kasey's smile showed approval. "I'll get Richard and Mykael up. There'll be hell to pay when Brodie and Sherman find out," she said, grinning.

"I know, great, huh?" That thought alone gave Andrea a strange feeling of elation.

Almost as rewarding as seeing Kasey's pleased smile directed at her.

Chapter Seven

BY THE TIME the small group made it to the freighter under the purplish-darkness concealing their efforts, tension replaced Andrea's earlier elation. She desperately hoped this plan would work. At the very least, prolong the inevitable until she could devise an alternate plan.

On the dock, Greg stood, smiling. "I've got the provisions, Captain. There's a small cabin," he said apologetically. "But comfortable enough."

If surprised by his presence, the others didn't voice it. She and Kasey hustled Official Hanako and Ambassador Caughley onto the ship. Below decks, Andrea tackled the computer code key using tools she retrieved from a square zippered pouch in her backpack. Opening a small metal panel beside the door to their cabin, she accessed the computer's operating system, and then linked the Security code through the dual inline package.

"What are you doing?" Mykael asked, sounding genuinely interested.

"Looking for the proper 'pin' that will let me access the MPU."

Mykael frowned in puzzlement.

After a quick glance to her, Andrea elaborated. "MPU is Master Processing Unit. If I can get the proper Read/Write head, then the DIP," she paused. "DIP is Dual Inline Package. It will send the

information through the circuits. Kind of like worker ants carrying the proper information to the queen ant. Only here it's to the accumulation register. Thus, the information is loaded to the main information port." The woman looked more confused, so Andrea added, "I want to make sure we're the only ones with access to this room. I'm explaining it to the computer. There." She replaced the metal panel and secured it.

"Give me your Data Cards," she said to Kasey and Greg. They complied. Andrea ran the cards through the small slit on the side. "Now, Ambassador and Official Hanako, I need you to run your TAP across the scanner."

Minutes later they were all stowed in the cabin.

"Very commendable, Captain," Official Hanako said. "Don't trust anyone."

"I don't want to be commended. I just want this over with." Andrea knew she'd spoken harshly, but wasn't about to apologize. She really had no reason to trust Richard or Mykael any more than Brodie and Sherman. Caution kept her one step ahead of everyone else--she hoped. Above all, Andrea was responsible for ensuring Kasey's safety and privacy until her situation could be resolved. She could only guess what could happen should anyone learn Andrea gained her lieutenant due to time-travel.

Hanako looked around at her accommodations, her nose crinkled. "Certainly isn't pretty." Andrea realized Mykael probably had the finest rooms and best of comforts. She'd never caught small doses of sleep in a foxhole with dead comrades littering the ground; never worried she'd be startled awake to find an enemy hovering above her, the wicked gleam of killing in an enemy's eyes. Never-- Andrea shook her head. This was not where she needed to be, right now.

Blinking rapidly to clear the images, Andrea scanned the room. The bulkheads were steel, six berths bolted to the sides of the grey metal hanging over grey metal floors. Kasey, Greg and Richard walked toward the beds and made themselves comfortable.

"How long are we going to be on this freighter, Captain?" Mykael asked in a voice rife with distaste.

Andrea directed her attention to Mykael. From the strained smile, Andrea knew she felt uneasy and wouldn't like hearing the answer. "About one week."

"Oh, dear me." Mykael's forced smile fell quickly. "We should be a cozy little group by the end," she said, and sat hesitantly on an empty bunk.

"Official Hanako--" Andrea felt at a loss. Part of her wanted to make Mykael relax, but she couldn't change the situation. They would all have to make sacrifices. Another part of her, small yet dark, found some comfort in Mykael's distress. Hadn't they come looking for her, demanding assistance? "If there was another way, I'd have taken it. We have to get this mission on track without any more incidents of mayhem. No one will expect us to use this slower means of transportation. It could be worse," she added plainly.

Mykael lifted an eyebrow quizzically. "How do you mean?"

A note of humor crept into Andrea's voice. "My grandfather said these trips used to take months. Just think of the time we're cutting off."

Kasey's rich laugh put Andrea at ease. Then Andrea blushed as she realized Kasey had been on a ship just a few months before, and could understand the intended joke first hand. Greg and the ambassador joined in the amusement, easing more tension.

Andrea turned to Richard. "I know this is difficult. Kasey and I have done this sort of thing before. Part of the military life, you understand. However, the severity of this situation has necessitated the inclusion of you two." She had the chance to remind them that they had asked for her assistance, but didn't use it.

So instead, commandingly, Andrea continued, "The two of you can't go on deck until we're well under way and, even then, only with our escort. Stay as hidden as possible when on deck. Let's not alert unwanted people to our presence. I don't believe it will happen, but--"

"We understand, Captain, and we trust your motives," Ambassador Caughley said. "One more concern needs to be addressed, though."

"Which is?" Andrea crossed her arms over her chest, prepared for complaint.

"If we're going to be confined," he said, diplomatically. "I really think we'd all do better on a first name basis, unless, of course, you want to continue putting us into separate categories from yourself. That would be rather rude, don't you think?"

Andrea flushed. "I was keeping on a professional level, sir."

"Of course you were." Richard grinned. "But, I'd gladly dispense with the formality. Neither Mykael nor I care one whit about it, truly."

"As you wish," Andrea said.

Richard's gaze settled on Andrea. "Talk about hard nuts to crack," he said with amusement. "It's obvious you hold to rules of protocol like a shield. To keep people from getting too close?"

She stiffened. "I don't see what one has to do with the other."

His hands came up quickly, as if defending himself. "An observation only, Andrea." He stifled a yawn.

"Let's get some sleep. Kasey, Greg." Greg jumped from the bunk the instant she spoke his name.

Kasey remained where she was and gave Andrea a slow wink that caused a flush to warm her cheeks. She turned away, surprised Kasey affected her the way she did, and directed the rest of her comment to Greg. "We'll post watch for this voyage constantly. I'll start tonight. Tomorrow I'll work out a schedule for the three of us."

Mykael's expression grew puzzled again. "It's necessary on board this vessel?"

"Yes, I believe so," Andrea said.

With them settled, Andrea turned off the lights and took her post. She hadn't realized the night had fled so swiftly. Not until Kasey stood before her.

"Why didn't you wake me to take over a watch?" Kasey asked in a whisper that sizzled with irritation. "You need sleep, too, Andrea," she added more gently, protectively.

"I had thinking to do. I'll play catch-up later."

Andrea could tell, when the topic switched to food, that Kasey didn't approve, or believe her.

"Well, then. How 'bout I go to the galley and rustle up some grub? I'll get you an extra strong coffee." At Andrea's nod, Kasey turned and left on her task.

With the others sleeping still, Andrea had more time to rehash the same scenario that had been playing in her head during the night. First she laid out the facts. *We have to get the ambassador, Richard*, she mentally corrected herself, *to the United Presidents*. Obvious routes couldn't be followed because of a traitor. *In addition, I have to figure how Billy is involved and get him*. The only major problem now was finding a way to do it all, and quickly.

Andrea's head ached from thinking, worrying, and a lack of sleep. Gratefully, she accepted her coffee when Kasey returned with a food tray. For a short interval, it gave Andrea a chance to put her concerns into the background. The new aromas wafted and worked as an alarm clock for the others. In moments, everyone woke.

For the most part, they ate in silence and Andrea gladly welcomed it. "You won't believe what I heard in the galley," Kasey said, breaking the quiet.

Andrea's headache began to throb. Kasey didn't gossip. Whatever she heard, it was important enough to bring to her attention. *So much for putting your cares away*, she thought. "What was it?"

"Seems the radio man fell asleep at his post last night," Kasey said.

"Is that uncommon?" Mykael asked.

"It is when you're on duty." Andrea knew there was more, as Kasey stared at her. "And?" Kasey cleared her throat dramatically. "The man suffers from insomnia."

"THEY WHAT?" BRODIE and Sherman yelled simultaneously at the man on Guard Duty.

"They're gone, sir," was his simple response.

Hank Brodie pulled his pipe from a pocket, deliberately taking his time in lighting the contents of the bowl. He needed to calm the angry tremble in his hand, needed to think.

"What is this, Brodie?" Sherman said. "If this is some covert plan of yours, I demand to know what it's all about."

"I'm as much at a loss as you, Sherman. I knew nothing of this." He puffed heavily on his pipe.

"Captain Knight is obviously acting alone."

"You let Ambassador Caughley suggest someone you couldn't control?"

"I didn't want dominance."

"What then?" Sherman said, incredulous.

"I wanted results, damn it!"

A scowling Sherman mumbled, "I don't appreciate this turn of events. It puts everything in a very dangerous light."

Brodie didn't appreciate being out of the realm of command and this put him so out of control.

The idea that Sherman felt he needed reminding irked Hank considerably.

"They were your responsibility," Sherman said. "How do you intend to rectify this situation?"

Smoke circled Hank's short form. "I'm not sure yet," he said slowly. "I'll think of something, I promise you."

"Well, it had better be fast. I assure you, if anyone takes the blame for this, I'll make certain it's in your camp." Sherman stormed out of the room.

Hank Brodie stood rooted to the spot, puffing and thinking. Thinking of alternatives and puffing on his pipe fiercely. "What a mess," he mumbled.

The trembling in his hands changed to an uncontrollable quivering.

THE MUTED GREY clouds shrouded any hope of sunshine appearing. Despite the waves building, rocking the ship in its peaks and slumps, it lulled Andrea into restfulness. On the freighter's deck, Andrea's eyes closed and her head lifted so the warm breeze gently caressed and enfolded her like a lover's arms. The taste of salt lingered on her lips. The waves brushed the deck and misted everything and everyone.

Contradiction.

She sensed it in the ocean--felt it deep within her. The waves slapping at the freighter were strong and punishing, the breeze gentle and delicate. Outwardly, she bathed in the sense of peace provided by the warm spray. Inwardly she warred with the struggle of control over emotions and duty. Here and now--they were the same. However, it could change in an instant.

Andrea released a sigh, vaguely aware of the crew about their duties as they moved around her.

The fresh air was calming, yet overly so as she labored strenuously with fatigue.

"You look exhausted, Captain," a voice whispered behind her.

She stiffened; Ambassador Caughley had arrived. "What are you doing on deck, sir?" she asked, turning to face him.

Standing with hands on his hips, feet placed firmly apart, a scowl on his face and hair tied back in a queue, Richard had the look of a pirate. "Richard, remember?"

Groaning inwardly, Andrea closed her eyes. "That takes getting used to," she said. "You didn't answer the question."

"Relax, Andrea," he said. Richard bowed, took a step backward and pointed to Greg standing behind him. "I brought my escort. May I dismiss him so we can talk?"

She raised her eyebrows at the request. "About?"

"Please?" he said. "I promise to be good."

Andrea wasn't sure how to take his easygoing attitude. He'd probably planned to lighten her dark mood. It had the opposite effect. No one won her trust with games, no matter how harmless the sport intended.

She complied hesitantly, a nod toward Greg. "I'll take care of the ambassador." Greg flashed a knowing grin before leaving. The grin annoyed her. Whatever he knew, or thought he knew, evaded Andrea. She made a mental note to chastise Greg later on the necessity of maintaining a poker face at all times.

Andrea motioned to a stack of crates on the foredeck and they sat. She felt at a loss for words. Not to mention, decidedly uncomfortable, which she attributed to his position in the Church. *What do you say to a man to whom you'd normally confess sins?* For a long moment neither spoke. Instead, they stared at the sea as if purposely avoiding conversation. At least Andrea was, and she recognized it, but he had come on deck with the pretext of dialogue. Enough was enough, she thought in aggravation. "You wanted to talk?"

Richard cleared his throat. "Actually, I wanted to thank you. It was a hard decision for you, giving us your assistance."

"Not really," Andrea said. "Nothing's changed me from my course. I've simply taken an alternate turn and subsequently a new direction."

He looked stunned. "You think he'll follow?"

"I do," she said simply.

Doubt showed in his eyes. Eyes, Andrea noted, that looked as green as the ocean on a white-sand beach. "We know he wants you to fail, but I don't know why." She paused to give him a chance to fill in the details, continuing when he didn't. "We also know I'm a thorn in his side. If we're all together," she added, "he'll be convinced two problems in one are eradicated. Billy will be overconfident, not careless. There's still a great deal of danger."

Richard stared at her as if trying to understand. "Why is this--Barbarous Billy, I mean--so important to you?"

Andrea tensed. She certainly wasn't ready, or willing, to discuss Billy's motives with anyone. The reasons went too far back, the scars too deep. "I won't get into that. If there's another topic to discuss, go ahead. However, my dealings with Billy are my own business."

He granted her request with a short nod. "All right, then. What are your plans once we reach port? Do you think they'll anticipate this mode of travel and be waiting?"

"A definite possibility." Andrea didn't share her certainty of it being the case. Instead, a strained smile formed on her lips. "We'll disembark and find another mode of transportation before anything happens."

Richard stood, looking like he would argue, and then changing his mind. "I hope you're right," he said. When Andrea stood, ready to escort him to the cabin, he said, "I hope, soon, you can learn to trust me enough with your reasons. If it's revenge--"

"It is my reason."

With a sigh, Richard planted a kiss on her forehead, then turned and went below; leaving Andrea with a mixture of emotions she didn't want to deal with--now or ever.

"Was the ambassador reading you the riot-act? Mad that we carried them off in the dark of night?" Kasey asked from behind her.

"Damn," Andrea snapped, startled. She twisted toward Kasey. "I wish everyone would quit sneaking up on me."

"Sorry," Kasey said, not sounding remorseful. "Usually, you're more alert."

Andrea sighed heavily. "No, Kasey, I'm the one who should be sorry. I shouldn't take my frustrations out on you." She smiled, rewarded with one of Kasey's. "You're right, too. Usually I am more alert." Andrea settled herself back on the crate. "Actually, he was concerned Billy would be waiting when we docked."

"What did you tell him?"

"I only agreed it was a possibility," Andrea said. "I don't want them even tenser than they already are."

"For that he kissed you?" Kasey sounded upset.

No, Andrea thought with surprise, *she sounded jealous*. Caught off guard, Andrea studied her. Was Kasey jealous of his emotional display?

"It was nothing, Kasey. He's a man of the church, remember. He probably thought to console me in some way." She frowned at the dubious expression on Kasey's face.

"If it looks like a duck--" Kasey said.

Andrea pretended she hadn't heard the comment, understanding the intended direction, and not welcoming the fact Kasey didn't believe her. Andrea didn't want her jealousy. Andrea wanted Kasey's friendship, nothing more.

So why did Andrea feel so miserable, believing that was all she would ever get?

Chapter Eight

THE FIRST THREE days of the voyage to the Americas were uneventful. Except for a few brief walks on deck, the group remained inside the cabin, Kasey or Greg going for food at meal times, and the three took turns guarding the safety of Richard and Mykael in the evenings.

The weather had been very companionable in warmth and sunshine. The cloudy skies from the first morning left behind, as if a vague memory. Unfortunately, so had the peace it brought Andrea.

Twice a day she went to the freighter captain, checking on the ship's location and verifying that nothing bizarre had happened. What might appear inconsequential could have bearing on her and those in her company. The captain understood. He'd been a military man himself in the past and one of the few she'd classify as "friend".

She wasn't pleased with the reports, even if the three incidents he'd relayed seemed unconnected. The first episode she'd heard from Kasey. A radioman had fallen asleep at his post, for which he'd

been confined to quarters. He'd protested himself faultless, yet unable to explain how it happened. The second incident was a theft of medical supplies from the infirmary. The third, and strangest to herself and the freighter's captain, involved a weapon missing from a still locked cabinet in the supply area, brought to attention during a routine inventory of gear.

Andrea didn't know what to make of the information, but she wouldn't dismiss any of the events either. If the very strangeness surprised the ship's captain, then her caution moved to a higher level.

She would make sure Richard and Mykael didn't leave the cabin. It might not be pleasant but it would centralize her control for the unexpected. With their lives in the balance, she had no other choice.

On the fourth day, the weather took a turn for the worse. A storm blew up from the south and hit the freighter with fervor. Because of the storm's severity, they remained in the room to simply avoid being in the way of the crew. The reasons sound enough, the effects were less than tolerable.

Tempers strained. Limbs longed for a proper stretching, and lungs begged for fresh air not found in the small cabin. Each knew the ultimate goal once they reached land, but their immediate needs were unfulfilled.

Even the food left them feeling unsatisfied. The freighter's cook proved generous in the portions he supplied, but the fare was elemental at best. The large ship bucked and rolled with the rage of the storm. They tried to consume their meal with as much grace as circumstances allowed.

Andrea didn't want to struggle any longer, and with a heavy sigh, pushed the plate away. She alone took responsibility for the situation, which had all of them tense by confining them even before the storm hit.

Reminding herself it was for their safety didn't make her feel any better. "I'm sorry to have put you through this, Ambassador, Official Hanako. Believe me, it's for the best, or will be, in the long run."

They smiled in return but she noted their expressions were forced.

"We'll be there soon, Andrea," Kasey said, watching her with concern. "I'm sure they understand, and don't blame you." She glared at Richard and Mykael as if daring them to voice a different opinion; or so Andrea thought as she watched Kasey's expression.

Richard raised an eyebrow and nodded. "We accepted help, no matter the consequences." His smile changed as he darted a gaze around the room. "Quite a change from planes and hotel rooms, I must say."

"Thank you for remaining so polite," Andrea said stiffly, not knowing if he joked or intended sarcasm.

"Not at all, Andrea, I'm serious." Pushing his plate away, Richard stood. "Granted, you hardly know me. You have no reason to trust me, other than being an ambassador of the United Church and, as such, expected to be honest." He clasped his hands together. "We all know, from history, men of the church haven't always been perfect or trustworthy, the prime reason for my position as a church ambassador. With that in mind, you've intentionally put your well-being in jeopardy to save mine."

"That's our job," Andrea said.

"No occupation should require one's own life before another's. Does your own mortality mean so little?" he asked quietly.

"There are circumstances that do. This is one of them. How I feel about my existence is my business, isn't it? Yet, you continually try to get into it."

Mykael rose from her spot, gazing at the ambassador. "Please, Richard." Mykael's eyes clouded with tears. "I had to learn the lesson at the expense of losing my father. He gave his life selflessly. You of all people know how it's possible. Andrea is no different. Both of you seem intent on keeping secrets."

"Mykael," Richard said in warning.

"How do you expect them to act? They see this as duty. You also have a job. We have an advantage, because we know what they must do in order to protect us. They have no idea of what you must do. How you are to ultimately protect them."

"This is not the time or place to discuss me," Richard said as if expecting that to settle the matter.

"Tell them your mission," Mykael said.

Andrea stared between them, confused. Being told so little from the beginning, now she had the distinct impression of there being something more. *So, he has secrets too*, she thought, annoyed. He'd asked about her private confidences concerning Billy, but wasn't inclined to reveal his own. That made his persistence worse.

She crossed her arms. "Yes, Ambassador, tell us your real mission."

"It isn't important to discuss," he said, resuming his seat. "Mykael's blowing things out of proportion."

"So, you won't tell the actual reason for your trip? We're supposed to give you superior protection and you feel it isn't necessary to know the purpose, is that it?" Andrea said.

"There isn't anything to it." Richard's voice remained steady and unyielding.

"Very well," Andrea said, shocked to hear the childish note in her voice. *I won't apologize for it either*, she concluded. "We should get some rest. We arrive at our destination sometime tomorrow evening."

Andrea moved to her bunk and pulled the wool blanket down half way. "Wake me for my rotation at guard," she said to Kasey. Without looking at anyone else, she climbed into the bunk, turned toward the bulkhead, and closed her eyes. The others soon followed her lead.

Hours later, Kasey woke Andrea to stand her turn at watch. Moving quietly, she sat in the chair by the door. The only sounds came from Kasey getting into the bunk, and the shallow breathing of the others in sleep. The freighter rocked gently once again, as it moved across the water now that the storm had passed.

Thoughts of what could possibly lay ahead twisted and tangled in her mind, and Andrea wondered what it would be like not to have to think ahead. To let fate happen naturally, the only concerns in life being what meal to prepare, whose birthday came next, or what outfit to wear for the day. Andrea had always worried with what the future would bring, and how to defend those choices, physically and emotionally. Shaking her head in the darkness, Andrea realized that as long as she remained in this profession, she'd never know those feelings.

Sounds of footsteps echoed dully in the companionway. Her ears picked up the sound, booming like a death knell in her head. The footsteps made their way up the metal stairwell to the top deck. Listening closely and following the sounds, her mind visualizing the progress of each step until stopping altogether. Some small comfort came in knowing she wasn't the only one awake at this hour. Time drags on endlessly when standing guard. Each sound draws attention as you sit in the silence, ready for any contingency. As each noise faded into the night, she relaxed again.

Andrea glanced at the illuminated dial of her watch. Only two hours had passed. Dawn seemed an eternity away.

She tried to fill those hours by repeating the events expected to unfold later in the day once they reached port and disembarked. Andrea had gone over the plans with the captain of the freighter,

and knew he'd hold to every minuscule detail she'd carefully laid out. She could trust him to keep the plans secret even from his most trustworthy of the crew. Silently, she thanked the deity the ambassador worshipped for giving them an uneventful trip, devoid of any attempts to kill those in the room with her.

Footsteps returned. She listened. *Odd*. These steps, stealthily trod, were different from the previous ones. These didn't want to be heard. The hair on the back of her neck stood out. Slowly, Andrea reached down to remove the weapon from her side. *So much for thanking unseen deities for good fortune not received.*

The footsteps came closer, just a few feet from the cabin's hatch. Andrea rose quietly and moved the chair. Her ears strained toward the outside sounds. She heard a telltale clicking from the computer keypad on the wall. Someone was attempting to access the code.

Andrea held her breath and prayed her security program held up. A barely perceptible beep signaled denied access, the inside pad blinked red to confirm the attempt. Her heart leapt for an instant. Careful not to alert the others, Andrea hurried to Kasey's bunk, and nudged her awake, before returning to the door. The seconds fell through time sluggishly. She motioned Kasey, now dressed and ready, to the opposite side of the hatch.

Reaching for the control pad, she punched in the proper code, deliberately waiting before tapping the last key. Andrea wanted this person to believe they had found the right sequence. With a deep breath, Andrea glanced toward Kasey, her weapon held tight in her grip. At Kasey's nod, she pressed the final button.

As Andrea pressed her back flush with the wall the door clicked, and then eased open.

A weapon-clenched hand thrust inside and aimed at the row of bunks. The intruder crept inside.

Andrea grabbed for the weapon as Kasey locked him in a chokehold. A tiny grunt escaped the man when Kasey's grip cut off his air. The man struggled ineffectively to get free.

With her gun pointed mere inches from his face, Andrea moved into the corridor, Kasey and their prisoner right beside. She then secured the door behind them. In a mere whisper, she demanded.

"Who sent you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the man said.

Kasey compressed tighter.

"I don't repeat myself," Andrea said firmly.

"No one," he said.

"What is your purpose?" Andrea shoved the weapon's barrel hard into his stomach.

He grunted, but remained silent.

"Let's take him to the captain. Maybe he can find some answers. If nothing else, we'll at least get him away from the ambassador." Andrea moved to the metal stairwell.

"It's a shame," Kasey said, giving her head a noticeable sad shake.

"What is?" Andrea said.

"Dead men tell no tales. Especially when they're shark bait," Kasey said. "We know who signs his paycheck." With an effort, Andrea suppressed a smile at the dated comment. No one signed much of anything these days, most everything simply an "enter" click away.

They reached the upper deck and Andrea peeked toward the railing. She understood Kasey's implication and the idea had definite merits. "You're right. He couldn't tell us any more than that, anyway." She glanced at the captive, his eyes wide with fear. Andrea shrugged. "All right, Kasey. Dump him."

He struggled harder as they reached the rail. "Wait!" the man wailed.

"Uh-oh," Kasey remarked with an exaggerated sigh. "He's getting his tongue back. I never have any fun."

"Too late, scum, had your chance," Andrea said. She turned and moved away.

"I know where Barbarous Billy will be! Don't kill me and I'll tell," he pleaded.

With a forced sigh, Andrea turned back around. "I don't have time for cat and mouse games.

What could you possibly know that's of use?"

"Billy's waiting for me to report," the man said.

She shook her head and *tsked*. "You're a fool. Point one, Billy wouldn't trust a flunky with that information; and point two, you're already a dead man."

The captive darted frightened glances toward the railing.

"Not because of us killing you," Kasey said in disgust. "Pay attention, you cluck."

"Do you really think your Leader Supreme will let you live if you fail?" Andrea shook her head.

"Billy wouldn't chance it that you'd use the information to save your sorry skin. If you'd succeeded in your task, he'd have found you."

Disbelief replaced fear. He quit squirming, stood motionless as Andrea's words sank in.

"Take him to the captain. He can lock him up until we reach port. The authorities can have him then. I'll meet you back in the cabin, Kasey."

Her scowling stunned him into further silence and part of her felt pity. Lost souls were such easy targets for Billy. It's a shame they lacked so little useful knowledge or basic morals.

A vision of her little sister, Marlee, impaled her mind. How many people, innocent children and adults alike, had died at his hands? Andrea couldn't answer, and that part of her heart had no pity for him. Maybe, like Marlee, who would have done anything to please an adult, it was all about the need for attention.

Would this senseless violence ever stop?

"I don't see how," she admitted in a grim whisper to herself.

Chapter Nine

KASEY EXPLAINED THE assassination attempt to Captain Marlow and left the prisoner in his capable hands. She was on her way back to the cabin, enjoying the gentle rock of the ship and the odd peace in the silence of pre-dawn. Mere feet from the door, she caught a soft rustling behind her. She spun toward the sound just as a sharp pain exploded against the side of her head. Her knees buckled and she fell to the deck, barely able to make out dark clad legs, then total darkness.

A dull ache throbbed through Kasey's skull. With sheer force of will she opened her eyes to blinding light, promptly squeezing them shut again. The first lucid thought was that there were two assassins.

She heard a voice from the darkness, thought the mist had come to take her back, but then oblivion.

GREY SWIRLING MIST surrounded her and Kasey swallowed the fear lodging in her throat. A tall, dark haired man stood in front of her; his hair the only color she could distinguish.

"Where am I?"

The stranger just smirked. "Does it really matter?" Kasey visualized Andrea in her mind, her safety net. "I see it does. Thinking of my sister, are you?"

"Your sister?" Kasey was feeling more disoriented with each second in this place devoid of color.

"I'm Billy, Andrea's big brother and leader of the Scepters. And you, my dear, are from the past."

He shifted closer to her. "If you don't want to return there, you'll talk to me. Or maybe I'll simply leave you here in the void."

Not certain she wanted an answer, Kasey asked, "Why haven't you done so already?"

"And spoil all my fun, I think not--yet." Billy crossed his arms over his chest. "This isn't a Jules Verne novel, this is real. I could return you to your time, or send you to a parallel universe.

Neither makes a difference to me. Either way, you'd lose Andrea, wouldn't you? What if I could assure you stay in her time?"

"What do you want from me?"

Kasey wasn't sure, but she thought Billy might have faded for a split second. His anger, however, was as strong as ever. "I really don't care if your little group manages to get Richard to his destination. I will win this, Kasey," he said. "Not even Richard's powers will stop me, and you can tell him so. You should beware his true motive. He's not what he seems."

Kasey noted that his increase in temper made him grow fainter again. At her frown, Billy explained, "We're literally two of a kind, he and I. Mostly because I've disposed of anyone else from that Military School 'Medical Facility' they tortured us at." He took a deep breath. "I'm testing the waters, and have selected the time traveler."

Kasey felt herself shudder. "How did--"

Billy's hand shot toward her throat and latched on with brutal force. "Just remember that I can pull you out of time and send you back, or kill you. Either one works for me."

This time, when his anger produced the fade, his grip loosened and Kasey realized he didn't have complete control of this space.

"Give my kid sister a message. Let her know that I'll finish what I started, and will win. She gets in the way, I'll remove her permanently." Billy shrugged. "We'll speak again, Kasey," he said before slamming a fist to her jaw. Kasey dropped to the floor, unconscious.

KASEY'S FIRST OBSERVATION, as she fought her way through the darkness into consciousness, was the acrid smell of smoke. She felt the cry of frustration gurgling in her throat. "No, I didn't go back." Fingers grazed her cheek seconds before feeling a warm cloth across her forehead.

"I'm sorry, Kasey," Andrea whispered. "I'll find a way to get you back, I promise."

Painfully, mostly for fear hearing played tricks with her mind, Kasey lifted heavy lids. Her vision was blurred, but she focused on the shadow above her. At first she thought a fuzzy version of Jimmy looked down at her. Blinking rapidly, she concentrated and realized it truly was Andrea watching her with concern.

Oblivious to all else, including the throbbing pain in her skull, Kasey reached up, wrapped her arms around Andrea's shoulders, and pulled her into a fierce hug. "Oh, thank God, Andrea, I thought I lost you."

Kasey felt the magnificent warmth of breath against her ear as Andrea whispered, "You're safe. I've got you."

THE FREIGHTER WAS close to reaching port and needed to prepare for debarkation. Andrea hoped all would go well. She was slowly regaining composure after Kasey's incident. She had never expected to feel so anxious when she scoured the entire freighter looking for Kasey and found she hadn't been seen since leaving the prisoner with the captain. Panic, and emptiness, set in immediately, sure that somehow Kasey had returned to her time. When Andrea reached the cabin, a skulking figure was trying to enter their room. They fought, but he managed to slip out of her grasp. He had an explosive device attached to him and the scuffle set it off prematurely. Luckily, damage to the ship was minor and, to her relief, when the smoke cleared she found Kasey out cold on the floor.

Adrenaline coursed through her veins, making it possible for Andrea to lift Kasey and carry her inert body into the cabin. She had no sooner placed her on a berth, soaked a cloth with cool water to apply to the massive bump on Kasey's forehead, when Kasey woke. Luckily, she didn't have to fend off questions about Kasey's comment, as the consensus seemed to be that she was happy to be conscious. Neither Andrea nor Kasey said much else about the incident, though Andrea had a sense that Kasey wasn't telling her everything about the experience.

Right now, they all had other things on their minds. The first leg of the journey was almost over, but two Scepter assassins had infiltrated the ship. Billy might know where they were if either or both men had managed to get word off ship.

Captain Marlow, the freighter's captain, sat at his desk before Andrea. Thread-like grey hair, full of static electricity, stood out from his head in all directions. His broad smile reached his eyes with a sparkle. Marlow wore faded blue jeans and a grey cotton shirt.

"I hope this works," he said in a raspy voice.

Andrea remembered his resonant tone from long ago. It comforted her. "It should," Andrea said. "Billy will have made provision for any contingency. I just hope this plan will catch him off guard long enough for us to get ahead of him."

"You're the soldier," Captain Marlow said. "You'd know better than I would."

Andrea laughed. "You had your share of the military. It was in my father's command when I first met you." She shook her head at the memory. "You certainly were a gruff old man and scared me silly, at first. Then you came around."

Marlow snickered. "I had no choice. You wound me so tight around your little finger, I had to give in." He leaned forward and placed his elbows on the desk. "I've known you a long time." His tone grew serious and he frowned. "What astounds me is the fact you've never settled down. Although, the life you chose hasn't surprised me, given your father, but I'd hoped you would've left it all behind by now. Give this up. Find someone special. Live a real life."

Flushed, Andrea looked away. "I can't."

"What you really mean is you won't. Getting Billy won't bring your sister back. Marlee is dead." He sat back in his chair; the squeal it elicited sent chills down her spine. "Stop, Andrea, before this life kills you. Or, worse, turns you into a carbon copy of your father."

Angry, she stared into his eyes. "I could never turn into him." She dropped the last word like venom from serpent fangs.

"No. But you could end up as lonely."

"My father made his choices. He didn't care who he hurt. My choices will work out better because--" Andrea broke off, not wanting to finish.

"You care too much about righting wrongs. Still hiding your feelings?" he asked.

The remark had the same effect as his chair. Andrea realized she'd always hidden her true feelings, and wasn't about to change now. It worked, made her feel more in control, at least of her

own actions. She was a living, breathing person. However, she'd learned feelings weren't a godsend; only a tool used in destroying everything decent within her.

Running a hand through her short hair, Andrea stood. "I'd better let the others know what we've discussed, get them ready." She held out her hand. "Thank you, Marlow. I appreciate all you've done for me, for all of us."

Sadness filled his eyes. "It's a pleasure and I'm glad to be of service." He paused, his voice huskier. "I've always loved you, as if you were my own child. One day you'll meet someone. Don't hide your true self from them. Emotions can be a wonderful joy when shared. And you have plenty to give."

"Gee, thanks, dad. Can I borrow the car keys next Saturday, too?"

After a quick chuckle, he added, "I only want what's best for you, Andrea."

She sobered, knowing it was unkind to make light of his honest concern. "I know, Marlow." She reached forward and placed a kiss on his rough cheek. "I'll be fine. I promise." She turned to leave and paused in the hatchway. "Marlow, you're the best."

Unable to bear the tears filling Marlow's eyes, her breathing heavy, she left. His whispered words to her retreating back jarred her as physically as any blow. "My tears are for you, Andrea, since you won't shed them yourself. May you find happiness, mostly a true love."

Captain Marlow had her best interests at heart and Andrea knew it. How do you explain to someone who cares that you're just being cautious? Especially when you know in your heart that they are correct. She didn't want anyone too close. The hurt of losing was too painful to let anyone inside long enough to achieve it. Besides, she reasoned, they'd explained to her in basic training, over and over: If it was necessary for you, it would've been issued in Boot Camp. Heart hadn't been issued, so emotions had no place in her career.

Kasey jumped to her feet at Andrea's entrance into the cabin. Andrea knew Kasey's head was probably smarting awfully bad when she wobbled a bit on her feet. Echoes of *if only* taunted her, and Andrea couldn't bring herself to look directly at Kasey.

Andrea shook her head in hopes of rearranging her tormented thoughts.

Andrea announced, "Well, people, this is it. We leave the ship at 1700 hours." There was a collective sigh. "We won't be leaving on foot," she said. "The captain of this freighter helped me work out the details."

"That's only a couple of hours away. How will we leave?" Mykael asked nervously, voice filled with dread. "It's not another boat is it?"

"No, Official Hanako," Andrea said, "it's not a boat." Andrea moved to a small table in the room.

"But," she said gravely, "it could seem as bad, maybe worse, to you and Ambassador Caughley."

"What do you have in mind?" Richard asked.

"Billy will expect us to leave the ship in one of three ways." She brought up her hand and held up three fingers. "One," she said tapping the first finger, "as part of the cargo; two, on foot; or, three, in a smaller boat. He knows we're here. Finding his two henchmen on board solved the case of the sleeping radio man at his post." She gave a grimace toward Kasey. "And the missing weapon."

"How'd they get past the captain?" Richard asked.

"Captain Marlow explained the men weren't part of the original crew, but last minute replacements from the company he's hauling for."

"You said it wasn't to be on foot or using another boat. Are we to be cargo?" Mykael's voice sounded constricted.

"Yes."

Richard frowned. "You just said Billy will expect this. How's it ever going to work?"

"This is a freighter, Ambassador, with a lot of cargo. They can't examine it all." Andrea looked at them in turn. "Billy doesn't know how I plan to ignore the disadvantage."

"What disadvantage?" Mykael said.

"The two of you." They both frowned in confusion. Andrea concluded neither understood the implication. "He knows I have an ambassador and an official. My prime objective is to get you to your destination safely with as little discomfort to you as possible. But I'm not going to do that." She paused when they both paled. Andrea stifled a chuckle. "You'll get there safely enough, just not comfortably."

"How?" Mykael asked in a tight voice.

"Most of the cargo's in large crates. Billy will assume you're off-loaded in one of them and concentrate efforts on the crates."

"Only we won't be in them," Kasey said. "Where will we be? Ship's laundry?"

Andrea looked at her and scowled. She wasn't helping; though she tried. Of course, that would be something out of one of the movies Kasey so enjoyed. When Andrea noted the laughter in Kasey's eyes, she had to fight the impulse to smile. Only Kasey would joke during a strained situation. Flashing a--you'll pay for this later--look at her, Andrea said, "Not the laundry, either. The captain collects old steam engines. It seems he purchased a Stirling engine while on Okinawa." She leaned back in her chair. "That, people, is how we're leaving."

"In an engine?" Mykael said. "You can't be serious?"

"I am."

"It definitely gives new meaning to togetherness," Richard said. "Will we even fit in this thing?"

"Captain Marlow's getting it ready as we speak. It will work," she said.

Andrea moved toward the door. Nothing had gone right since she'd been involved in this situation. "I'll return later," she told Kasey, then left the cabin.

KASEY GLARED AT Ambassador Caughley and then Official Hanako. She felt a compelling urge to justify Andrea's plan. "I hope you realize how seriously she's taking this mission. If there were any other way--"

"It's just a shock. I guess we never understood how ruthless people of Billy's caliber could be," Richard said. "Then having to read the enemy's mind, know how they would anticipate your every move?"

"It's the name of the game," Kasey said with a shrug. A lot of this was so very new to her, too. She felt a new respect for the commanders of the boys sent into battle during her timeline. Kasey knew it to be especially hard on Andrea. These two people weren't military trained. They couldn't understand how Andrea felt with each decision, or how she felt liable in asking civilians to do things they weren't prepared for.

Giving in to the urge to go to Andrea, Kasey ordered Greg to stand guard and she, too, left the cabin. Kasey didn't know what she'd say once she found Andrea, but for her own peace-of-mind, had to make sure she was all right.

Seeing Marlow, Kasey asked, "Have you seen Captain Knight?"

"She's in the hold getting things ready," Marlow said. "Going that way myself, wanna join me?"

The hairs on Kasey's neck prickled. Marlow, she felt rather than noticed, had been staring at her, like he could see inside Kasey's thoughts. Did he recognize that she was from the past? How could he? Would he announce to the others she wasn't exactly who she claimed to be?

When Kasey fell into step beside him, Marlow asked, "How long have you known Captain Knight?"

Perplexed, Kasey responded carefully, "For a while now. Why?"

"No reason, just curious." Marlow remained silent for a while. "Does she have someone special in her life?"

Personal questions always threw her off guard, especially since an innocent question could snowball devastating results to life and careers; and, though not directed at her, this time was no different. She stopped and stared hard. Marlow could be interested, as age would never matter to Andrea. She wasn't shallow, and she definitely wasn't homely--certainly not with those incredible grey eyes. Was the freighter captain infatuated?

Kasey frowned.

Marlow burst into laughter. "No, Lieutenant. I'm not personally interested. I've known Andrea since she was a feisty little kid. I'm only concerned for her well being in a fatherly way, and as such I worry."

"That makes two of us," Kasey said seriously.

"Well. Does she have a special person in her life?"

If asked in a fatherly way, he'd be disappointed with the truth. "No. With career being foremost, Andrea doesn't believe she has much to offer. Guess it's the soldier in her." Kasey knew it to be true. They'd discussed the topic recently, always jokingly, but she could tell Andrea had been honest.

"Shame, that is. Such a pretty girl and so gentle," Marlow said with a heartfelt sigh.

Kasey laughed. No one ever accused Andrea of being gentle, especially to her face. "Don't ever let her hear you use that word," she said.

However, Kasey remembered a time when she believed the same thing, finding Andrea staying beside her bedside after the transport from 1945, then again a few hours ago. Kasey, expecting to be dead, had found Andrea to be gentle then, tending to her as no one ever had. Yes. Andrea had great gentleness, but she would never let anyone know. Even Kasey was allowed only the briefest of glimpses, which left her wanting so much more.

Kasey thrust the thoughts from her mind when they reached the cargo hold and she caught sight of Andrea.

THE CREW WAS completing their work. Andrea scrutinized every move as the men worked on the alterations to the engine. The antique boiler's pistons now lay where two men had placed them into an empty crate. A broad grin escaped her, as Kasey and Captain Marlow entered. *My two favorite people*, Andrea's mind whispered, unbidden. She couldn't explain how or why it suddenly occurred to her. It took a concerted effort to mask the confusion it created.

"Just about done," Andrea said, her pulse quickening. Her gaze automatically darted to Kasey and her face heated as if Kasey could read her thoughts. She hoped the flush would be associated with working on the engine.

"Good. We're almost there," Marlow said. "You'll have to get your people inside before we dock, if we're going to pull this off successfully. Your cheeks are flushed," he said in a sly whisper for her ears alone. His eyebrows lifted. "Glad to see your young friend?"

Andrea's face flamed hotly.

"Only an observation," he whispered, edging closer to her.

She resisted the impulse to slap him. Barely. "I'm sorry we had to destroy your engine." She shot a defiant stare that willed him to hold his tongue.

"It's worth it to know you'll be all right." He took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. "Go safely, my girl."

Andrea's heart felt tight and strained. "Thanks to you, we will." Clearing her throat of the emotions lodging there, she added, "I'll get the others." Releasing her hands from his, she left, not daring a glance in Kasey's direction.

KASEY LOOKED ON as Captain Marlow's gaze followed Andrea until she walked completely out of view.

"Watch out for her, young lady. Lord knows she won't do it for herself."

Touched by the depths of care this man obviously felt, Kasey met his warm gaze. "I will, Skipper. Rest assured."

After shaking Marlow's hand, Kasey headed to the cabin. Her promise to Marlow had been easy. Hadn't she made the same promise to herself already? But, she admitted, the reasons had changed.

Before, watching out for Andrea came out of a sense of loyalty. Now, it was different. It came from her heart. It leapt at the prospect Andrea might care for her in return. She hoped Marlow's observation of Andrea's flushed face proved correct.

Maybe with Richard safely deposited at the United Presidents, Andrea would let down her guard and open up to Kasey. Maybe tell Kasey what she'd known all along: They were perfect for each other. Only one thought ruined the happy feelings that prospect brought. Would that mean she could stay forever in this time? Or would Kasey, the moment she realized love, be ripped away and tossed back to her own?

Worse, a headache began to throb furiously and, "Talk to me, Kasey," echoed through her head. Was Billy calling her back to the nothingness? Billy had the power to pause, if not travel, in time and yank Kasey with him. Snippets of memory were coming back to her from her time of unconsciousness. When she awoke, Kasey was so relieved to see Andrea that she feared telling her about Billy would jinx her. What if he sent her back and she no longer had Andrea Knight in her life--her heart? Kasey shuddered from the cold chill coursing through her veins. That loss would be the true nightmare.

CAPTAIN MARLOW STOOD on the deck of his freighter, with half an hour left to reach the dock in Los Angeles. On the horizon, he could see the small boat they'd sent as a decoy. It bobbed in the water as it made its way to a port north of LA. He prayed it would work, but his gut admitted it was a long shot. Marlow knew Billy would be waiting. At least his people would. Billy, too clever to show himself unless guaranteed complete control of a situation, would not be waiting. After giving instructions for docking to his navigator, Marlow went down to the ship's hold.

Chapter Ten

THE CREW HELPED Andrea's small group get inside the large engine. It would be a tight squeeze, but it would work, as long as they remained silent. Kasey and Andrea were the last to climb up.

"We'll be there shortly," Marlow said, giving the last update. "Hopefully, those small air holes we put in will give you enough air for the journey, and will go undetected. I'll have my people try to unload this somewhere in the middle of the other cargo. With a bit of luck it'll throw them off."

Marlow locked Andrea in a quick embrace.

His fear for her, evident in the hurried hug, worried Andrea. Nothing she said or did would change it. "This will work." She hesitated, cleared her throat of the tears threatening to choke her.

"I really appreciate all you've done. I won't forget this." Tears filled his eyes and he only nodded.

"Hey, Skipper," Andrea added with a wink. "Next time I look you up, I promise it'll be on better terms, maybe for a drink and dinner."

"Just take care of yourself," he said sullenly.

Climbing behind Kasey, Andrea waved to her old friend and crawled into the engine's boiler.

Numerous wool blankets, supplied by the ship's storeroom, covered the bottom. She squeezed into a small empty space, the others just as cramped.

"Shouldn't be long now," she said. "We remain quiet, and Captain Marlow will take care of the rest."

"I pray you're right," Richard said.

Andrea gave him a deadpan expression. "Actually that, Richard, is the best thing for you to do. Pray."

"It was just a figure of speech, Andrea," he said.

"It couldn't hurt, could it?"

They had to sit in a row: Greg at the far end, Official Hanako, the ambassador, Kasey, and then Andrea under the opening.

"The next hour will be crucial." She wasn't sure if she tried to convince them or herself.

The boiler door closed above them, submerging them in total darkness. Andrea glanced at her illuminated watch from time to time to note the passage of the hour. Around them, the sounds of the freighter reverberated as it pulled into dock. The metal protested and the echoes of running feet announced the crew going about their duties. Shouts from men preparing the cargo for off-loading met them.

"It's now or never," Andrea whispered, mostly to herself.

A hand reached in the darkness and found hers, the clasp warm and reassuring, as Andrea knew it was intended. Kasey's features couldn't be seen but her feelings conveyed themselves in her grip.

Andrea felt a tingling course through her body, glad her own features were hidden, as her face got hot from this new sensation. A quick return squeeze answered Kasey's assurance, before Andrea pulled away and crossed her arms over her chest, and wished she were with Marlow, in the open, instead of locked inside the metal shell with her confused heart and troubled emotions causing more chaos than any battle she'd fought.

CAPTAIN MARLOW SENT his men about unloading the cargo once the ship tied to the dock. The ladder moved so his men could exit. Then he observed them. A group had gathered on the dock. There looked to be about twenty of them, a scraggly group, gold and green streamers the only uniformity. Danger and blood lust shone in their eyes, with not a shred of humanity.

"You there," he hollered down. "Stand aside so we can go about our business."

One man, calm and cock-sure, stepped forward and started up the ladder. The others grouped close behind him. "After we check around, old man. What's your cargo?"

"Do you have the authority to do so, young man?" Marlow knew he must be careful with what he said or did until the game played out. They reached the top and moved toward him. "What is it you're expecting to arrive?"

"Passengers. You have 'em. We want 'em," the leader said.

"That's right. I did," he said, sticking as close to the truth as possible, less chance for a slip-up.

"They got off after someone tried to kill them. I've got men in custody for the local authorities," Marlow said. With a supplicating gesture, he added, "Look. You're free to search the ship."

The leader cocked his head to one side. "A fountain of information, ain't you, old man?"

Marlow looked him straight in the eye. "I'm a business man. If I stopped you, you'd only kill me and look anyway. What kind of business could I conduct then? This way, you get what you want and I get to stay alive."

"Smart. Maybe, too smart." He snapped at the others. "Go find 'em. Cargo holds and cabins first. If they ain't there, check whatever's left. Move!" he shouted.

They scattered, frightened. "I'll take care of Pops here," he added, lifting the corners of his lips into a wicked grin.

Marlow raised an eyebrow. "Will this take long, young man?"

"Long as it takes." From the belt at his waist, the intruder pulled out two long knives. "Don't call me, young man. Name's Blades, remember that," he said, thrusting a knife to the hollow in Marlow's throat. "We find 'em you'll need it to know who to beg to for that life you wanna keep."

"Don't you mean if? I told you. They got off," Marlow said.

"We'll see," Blades said sarcastically.

From Blades posture and attitude, knives brandished for emphasis, Marlow suspected the hood made the most of being in charge. He doubted it was a common occurrence. The longer this took, the less chance Andrea had for success.

IN THE CARGO hold, Blade's people conducted their search. They opened crates; the crew closed them back up and hastily attached them to the crane, which pulled them up and carried them out and over the ship and to the dock. The crew began to hoist the engine after a number of crates were opened.

"Wait," called one of Blade's men. "We didn't check that."

The crewman shrugged. "Thought you was just lookin' at crates."

"Come on, Jerry," sighed another. "It ain't a box, it's a machine-thingy. You don't really think they'd be in there, do you?"

"We were told to look. In everything," the other stated. "Billy'd kill us if we didn't, Stan."

"Yeah, he also said anything that could possibly be used. You don't think they'd put an ambassador and that lady in there, do you?" Stan's voice hummed in disbelief.

"Could be," Jerry answered. "Billy told us 'bout that Knight person. She'd do anything, think anything, if she thought she'd get away with it," Jerry said.

"Then you do it. I ain't getting in that death trap." His boots scuffed against the metal floor. "Not even for Billy."

INSIDE THE BOILER, Andrea reached for her weapon. She needed this to work. The conversation between the two thugs, Jerry and Stan, echoed dully through the metal. She waited.

If the boiler opened, she'd kill at least one before the others could regroup and attack. With her weapon pointed at the hatch, Andrea crouched within the confines, ready for a fight.

Then she heard the yell of the crane operator. "You gonna look or not? We got a schedule to keep."

"Hell," Jerry said bitterly. "Blades can take the heat. Move it away."

Relief flooded the occupants of the boiler. That was too close for comfort. Within the interior, they felt the engine swing as it moved up from the hold; and a jolt, when placed on a truck at the dock. A screech came from the boiler. Inside the engine, Richard and Greg simultaneously clamped a hand across Mykael's mouth, her body quivering in fright.

Andrea knew they still weren't safe. She heard shouted commands, the running footsteps of the workers, and the hum of the truck's engine as it vibrated through the ancient material. Another voice from outside yelled to latch it securely. The clash of metal against metal sounded when chains were placed around it, the sound grated through every fiber of their bodies. Then the grinding of gears as the truck finally began its move forward. Andrea felt a little of the tension ease as the sounds of the dock grew fainter. Soon, the only sounds were the steady but stifled breathing of the boiler occupants and the truck as it made its way over the paved road and away from Billy's henchmen, the freighter, and Captain Marlow. Andrea whispered a heart-felt plea for Marlow's safety.

FROM HIS POSITION on the freighter deck, Captain Marlow could see the truck, with the old Stirling engine chained to its bed, make its way undisturbed into the night. He sighed, turned back to Blades and gave him a tired frown.

"Have your men about finished?" he asked. "We have schedules."

"You'll know when we are, Pops," Blades said. Sweat formed on his upper lip. He turned from Marlow and started toward the hold. From the ladder, a shout stopped him still.

An agitated female Scepter made her way to Blades, only four feet from Marlow. Breathless, her words chopped, "Coming--we're jammed--Militia--hurry."

"Damn!" Blades said in response.

A twitch curled his lip and Marlow began to wonder if he'd cry, not doubting he could, wishing he would. To Marlow, it seemed a lifetime flew by as Blades paced, clutching the hilts of his knives.

"Get the others," Blades then ordered. "Tell 'em the Rollers are here, gotta split before we get hemmed up." Down the ship's ladder and running from the dock toward safety, Blades never looked back to see if his order was carried out. Marlow watched. The others, not far behind, scrambled into the shadows. They raced as if their lives depended on speed alone. It did.

Captain Marlow's relief proved short lived. Barely two minutes after the departure of the Scepters, a CFFM Unit arrived. Their commander, like Blades, boarded without invitation and sent his Unit through the freighter before making his way to Marlow's side.

"Can I help you?" a tense and tired Marlow asked.

"We're looking for your passengers," the commander said. "We also suspect the Scepters will be coming for them."

"You're too late, in either case."

"I don't understand." The commander stood erect, poised for confrontation. His eyes gauged Marlow as if he didn't like what he saw. The younger man reminded Marlow of a pompous fool, one who made decisions based on appearances.

"What do you mean, too late in either case?" he said.

Marlow shoved his hands into his jean pockets. After a heavy sigh, he explained, "The Scepters scurried over there." His hand pointed in the direction. "And, I'll tell you what I told them. My passengers left in a smaller boat, before we docked. They sailed north, last I saw."

When the commander hissed through his teeth, Marlow added, "Look. I've lost valuable time. Two possible Scepters are in custody, men that tried to kill them. My passengers didn't want to stay too long after that. So, they took a boat," he said with a broad smirk, "and sailed into the wide blue yonder. Don't think the Scepters found their guys before you scared them off." Keeping an eye on Marlow, the commander pulled his radio from his uniform utility belt and called his unit to assemble on deck. "I hope you're right about what you told me. You'll pay dearly if you aren't."

"Threats?" Marlow asked innocently.

"No, sir, promises. Kidnapping an ambassador is a crime." With one last haughty look, the commander about-faced, marched to his unit, already in formation, and left.

Once fully out of sight, Marlow grabbed the first mate by the shoulder as he hustled by. "You get this cargo unloaded fast. We're leaving. Immediately," he said. "Dump the prisoners in the ocean if you want, but get them off my ship. I'll be in my cabin."

A sudden desire for a stiff drink took hold, and Marlow smiled at the welcomed thought. It would be a relief, after the last hour, to toast the mission coming off without any major hitches.

THE TRUCK TRAVELED for hours with no further problems. Inside the Stirling boiler, the occupants remained silent, their safety not yet secured. The sounds of a few passing vehicles hummed within the metal compartment.

Kasey knew Andrea had fallen asleep just moments before. It relieved her that Andrea had allowed herself to rest. It had been too long since she'd slept. In sleep, Andrea remained sitting with arms cradled to her chest and knees tucked beneath her chin. Her head, the only part of her that had budged, rolled sideways and rested against Kasey's shoulder. Kasey had almost given in to the impulse to place an arm around Andrea and pull her closer, but she didn't want to waken her.

Her stomach tightened from hunger, and Kasey wondered how long it would be before they stopped to eat. As if on cue, her belly rumbled. It echoed in the confines of the boiler. She chastised her stomach when Andrea stirred, but it responded with a repeated rumble. Andrea raised her head from Kasey's shoulder, and she felt angry with herself. She'd wanted Andrea to get as much sleep as possible.

More than that Kasey missed the warmth of Andrea nestled against her.

ANDREA WOKE, UNABLE to see Kasey's face, knowing she'd be embarrassed by the unintentional wake up call. In the darkness, Andrea's auditory and sensory perceptions were more acute. She sensed the others were awake, too. With a quick glance at her watch, Andrea noted the time. "Soon, people," she said above the noise outside. "Just hold on a while longer. Our destination will have lodging as well as food."

Kasey's stomach rumbled again.

Andrea didn't hesitate to tease. "If you can't wait, Lieutenant, chew on a bullet."

With a soft chuckle, Kasey replied, "No go, Skipper. I'm ravenous. Wouldn't have enough left for the bad guys." Everyone laughed then.

Not five minutes later, the truck lumbered to a stop. The vehicle's cab door opened and closed with a bang. Soon after, the boiler entry hatch creaked open and night stars winked at them. Andrea was grateful their eyes wouldn't need to make sudden adjustments to bright light.

"End of the line, folks," the driver informed them.

With stiff limbs, they crawled, climbed, and stumbled into the cool, brisk air, grateful to be out of the cramped space with its stale air. Andrea was glad to see that behind and ahead stretched an empty highway, not another vehicle or soul in sight. The driver shut the boiler and jumped down. Glancing around, Andrea realized they were at a crossroad with only fields surrounding them for miles, with what appeared to be abandoned homesteads dotting the land. "Since the truck's here to afford some privacy," she said, "I suggest girls on the left, men on the right. We still have a long way to go."

Andrea smiled when hearing Mykael's, "Thank heavens."

"Your first goal is about two miles west," the driver informed Andrea, pointing. "Everything's ready."

"Good," Andrea said. When he gave a slight nod and moved to the cab of the truck, Andrea followed.

At the side, the driver bent to whisper in her ear. "Marlow sends an update. Be careful, bulletins are out. You're now a fugitive wanted for kidnapping."

The shock registered in the pit of her stomach with a responding ache. "Thank you." The driver entered the cab and drove off. She returned to the others. "Let's go, people. Our little trek will get the stiffness out."

The group made their way westward. The walk, illuminated by stars and a flashlight provided by the driver, gave Andrea the time she needed to think. Only she couldn't. At least not well.

Andrea remembered a story she'd learned in childhood history teachings of Atlas the Titan, condemned to support the Heavens on his shoulder. She could relate to his predicament. A similar burden weighted her every step; her limbs moved as if made of lead. Two questions haunted her. No solutions presented themselves. *Why wasn't anything going right?* Maybe she'd lost her touch in her desperation to avenge Marlee's death. Judgment possibly clouded by the single goal, her reactions possibly slowed. However, the second question would be harder to resolve. *Who was sabotaging this mission every step of way?* Andrea made a solemn vow to learn the answer; and Richard had better have a prayer ready. The traitor would need it.

Maybe she had three questions unsolved. Andrea shuddered. The first two handled using logic and military training; not so the third. It proved more terrifying, harder to analyze, and impossible to control. It scared her to the center of her soul. Had Marlow seen horrible changes in her personality that she'd somehow missed? Andrea wanted revenge for Marlee's death, simple, cold, calculated revenge. *Was she turning into her father?*

Chapter Eleven

ALERT FOR ANY unwanted visitor in the night, Kasey walked beside Andrea, behind the others at Ambassador Caughley's insistence. The group trudged forward, a slight breeze blowing warm air. Silence no longer necessary, Richard, Greg, and Mykael took advantage with small talk.

Kasey watched closely, but chose not to join in the chitchat until she couldn't stand it any longer. Scanning the terrain, which was a dry plain shrouded in darkness, she questioned Andrea. "Are you going to tell me?" Kasey kept her tone calm and deliberate, even though she felt tense and anxious.

"Tell you what?" Andrea said too quickly. Kasey recognized it as a sure sign of worry.

Kasey tried to meet her gaze, but Andrea whipped her head around and focused on the three people ahead. "What did that driver tell you? You've been frowning about it since."

"I had no intention of leaving you out of the loop," Andrea said in an apologetic tone. "I didn't want to alarm the others until I had come to a resolution."

Kasey scowled. "I understand. But you know I can help, or at least try."

"I know," Andrea whispered.

To Kasey's ears, Andrea's tone sounded defeated. Whatever the driver said had unsettled Andrea and, not knowing the cause, made it impossible to fix the problem. Kasey guessed the need to fix things lay imbedded in her genes; but she knew it would take more than medical classifications or even tape and gauze bandages to correct the whipped look in Andrea's grey eyes. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

Kasey's eyes widened.

"Sorry." Andrea chuckled, but it sounded strained.

"We're all short tempered lately."

"I know, apology accepted." Kasey decided to try a new tactic. With her left hand over her heart, she thrust the right forward in the guise of warding off an imaginary foe. She employed her most gallant tone. "Let me share the burden with you, fair lady. We'll vanquish the enemy together."

Quickly Kasey turned up the collar on her sateen jacket, buried her hands in her pockets, and attempted an Edward G. Robinson voice. "Listen, Toots. We're in this together, see. You and me, that's right, see."

Andrea appeared surprised but chuckled. "Be serious," she said through clenched teeth. "I don't want the others to hear you."

"I'm always serious," Kasey said, feigning a hurt expression.

"Our mission has a new kink." She smirked. "Satisfied?"

"Not really. What new kink?" Kasey concluded the "kink" wasn't pleasant. Andrea seldom got this upset by one, as she labeled most problems as "minor details."

The residual humor left Andrea's voice. "There was a message from Marlow. He wasn't just visited by the Scepters, but the C double-F M as well."

"Not really surprising," Kasey said. "I didn't figure it would take Brodie and Sherman long to catch on."

"Neither did I," Andrea said, "but didn't figure they'd pass bulletins stating we have Ambassador Caughley and Official Hanako as prisoners."

Kasey stopped dead in her tracks. "What?" She didn't realize how loud she'd spoken. The other three stopped and turned questioning eyes toward them. Clamping her mouth closed so quickly she jarred her teeth, Kasey glanced away and directed herself to Andrea. "What the hell for? Do they realize everyone will be hunting us now?"

"I think that's the point."

Kasey noted the others walking over to join them. After she pasted a pleasant smile on her face, got an elbow of warning jabbed in her ribs from Andrea, they waited.

"Is there a problem?" Richard asked.

"NO PROBLEM, AMBASSADOR," Andrea said.

Before anyone could inquire further and ask questions she didn't want to answer, Andrea walked passed them and continued on their path. "Just a little farther, people," she said over her shoulder. The shuffling of feet told her they continued to follow.

Andrea glanced up and watched stars twinkle against the black sky. Any other time it would have been a comfort. It had been during many battles, but not tonight. Physical comfort she'd learned to live without long ago. Now it seemed she'd have to go without the simple solace of watching the stars, too. What did that leave her? Andrea wished she knew.

Not too long after, they came upon a large structure. Their destination, a lone building of concrete smack dab in the expanse of desert, was an empty beacon that whispered no harmonic chords of promise. One paved road that stretched and joined the structure connected to another highway a half-mile south. Andrea could see the broken windows and the battered doors. Once, very long ago, it allowed children a view and exit to the outdoors. Not anymore, though. The words *Desert Flower School* carved in marble shouted emptiness and despair.

With reluctance, Andrea confirmed the obvious. "This is it. Home, Sweet Home, at least for the evening," she said. The double doors in front showed shattered glass. When Andrea tried the handle, she found the doors unlocked. She held the flashlight in front of her and entered. Rusty lockers, many on broken hinges, lined the walls. Their footsteps echoed loudly on the tiled floor, like evil wraiths dispelling peace. Paper debris and dust kicked up with each step. Open doors led into classrooms long since unused.

The group walked on.

In shadows cast by the flashlight, Andrea saw fresh footprints in the dirt farther up the hallway. She held up a hand to stop the others. Andrea raised the flashlight and placed one finger on her lips to alert them to remain silent. Her next signal motioned Kasey to stay with Richard and Mykael while she and Greg investigated.

Her weapon drawn, Andrea moved forward. Greg remained close behind, his weapon sweeping steadily back and forth. The footprints led to a stairwell in the back of the school. Quietly, she followed them down, her heart slamming uncomfortably within her chest. She absently wondered if Greg's was doing the same. At the bottom, a set of wooden double doors came into view. She placed her ear to the door, but didn't hear anything. Careful not to make any noise, Andrea pushed it open, slowly and deliberately.

The flashlight's beam skimmed from left to right revealing dirt collected from disuse on the carpeted floor. From the numerous empty shelves, it appeared to have been a library. The air was stale, yet breathable. A windowless underground room allowed no light to enter. In the center of this room rested military cots and footlockers. The floor, near and around the cots, had been hastily brushed clear of debris. Andrea stepped completely into the room and inspected it. Then lighting the supplied lanterns, she placed them on the lockers.

"Appears okay, looks like the only ones in here recently were on our side. See what else may be in the footlockers," she said. "I'll go get the others."

When they'd followed her back down, Mykael and Richard sat on the cots, a look of relief on their faces.

"There's fresh food," Greg said. "I'll cook."

Andrea motioned Kasey to her side. "I'll have a look around, see what other goodies were left for us. Keep an eye on them for me."

Kasey grasped her elbow as Andrea turned to leave. "Try making it quick. You need sleep. You've had the least amount of us all," she said with a concerned look.

Andrea pierced her with a fierce look. "I know precisely what I need, Lieutenant." She immediately felt a pang of regret. Kasey released her arm as if the contact burned. A chill settled in Andrea's chest when a silent Kasey walked away, her straight back the only sign of the hurt Andrea had caused.

Angry with herself, Andrea hurried out the doors of the room.

In her heart, Andrea knew Kasey was only concerned for her welfare. Kasey was a nurse and a friend. Andrea was surprised at her own tactless response. If she had thought before speaking, she could've handled the situation better. Why hadn't this been one of those times?

The answer obvious: Kasey's concern had been so evident on her beautiful face; and, deep down it scared--terrified--Andrea. For so long, she hadn't needed to care for, or be cared for by, anyone. If she had, then why did she feel so miserable, as if she'd created an unfixable rift?

Andrea hadn't wanted it to happen, the unexpected result of injuring Kasey, who wasn't a soldier hardened by life. Even if her time had different social issues, how do you sneak off ship and join foot soldiers, as Kasey had, if you didn't care about life? How else could she have adjusted, without complaint, thrust nearly a hundred years into the future and adjusting as if born to this time? With inner strength, that's how, and Kasey was loaded with it.

"I hadn't been issued a heart," Andrea mumbled into the emptiness surrounding her. Logic answered, *You had one once.*

Yes, once. Long ago, Andrea had loved and adored her mother and sister. She had a heart then; cared deeply--in her heart--for them. When they died, it had splintered into so many fragments, unrepairable, lost forever. Andrea couldn't care if Kasey worried about Andrea's physical and mental well being. "Once a marine, always a marine" was the motto. Emotion no longer existed, and Andrea couldn't allow herself to be trapped by feelings. Not by anyone. Not even for a woman as special and attractive as Kasey.

Could she?

A small, unnamable voice whispered in her head. *Oh, yes, you could, if you tried.*

Shaking her throbbing head, Andrea completed her inspection.

Minutes later, she returned to find the others eating a meal Greg had prepared. He handed Andrea a plate laden with a large portion. The first bite surprised her.

"When did they teach soldiers to cook?" she asked. Andrea hoped the levity would lighten the tension surging in the confined room; and hoped it would work on Kasey as the "I'm sorry," she couldn't say aloud yet. Kasey sat to one side of the room and said nothing. Not even a hint of a smile. If she left Kasey alone long enough, she'd come around. However, Andrea didn't want to wait. "I've inspected the entire school. Except for rats, we're alone." She glanced at Kasey, still silent and sullen. "We also have transportation," she added. "An M109 truck has been left for us. It's large and has the C double-F M markings painted on the side. It should, reasonably, let us go unnoticed for the rest of the journey."

Mykael brightened. "That's great news."

Andrea hated to impart the rest of the news, which would probably destroy Mykael's elation. She started out slowly, "Not exactly. You see, like the trip so far, it will not be the most comfortable ride you've taken. And it's so old there are no hover mechanisms to it, just old fashioned tires and pavement."

Kasey looked up with a half-smile, some of her usual personality returning. It pleased Andrea immeasurably. "I'll be designated driver," she said in a half-grin. "Andrea never did get the knack of shifting gears. She turned a small town into a race of albinos. Never saw so many white faces in my life."

Andrea gave Kasey a silent look of apology and simultaneous thank you for making up the charade. It was comments and responses like this that continued the impression that they'd worked together at great length previously. "I did not. The town survived," Andrea said. "Barely," Kasey snickered.

The others laughed dispelling some of the tension.

"If it's all right, Captain, I'll take first watch." Kasey placed her empty plate on the floor.

The coolness lacing her request, and the use of rank, told Andrea she hadn't been entirely forgiven. Not trusting her voice, Andrea nodded, her heart beating unevenly in her chest. She stared down at her plate, no longer hungry.

"I think we should all get some sleep," she directed. Andrea turned the lanterns down low and lay on an empty cot. Although exhausted, sleep eluded her. Hands cradled beneath her head, Andrea stared at the ceiling, her mind replaying the scene with Kasey.

Andrea knew she'd never get to sleep if she didn't apologize. She waited for the steady breathing of the others. Careful not to wake them, she got up and moved to the wooden doors. Slowly, she opened them and walked to where Kasey stood guard a few feet away.

KASEY DIDN'T ACKNOWLEDGE Andrea's presence but sensed her there. She couldn't figure out if it was a sixth sense, or simply an emotional one. Her whole body tensed with sensations that begged for release. Frustrated, she wondered why she'd been able to control these physical reactions before the time jump. Was it the jump or the simple fact that Kasey never truly wanted anyone in her life as she desired Andrea to be there? The sweet smell of Andrea, an essence all her own, had Kasey's emotions stimulated.

When Andrea stopped, just inches from her, Kasey's body and heart took over. Reaching out, she grasped Andrea by her shoulders and pulled her close. A groan escaped Kasey's lips before bringing them a bit roughly to Andrea's, her kiss fierce and hungry. Kasey felt Andrea stiffen at the onslaught. Then relaxing, Andrea returned the kiss with the same hunger. Kasey deepened the kiss when she felt Andrea's fingers tangle in her hair. Time stopped in the wake of her greed and thirst to extract every nuance, every taste from the lips beneath hers.

Breathless, Kasey grudgingly pulled away and held Andrea at arm's length. "I know I shouldn't have done that," Kasey said, her voice hoarse with passion. Andrea's eyes were wide, her face flushed, but she didn't move away. "Now you have reason to be angry with me."

ANDREA STOOD, QUIVERING and staring at Kasey. Words wouldn't come.

What could she say? This wasn't what Andrea had expected and was, in fact, the last thing she predicted.

Andrea only intended to make amends for her earlier sharp outburst. Feelings ran up her spine like the tingling from myriad pinpricks. Confusion warred with pleasure. Andrea didn't know why Kasey had kissed her right then, but her own lips ached for Kasey to repeat the kiss, to learn and feel more from those miraculous lips.

Her senses numbed, Andrea mumbled, "I'm sorry." She turned and walked back into the other room, her actions mechanical as she curled up in the blanket on the cot.

Adrift on a sea of emotions, Andrea tried to gather her thoughts. She meant to apologize, and had, even though Andrea couldn't remember for what. Was she sorry Kasey kissed her? Or had she been sorry for something else? The questions nagged, surged in her mind, relentless. The

replay of their kiss lulled her into a sedated slumber, warmed by the uncharacteristic yet glorious steady beat in her chest.

BILLY SCREAMED FURIOUSLY.

His Scepters had proven themselves more stupid than he'd originally believed. Each new task met with incompetence and failure. Barbarous Billy, Leader Supreme of the most powerful terrorist movement in the world, would have to do the job himself if he expected results; competent results, at least.

Faces filled with fear, Blades and Scat stood in front of him, trembling. Any other time it would've been amusing, but now it filled him with more anger.

"Again, you've failed me." Billy clenched and unclenched his fists to maintain a modicum of composure. "I should have you both killed for this fiasco."

Blades remained silent. Scat whined for a moment, and then gave a sick laugh. The response was expected. Billy knew Scat was insane and used it to advantage. Still, anyone else would have done the job with less satisfying results. As if physically pushed, they backed away when Billy rose to his feet. "What do you idiots have to say for yourselves?"

"Did as you asked, Billy," Scat answered hysterically. "Boarded the boat." His dark eyes glazed. "Killed 'em all."

Scat staggered with the blow Billy plowed into his jaw. "You fool," Billy yelled. "They were the wrong ones. You didn't even board the decoy boat. You found a damned fishing boat, Scat!"

Billy, revolted by Scat's sudden crying, turned away.

Blades wide-eyed stare met Billy's. "We had to leave. The militia arrived, Billy," he said. "I couldn't endanger my people. The Rollers were there." In expectation of a punch like Scat received, he flinched.

It didn't come. Instead, Billy wrapped an arm around Blades shoulder and gave it a pat. "Blades, Blades, Blades." Billy *tsked* and shook his head. "Of course you couldn't. You're their leader. What kind of leader lets family get arrested?"

Sweat trickled uncontrolled down Blades' face. This new approach was more frightening than violence. Billy knew it would be. Blades tried to smile, and when a poor excuse for one settled on his lips, the lower one trembled uncontrolled. "I didn't know what else to do, Billy."

"Of course, you didn't," Billy said quietly. Then, with lightning speed, Billy pulled his knife free and pressed the tip to the base of Blade's throat. "But, how do I educate the others. I can't let failure go unpunished." Billy shook his head. "My European representative doesn't give me this much trouble, nor my Middle East, Asian, or any of the others. How do you expect to run even a small section of the world without me watching over you every step of the way?"

Fear caused a lump in Blade's throat. He swallowed hard. A trickle of blood colored the knife when Blade's Adams-apple made contact. His eyes watered, and he blinked rapidly while gazing at the ceiling.

Engrossed in his little game, Billy became vaguely aware of Scat cackling with hysteric elation a few feet away. Just as quickly as he'd produced the weapon, Billy sheathed it, walked the distance to Scat, and slammed another fist into his jaw. Billy returned to his seat.

Raising hands upward in a supplicating gesture, Billy addressed them, his tone tight with anger. "All right, boys. Let them make their journey to the United Presidents. Our informant tells me they'll meet with hostility. Once they've completed their ineffectual mission, I'll be ready."

"But I thought we had to stop them before they reached the United Presidents?" Blades said in confusion.

"Your first mistake, Blades, don't try to think." Billy said. "There's more here than you could possibly realize. Let alone understand."

"Yes, Billy," he mumbled dejectedly.

"We have an ultimate goal not even realized by our informant, who believes he's so clever. You will soon see my greatest triumph. Now, I have a time traveler to help me in my cause."

"What do we do now?" Scat asked, his question spoken from lips split and swollen, a bruise beginning to color beneath drying flecks of blood on his chin.

"We go to Washington, D.C. and wait for them to come to us. Only this time," he said menacingly, "I'll handle every step personally."

Chapter Twelve

ANDREA WIPED THE last traces of sleep from her eyes as sounds of movement echoed around her. She felt rested, but far from relaxed. Every muscle cried out in protest to the tension left even after sleep. Slowly, it dawned on her that she hadn't been wakened to stand watch.

Obviously, Kasey meant her to get as much rest as possible, despite her own earlier complaint; or Kasey didn't want to confront her after giving the heated kiss last night. With difficulty, Andrea pushed those memories to the back of her mind, unable--unwilling-- to let them confuse her. Nevertheless, they did confuse her.

Warm smiles greeted Andrea from the others. "Good morning, people," she said, feeling a bit guilty about not pulling her turn on guard. When her gaze rested on Greg, a grin flashed on his face and settled in his eyes. She shifted her gaze to Kasey, who stiffened and gave her a defiant look. Andrea didn't know if the reaction stemmed from the acknowledgement she'd let Andrea sleep or that Kasey regretted having kissed her. Andrea couldn't chastise Kasey for either action, especially in front of the others. Instead, she inquired about breakfast.

"You'll have to settle for MRE's," Greg said. "Stuff last night was probably meant as a special treat."

Like any military person, Andrea knew what to expect from MRE's. It may stand for "Meals Ready to Eat", but they definitely lacked in the taste department. Andrea grabbed a dark green bag with the black word, "Turkey", stenciled on the front. She frowned for a second, knowing the bagged MREs were probably left from Kasey's time. "Captain Marlow had some things placed here for our use," she said. "There's even a computer. I'll see what information I can get from it, rather than from my ACRN."

"What are you looking for?" Richard asked.

"Anything that may help," Andrea said, not looking forward to sharing the information from Captain Marlow with the ambassador. She had no way of knowing how he'd respond to the news, knowing it could put them all in a--shoot first, ask questions later--situation; if they survived.

"How 'bout I keep you company? Always wanted to see an expert on one of those things," Richard said.

"That won't be necessary," she said too quickly. If they harbored any doubts to Andrea's reasons, her hasty reply confirmed probable suspicions.

Damn!

Kasey gave a sad shake of her head, "Might as well let the cat out of the bag now."

Andrea began slowly. "An alarm has been broadcast that Kasey and I have taken you both prisoner. I need to find out who authorized it." Richard's eyes grew wide in disbelief. Mykael paled. "If my suspicions are correct," Andrea continued, "the one who sounded the alarm may very well be our traitor."

"But why? What could they hope to gain?" Mykael asked, her brows drawn into a frown.

"The way I see it: A--if the Scepters find and hold you hostage, they have a bargaining tool." She didn't want to expound on the obvious probability they would be eliminated. "B--if the C double-F M finds you, the government and the Militia look good, kudos for a job well done. Either way, the suits have your whereabouts, good, bad or indifferent."

"What about Kasey, Greg and you?" Richard said.

With a shrug of her shoulders, Andrea said, "That's option C. Depends on who gets us first. My intention is to get to the Committee without intervention of either party."

Richard moved to stand beside Andrea. "A hope we can all wish for. Shall we see if we can unmask the traitor?"

Andrea shrugged. "It's your free time."

Minutes later, Andrea found what she was looking for. The computer she found proved to be archaic at best. It was an IKR 686 model still linked to the major networks. Most people never realized that the same master computer was the very same military brain that ran her ACRN.

"Big Brother" was everywhere. Andrea surmised the link had been necessary in a time before terrorists took over, a time when children physically went to school. Now children attended schools with links from the safety of their homes. What had started as a convenience for isolated areas quickly became a necessity for everyone. Andrea pulled up a menu, irritated with how slow the system ran from this machine, and then chastised herself for complaining. She was lucky they had a network, probably another courtesy of the friends who supplied the other items waiting for her. An eternity seemed to pass before the network link connected and the monitor flashed with the opening screen. It prompted her for the file she wished to access. Codes punched, her fingers deftly typing at the dusty keyboard, she entered the Central Militia Database, requesting information on the ambassador.

The screen cleared, the cursor blinked in the upper left-hand corner. On the Central Processing Unit, the green light fluttered, the requested data searched. In slow motion, the readout of the original ban appeared. It read:

Ambassador Richard Caughley and his associate, Official Mykael Hanako, were taken as hostages in a wild attempt to prevent the meeting scheduled with the United Presidents. The perpetrators of this crime are Captain Andrea Knight, with her second in command, Lieutenant Kasey Houston. Anyone knowing of their whereabouts should report them immediately to Official Mark Sherman, Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

"At least Greg isn't listed." Andrea sighed. "Maybe we can use it to our advantage."

"I guess Official Brodie was right. He suspected Sherman after that attempted bombing," Richard said.

Andrea's gut clenched, she knew the definition of that particular feeling. Instinct, and right now it warned her that this seemed too pat, too easy. *However*, she worried, *what if it was as simple as it seemed?* She never did get a good feeling around Sherman. Andrea remembered he had wanted her to avoid this mission, actually angry when she agreed to take the assignment.

Shaking off the doubts swimming in her head, Andrea logged off the computer. "We better get the others and leave, in case there's a trace on the bulletin we accessed. The sooner the better," she said.

The M109 had enough room to hold the gear from the basement, including two cots, while leaving plenty of room for walking space. They agreed to take turns sleeping, as even driving continuously, it would take forty-nine hours to arrive.

Placed on the driver's seat by their unknown helpers, lay a map with a suggested route highlighted and a plastic gas card for fueling. A red circle indicated their present position outside of the abandoned Barstow Air Base. Kasey studied the map from behind the wheel as Andrea sat on the passenger side. Ambassador Caughley, Mykael, and Greg safely installed in the rear compartment.

From their position in what used to be the gymnasium, Andrea noted the dark sky of night as they left the school. A solid wall of metal shielded her from those in the rear. Andrea wondered what the others would do to occupy their time.

As for her and Kasey, silence filled the vehicle's cab.

Neither attempted to broach conversation, knowing it would lead down a road they weren't ready to traverse; a path Andrea preferred to avoid, memories of last night too vivid.

Andrea touched a finger to her lips, slow and hesitant. The flesh felt invisibly branded, reminiscent of the warmth of Kasey's lips.

THE FIRST DAY passed quietly and uneventfully.

They stopped for the basic nature calls, and were quick in getting back on the road. Though speeds were no longer monitored, the damaged roads made driving too fast unsafe. Andrea ensured that they only stopped at the towns with the least destruction when topping the tank. As they traveled, she witnessed the devastation of too many cities. Only the smaller towns seemed relatively unaffected by the war waged between the Scepters and Civilian Militia. Most towns were abandoned, the people having moved to bigger cities for the better protection it allotted them. When they passed close to militia outposts, she worried they would be detained or picked up visually by a hidden RAL, and was relieved when they weren't. She knew this was partly due to RALs making too great a target for potshots, the pieces scavenged or sold on the black market. Her relief faded on the second day.

Despite Kasey's comment of being designated driver, Andrea and Greg took their turns so she could rest too. Greg drove now, Andrea beside him after relieving Kasey a half-hour before. Kansas City loomed before them. Even by the light of the day, it appeared dreary and uninviting. Buildings crumbled to the ground, desolate. The inhabited structures kept tenants prisoner, locked behind bars protecting them from outside influences. Daylight didn't make anyone safe. Instead, it gave Scepters a greater thrill to have their exploits open and visible, not shrouded in shadows of darkness. Except in Washington, D.C., where the Militia was in full force protecting visiting dignitaries and the Committee. There people were not captives in their homes.

Andrea shuddered. So much violence encircled life and there was so little reason for it. She was good at protecting civilians from these types of actions, quickly learning that combating violence with violence proved to be the best alternative. Did that make her the same as them? She knew it didn't. Andrea killed, as a last resort, in order to defend the country and the people living within. The Scepters killed for pleasure and the neurotic gratifications it gained them. A slender thread separated her from them. A line so fine it could snap and drop her into the same helter-skelter realm of killer, rather than defender.

Greg cursed and slammed his foot on the brake. The truck jerked to a stop. Andrea peered out the front windshield to ascertain the reason. It manifested itself in the form of a boy, maybe eight-years-old beneath the grime and tattered clothes, darting across the road a mere twenty feet in

front of them with a bundle cradled in his arm. Andrea scanned the area to determine the cause of his hasty flight. Four men darted after the boy from the corner of a building. Their filthy arm streamers flailed with the excursion.

Instinct kicked in. Andrea pushed the passenger door open and jumped from the vehicle. As she ran after them, she drew her weapon. Two Scepters had caught the boy, the remaining two going through the bag the boy carried. They all turned in her direction when Andrea approached.

"Ah. More fun boys," one said. Three stayed silent.

"Yeah. Fun for me," she said. Andrea noted they weren't carrying guns, but one clutched a knife. The speaker laughed at what he perceived as a joke. "You take on us men?" They all joined in the laughter.

"No men here. I'm going to dispose of garbage," She said, "Let the boy go."

The first man yelled. "Get her!"

Slowly, they began circling her. Andrea raised her pistol and fired at the hand holding the knife. The man screamed in pain. The knife dropped. She swung the pistol at the second man and fired twice, each bullet shattering a kneecap. He crumpled to the ground. The third man covered the distance between them. Glimpsing this attacker launching his entire body had Andrea spinning and ducking simultaneously. Foot extended, she kicked his ankle. The sudden impact caught him off balance. As he fell, she raised her elbow and slammed it into the base of his neck. He landed with a thud.

"Three down," she said, reinforcing the acknowledged number with raised fingers. She stared directly at the last man who still held fast to the boy. His earlier humor seemed replaced with uncertainty. Andrea advanced on him.

"Come closer and I kill him," he said over his loudly moaning men.

Andrea raised her pistol and aimed it at his forehead.

"I mean it, bitch," he shouted. He took a step back, dragging the boy. His gaze shifted off for a split second and focused behind her.

She twisted, dropped to a crouch, and fired. The third man, recovered from her elbow slam, toppled to the ground, blood seeping from the hole left by the bullet's entry. When she straightened, Andrea realized the boy's captor had taken advantage of her preoccupation.

He hadn't gone far, having to pull the resisting boy with him.

Again, she leveled the weapon. "Let him go and I let you go." Pausing, his gaze darted about the area. "Drop the boy and run, or I put a bullet through your head right now." Andrea advanced.

One step.

Two.

The man groaned in frustration. Andrea saw the violent trembling of his hands. With a small cry, he shoved the boy to the ground and ran. Her gaze followed his flight until no longer in her sight.

Then she moved to the boy, who was still huddled on the street where he'd been thrown.

Behind her, Andrea could still hear the pain filled screams of the two she'd wounded as she bent in front of the boy. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Eyes wide and staring, he didn't reply.

She extended a hand to help him rise. The boy stared at it with a horrified expression. Andrea didn't retract the hand. "What's your name?" she asked.

Silence.

"I won't hurt you."

Nothing. Not even a muscle twitched.

"Can I help you get home? Maybe to a CFFM outpost?" she said, knowing they couldn't actually show their face anywhere near the militia.

His face contorted into a grimace of disgust.

Finally, movement, she thought. Andrea raised an eyebrow. "Not a good idea, huh?" She crouched and put herself at eye level with him. "Which part didn't you like, home or outpost?" The sound of running footfalls distracted him from answering, if he would have responded this time. Certain it could be more Scepters attacking, Andrea spun around, shielding the boy with her body.

Relief flooded her at the sight of Kasey. "I missed the fun," Kasey said dryly. "Are you all right?" "Yes." Andrea said.

Kasey frowned before continuing. "Would this be a good time to remind you we're fugitives?"

"Not really."

"Who's the kid?" Kasey nodded toward the boy.

"Don't know, wouldn't give me his name. I don't want to leave him here, but--"

"Let me try." Kasey towered over the small form. She must have realized how imposing the posture was when the child shuddered violently. "Calm down, kid. I'm a nurse, usually," she whispered, crouching. "What's up, Doc? You hoyt?" Kasey asked in imitation of the *Bugs Bunny* cartoons from her childhood. He grinned and shook his head in the negative. "Can you tell me why those men where after you?"

The boy hesitated and Andrea concluded he was too scared and wouldn't talk to anyone. She felt taken aback when he did speak.

"W-wanted my food," the child said.

Andrea remembered the bundle he'd carried during his flight. It still lay where it had fallen during the attack. Andrea retrieved it. The wounded Scepters were pulling themselves to safety--any direction opposite of hers--and she ignored them. She hauled the boy's bag over a shoulder and went back to Kasey.

"Here," she said handing it to him. He clutched at it as if a lifeline. Andrea repeated her earlier question. "Can we take you someplace safe?"

He shook his head, answered with repulsion in his tone, "Not the outpost. They'll steal my food, too."

Shocked, Andrea and Kasey looked at each other.

"Why?" Andrea finally said.

"Shipments don't come no more. They steal our foods."

"You mean to tell me this city is without food?" she asked incredulously. "The militia is stealing from the general population?"

Kasey shook her head. "So the vigilantes have become terrorists themselves."

Perplexed by the information, Andrea felt at a loss. She and her group had to get out of here and back on the road; couldn't let themselves be noticed. She'd already spent too much time on this little boy's problems, but she couldn't leave him here and couldn't go to the militia outpost.

The same thoughts had occurred to Kasey, Andrea realized, as she questioned the boy. "Is there anyone to care for you, someone safe? Where were you going with your bundle?"

"Going to Aunt Jinny. She's sick." He pointed to a structure so ravished it looked like it would tumble to the ground any minute. "You help, you is nurses, wight?" he asked looking from Kasey to Andrea.

"We'll take you," Andrea said, not relishing the idea of leaving the boy and his sick aunt.

Hopefully, a resolution would present itself soon.

"My med kit is in the truck. Maybe Richard or Mykael can help out," Kasey said. "They should know about this, at least, for their big meeting."

Andrea recalled the others were still with the truck, in broad daylight and very much in the open. She glanced around and noted a large breach in the toppled structure next to the building the boy had indicated as his destination.

"Have Greg park the truck in there." She showed Kasey the opening. Kasey nodded and left. What other surprises awaited her on this mission?

Chapter Thirteen

"SHALL WE TAKE you home?" Andrea asked, extending her hand to the little boy. This time he took it and she gently pulled him to a standing position.

As she entered the structure, Andrea shuddered, revolted by the place the child considered home. He led her through a maze of fallen beams and damaged walls. It appeared they hit a dead end and she gazed at the boy in confusion. With a shrug, he bent and pulled a portion of plasterboard to the side. He entered after dropping to his knees and Andrea followed in the same manner. Inside, she felt the temperature change immediately. Any warmth from the day had been lost in the cubbyhole of the child's home, oppressed from entering by the dark shadows filling it. From a corner came a raspy voice. "Keith? Who's with you, Keith?" the voice questioned before halted by wracked coughing.

Andrea tried to see who spoke but couldn't see past the blackness.

Keith rushed into the corner. "It's me, Aunt Jinny. And a lady that saved me."

"Saved you?" Aunt Jinny said in horror, followed by another fit of coughing.

"Don't be afraid. I'm okay," he said.

Andrea walked to their side and glanced in their direction, unable to make out the woman sufficiently. She squinted and reached a hand to where she could sense the boy stooped and grasped Keith's shoulder. "Could you help show the others the way in? They should be right outside."

"But--" Keith stared at his aunt as worry blanketed his features.

"She'll be all right with me. I promise."

Reluctantly, Keith did as he'd been asked. Andrea waited until he was no longer in hearing range. She pulled a flashlight from her utility belt and flicked the beam on before she placed it on the floor, the light pointed upward. It cast a hazy glow in the room and on the woman.

Andrea realized she wasn't on a bed, but huddled in torn blankets on the floor. She knelt and grasped the woman's hand gently, felt the involuntary shudder. Jinny's sickness became evident in the sunken cheeks, pale skin stretched tight over the bones, and eyes surrounded by dark circles. Her heart clenched at the sight and Andrea squeezed the bony fingers in hopes of relaying her compassion. Keith's aunt looked so frail, so close to death. "You have a brave nephew," Andrea said, hoping the fear would disappear, even a little.

Jinny smiled.

The result made Andrea feel nauseous. Instead of warming the woman's features, it gave her the appearance of a skeletal wraith, alive yet dead. She wondered if that explained why she closeted

herself in darkness. Did she fear Keith would see the extent of her illness? Know how thin the wire suspending her between life and death?

She didn't have to wonder for long. From the hole, the others entered the area. Keith ran to his aunt's side, followed by Kasey, Richard and Mykael a step behind her. Andrea moved a discreet distance backward. Kasey bent close to the woman, but Richard whispered something to her, and she edged away. As he and Mykael tended to the woman, Andrea motioned Greg over. "Take any food and supplies we can spare and bring them here," she whispered, "lanterns and blankets especially."

He nodded and did as commanded.

Andrea walked to stand beside Kasey, who appeared to inventory the room, since dismissed from tending the woman. There showed little in the line of comforts; no stove for cooking, no television or radio for entertainment, and no obvious place to suggest bathroom accommodations. Just debris cluttered flooring. Richard, Mykael, and Keith worked on the ailing woman. She lay on blankets intended for the boy's bedding.

"You okay?" Andrea asked. "I wish the others could know about your nurse's training."

Kasey shrugged, "It's frustrating sometimes but I understand." She grimaced. "I thought the battlefield was hell, but boy, was I wrong. I can't believe my world will come to this."

She understood and felt Kasey's compassion, her disgust. "Not that it's any consolation, but most people from your time won't live to see this. As for Keith and his aunt, I can't take them with us, you know, but I don't want to leave them here. Not like this." Andrea leaned against the wall, immersed in thought. "Suggestions?"

KASEY SPENT ENOUGH time with Andrea to realize the question was rhetorical. On the other hand, what good would she be as second in command, or as a friend, if she didn't attempt to assist in solving this dilemma? She reasoned there were two distinct issues. They couldn't spend much longer in this city without someone finding them. Nor could they leave a dying woman to her fate or a little boy to fight alone. The militia, no longer a sanctuary, was out of the question. Were the militia the same in towns further east? There could be no way of knowing and they couldn't take the chances required in finding out.

Options fluttered in her mind, each one depending on one aspect. She couldn't decide on any of them until Aunt Jinny's health issue was established. Kasey moved forward, toward the woman in question, and thought she witnessed a green light hovering around them. Her own heart beat erratically as she remembered the grey mist that brought her to this time, and how Billy threatened her with return whenever the mood pleased him. Was she ready to transport back to her original time? *Hell, no* screamed in her head.

Keith jumped back and knocked over the flashlight, and the room's shadows danced wickedly. Taking her gaze off the boy once he'd attached himself to her side, Kasey settled her attention on Richard kneeling beside Jinny. Kasey no longer saw the greenish light. Wasn't sure she had in the first place. She continued her approach, curious and cautious. Richard rose to meet her.

"She'll be fine," Richard said.

"What did you do?" Kasey asked, staring at the woman. The death mask she wore moments before, replaced with fatigue. All signs of her near death illness were gone. Granted, this was a different time, but she didn't think medicine had advanced that far, even with the laser scalpel. She also remembered Billy's remark to beware of Richard and his true motive. Though Kasey knew it was unwise to trust Billy, Richard continued to perplex her enough to be very wary. Richard hesitated in answering and Kasey glared at him in expectation.

"The healing power of prayer," was Richard's calm answer.

Kasey shot another look at Jinny. "Some prayer."

"Yes, it is."

Kasey wanted a better explanation, but decided against it. As one problem was solved, Kasey cared less about the how and more about how to use the achievement. "Can she travel?"

"I don't see why not. Where's she going?" Richard asked.

"Good question. I'll let you know when I have an answer."

Kasey walked back to Andrea, who helped Greg as he brought in supplies. They began by gathering all the dirty blankets and leaving the clean military issued ones in their place. She could see Andrea's startled surprise at the change in Jinny and wondered how she'd respond when she told her what she saw. *Probably be as confused as I'd been*, Kasey mused. *Maybe I should tell Andrea what happened with Billy*. Just as quickly, she dismissed the idea. Andrea had way too much to handle already. As if the thought were a beacon, she could feel the pain building in her head. Could almost hear her name called.

With the soiled blankets taken to the outer area, lanterns lit to provide light, she heard Andrea order Greg to break out more MRE's.

They ate in silence. The room was brighter, but remained cold. Shadows barely held at bay by the light hovering around them, as if it still tried to stretch and shroud them in its grasp.

Richard, the first to break the quiet, made a hesitant suggestion. "I know of a church close by that would be willing to take in Keith and Jinny." No one spoke, as the comment came as too startling to everyone. "I know what all of you are thinking," Richard said.

"I doubt it," Kasey mumbled.

The ambassador laughed. "Okay, Lieutenant, I didn't mean it literally. What I meant to do was make a joke, lighten the mood. Historically, churches were the first places used as sanctuaries. Look at the tale of the Hunchback and the Gypsy."

"We aren't hunchbacks." Keith frowned. "Whassa gypsy? We not those, is we Jinny?"

"No, you're not," Mykael answered, then grinned reassuringly at Keith.

"We're close enough," Jinny said quietly. "No real home, travel to hide."

"Will they take Jinny and Keith?" Andrea asked seriously.

"They will," Richard said.

"But I wanna go with you," Keith said, shaking Kasey's sleeve.

Kasey lifted the boy and placed him on her lap. "You can't. It wouldn't be safe, Keith." She squeezed the boy's nose playfully. "We have to go see a bunch of stuffy old men. I don't even want to do that," she finished and stuck out her tongue like she was gagging.

Keith laughed. It sounded good to hear that response from the boy. Kasey knew they all could use the sound of laughter, hear the innocent joy and let it dispel the worries in each of their hearts. She achieved it again by tickling Keith's belly. The boy wiggled and twisted, his chuckles surrounding them within the room. The others began laughing too. Kasey stopped when Keith began to breathe heavily, and just let the boy latch on her.

ANDREA STOOD. "I hate to put a damper on this, but we have to get going," she said. She addressed Greg. "Please reload these supplies for them. They'll probably need them at the church."

When everything was reloaded and Keith and Jinny put in the back of truck with Richard, Mykael and Greg, they drove away. Andrea wondered what to do about the militia problem in this area.

Simple, she concluded, we solve the Barbarous Billy situation and the rest would resolve itself. At least she prayed it would happen that way. *Maybe I should get Richard to pray on this matter.* The odd wish troubled her, remembering the dramatic change in Jinny. If his prayer had such an impact, what did he need her for?

Only a few miles from reaching their intended destination, Andrea noted more and more militia posts as they closed in on the city. She absently wondered if they were in the same condition as those of Kansas City. It wasn't a pleasant thought. Her consolation was that Jinny and Keith, now safely with the people Richard had recommended, wouldn't have to worry about the problem again. That fact allowed her to concentrate on the new task, getting into the city without detection and ridding herself of Ambassador Caughley and Mykael.

"I think we should pull over, Kasey," Andrea said. "The two of us will be recognized immediately. The militia won't identify Greg as one of us and should let him drive through easily enough. If the RALs are working here, the license plate isn't identifiable with us."

"We hope." Kasey pulled into an empty area, free of traffic and prying eyes.

Leaving the vehicle's cab, they moved to the rear, opened the door, and had three occupants looking at them expectantly.

"Have we reached Washington, D.C.?" Ambassador Caughley said.

"Almost." Andrea motioned for Greg to exit. When he stood before her, she addressed him, but spoke loud enough for the others to hear her plan. "You need to drive into the city. They don't know you and, hopefully, haven't been alerted you're with us, since you aren't in the bulletin. You shouldn't be stopped, but we can't know for certain. Just do your best at improvising for whatever situation may arise."

With a smart salute, he replied, "Yes, ma'am, point of termination, Captain?"

After a glance at the others, she said. "I think the Gateway Marriot. We could all use a shower, fresh clothes, and a complete night's rest. In a real bed," she added with a quick wink to Mykael.

"Yes, ma'am," Greg said with a grin. "You can count on me."

"I know I can," Andrea said seriously. Then she and Kasey moved into the rear of the truck. Once again underway, Andrea sat beside the door, ready should Greg encounter any problems. The vehicle lumbered down the road for quite awhile before coming to a stop. It lasted longer than it would take to wait for a traffic signal. Her nerves grew taut in anticipation of difficulty. Beside her, Andrea sensed Kasey expected the worst, too, as her body had gone rigid.

Briefly, Kasey's thigh grazed hers when joining her at guarding the door. Andrea could feel the well-toned leg as it contacted hers, sending warmth through the material. Once settled, Kasey shifted and Andrea felt a loss she couldn't immediately explain.

Minutes ticked by, but the door remained sealed. The tension of expectation hovered thickly in the air, nearly tangible. After what seemed an eternity, the vehicle began to move again. They drove another few minutes before noting the truck made a short trek downhill leading to parts unknown.

Again, the truck stopped. This time, they could hear the engine shut down. The sound of the cab door opening and closing echoed strangely, the occupants in back left wondering where they had stopped. Then, the outside latch lifted. Battle poised, Andrea and Kasey crouched in defensive readiness.

When the door finally swung open, only Greg stood outside. He smiled at the sight of them ready to launch at him. "Sorry it took so long," he said, wiping away the last traces of humor.

"What happened?" Kasey asked. "Stopped by the militia?"

"Nah," Greg said with a shake of his head, "didn't look twice. I drove up to the hotel, went inside and got us some rooms." He grinned, as if pleased with himself. "I figured it best to enter through the maintenance area, fewer people to mark our coming."

A laugh escaped Andrea as she looked around, noting the surroundings. He'd parked in an underground servicing area. "When I said-- improvise--I had no idea you'd do it so well."

Greg fairly beamed from the compliment.

Andrea turned to the others. "We have real and, presumably, more comfortable accommodations, courtesy of Corporal Mitchell. Let's go."

With Andrea at point and Kasey taking the rear, they made their way to the elevators and the rooms Greg procured. Though Andrea didn't know how, or care to question it, he'd obtained two adjoining rooms. She, for one, welcomed the comfort they were about to indulge in.

THE SPACIOUS ROOMS were more elegant than Kasey had imagined. "Nice," she said, then whistled softly. Two double beds occupied the interior, along with a couch, a small table with two chairs, and a low dresser with a television set, certainly a plus from Kasey's perspective, facing the beds.

All five of them entered the room and the door automatically secured behind them. First thing, Kasey moved to the door separating the two rooms. With a sharp twist to the handle, Kasey entered the second room. Except for the objects placed in reverse positions, identical to the first. "Ladies should occupy one room, the men the other." Richard and Greg quickly escaped to the adjoining room.

"So, what's next?" Kasey asked Andrea. She realized, with some discomfort, they hadn't spoken much in the last two days. When they had, Keith had been the main reason they did. Kasey sadly missed their normal conversations and the ease in which they usually conversed. *It all ended with that damn kiss at the school.* Even if she regretted the current outcome, Kasey didn't regret the kiss had happened. It was unexpected, no fault of either. It just happened; and she couldn't take it back even if she wanted to, which she definitely didn't. The last days of strained silences gave her plenty of time to think, though Kasey remained as confused as she had at the beginning. If Kasey relied on a military thought process, then what happened between her and Andrea was totally unacceptable. However, the kiss hadn't come from Lieutenant Kasey, it came from Kasey the woman, desiring another woman. Her woman.

The possessive thought disconcerted Kasey. *Andrea is my superior, not my woman,* she chastised silently, wondering when she started thinking of Andrea in such ego laden terms? *In my time, I'd barely be able to think the attraction I feel.* Andrea's an individual and definitely a loner, and would never amend her lifestyle. Not even for Kasey. Something stronger urged Andrea on and Kasey couldn't be sure she knew all the reasons. Would she ever understand?

Kasey knew it would be worth it, in the end, and wanted to give it a shot. Then, maybe, she could work on a new beginning, where Andrea really could be her woman, where they could acknowledge feelings openly. Would it be worth it? As she asked herself the question, Kasey darted a quick look in Andrea's direction. She was talking quietly with Mykael. Something the woman said made Andrea grin.

The answer hit Kasey like a punch in the jaw. She rubbed her chin as though physically hit. Yes. Andrea would be worth taking quite a few punches. Was she expecting too much from this future, from Andrea? The question made Kasey scowl.

Chapter Fourteen

ANDREA SAW THE frown on Kasey's face. It seemed like a number of emotions had flicked across her Second's features before settling on what appeared to be despair. She attributed them to doubts about their next step in getting Ambassador Caughley to the United Presidents meeting. She didn't want to think about the future right now, even if that future was tomorrow. Or was Kasey rehashing more intimate thoughts, memories? Knowing would put them back on shaky ground. So instead, Andrea decided to avoid personal altogether and feigned not noticing Kasey's scowl.

"We'll get cleaned-up and get plenty of rest," she said. "We'll forego the standard watch, but sleep lightly just in case. Have Greg order up some food, too, when he's done showering. I'll credit his DataCard later."

"Andrea," Kasey said hesitantly. "I know you said Sherman hadn't included him in the bulletin..." She appeared doubtful about finishing.

"Go ahead, Kasey," Andrea said.

"What are the chances they're monitoring his DataCard usage? You told me it holds all personal information, right?"

Andrea sighed, angry for not recognizing the point herself. "How could I have overlooked that? I expect they're aware of our presence at this very moment."

"Do we continue to stand watch then?" Kasey asked.

"No, not beyond being wary as usual," she said. "Most probably, neither Sherman nor Brodie will do anything tonight. They'll want to prepare a full force, and they will come, rest assured, as they won't want to make another obvious mistake."

Kasey nodded. "Check out the information first in case of another decoy?"

"I admit I'm guessing. Either way, we won't be any good to Richard and Mykael on the little rest we've had. You and I definitely need sleep."

"Richard and I have been able to sleep in that M-thing," Mykael, said. "Would you like us to remain awake? We could wake you if we thought something was wrong."

Andrea felt surprised and touched. The reaction was uncharacteristic to most people she'd known, let alone dignitaries. With a reassuring smile, she replied, "Thank you, Mykael.

However, I really do think it unnecessary."

Richard quickly responded. "How can you be so sure? You admitted guessing. What about Billy?"

"I have to go on assumptions," Andrea said, surprised the man had been listening. "I do know Billy let us continue unhampered since the freighter. I think that when he tries something it'll be at the meeting, not here. If Sherman is the traitor, he'll go along with Billy's demands. If he isn't, then he and Brodie will need time to figure out what to do next about keeping me in line, and regaining custody of the two of you. They'll be going on the supposition that I'm unaware of the bulletin, and so will turn you over into their care," she said honestly, knowing most was guesswork.

"But you won't?" Richard said.

"No, sir, I will not. Not until I feel safe doing it."

Richard stared at her for a moment.

"With all due respect, Ambassador, I believe it would be a mistake to turn you over right now. Until we have a better understanding of all the facts, your safety can't be assured with anyone. You've a better chance with us," she said. New tension filled the room. Andrea wondered if they doubted her ability to complete the mission with their lives intact.

Greg emerged from the bathroom, his hair damp, his skin smelling of soap and fresh clothing. Unaware of the tension building, he walked to the computer. "I should order something to eat. It's easier to sleep on a full stomach. Is that all right, Captain?" he asked.

"Yes." She watched as he punched up the code to the hotel kitchen. He twisted the screen so it wouldn't show the rooms occupants to whoever answered. After placing an elaborate order, including dessert, and running his DataCard through the scanner to pay, he signed off, and powered off the monitor.

Andrea, impressed he'd had the foresight to shield them from the view of prying eyes, hesitated to compliment him for fear of embarrassing him. Instead, she flashed a smile and hoped he'd understand her gratitude and pleasure.

By the time they'd all taken turns getting clean and changing clothes, the food arrived. Soon after, the lights switched off and they each nestled comfortably beneath the crisp, clean linen. Except Greg, he'd fallen asleep in the men's designated room before the others had even finished eating. Never once did he complain. She wondered if Greg would opt for another command, or if he'd be content to follow her after this assignment.

Later, while she stared at the ceiling, hands cupped behind her head, Andrea tried to think about her next move. They certainly couldn't be there in the morning when Sherman's or Brodie's team arrived to pick up Ambassador Caughley. She had to get him to his destination, this Presidents' meeting, for whatever reason. Her gut instinct told her she could only trust herself to accomplish that end. Andrea hoped the assumption proved valid and not false confidence.

Still, Andrea did question her own motives. Once she had Richard safely in the hands of Brodie and Sherman, her mission would technically be done. However, Andrea felt there was more to this than she'd been told or understood. What exactly was Richard's reason for speaking before the United Presidents?

And why did Billy see him as a threat?

MYKAEL'S ODD SILENCE bothered Andrea. The woman's eyes seemed strangely distant and numb. The only thing Andrea could surmise was concern for Richard's safety, along with their hasty retreat from the hotel. Maybe Mykael didn't like Richard's sudden knowledge of the location change. Andrea certainly didn't care for it, no matter how adamant he was in his assurance to be trustworthy. What worried her most was that Kasey was more guarded around Richard, glaring at him when he spoke as if gauging every word, and hardly letting him out of her sight.

Again, Greg drove, delivering them to their final destination. Luckily, they stopped on a small street just half a block from the White House. Streets deserted, thanks to terrorist activities, their appearance on the scene went unnoticed. The five cautiously made their way toward a deserted building, a small bar called *The Wetted Whistle*, which at one time catered to the city's working populace.

Once inside, Andrea addressed them. "We'll be going in through a tunnel." Eyes, full of questions, stared back. "If I remember it correctly, it's an old tunnel used by the Central Intelligence Agency. Rumor has it that this was constructed as a parallel system that ran

alongside an existing tunnel to the White House. The original tunnel was to be used for evacuating the President in a crisis, and it's said the CIA used it as an access to kill President Winslow when he thwarted their plans for gaining more control in the White House. Since the abolishment of the CIA the year after, with other political groups such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the possible secrets are long since forgotten. The tunnel we're going to use was supposed to be the decoy. Most recently, the tunnel allowed female guests of Defosset to enter without alerting the rest of the nation to his nightly activities, which were peculiar, from what I've heard."

"Whoa," Greg said. "This is like a spy movie from a late night TV show."

"How did you become aware?" Richard asked. "Do we know someone won't be waiting?"

Andrea shrugged. "Like the rest of this mission, Ambassador, I can't be absolutely sure of anything. At one time, there was a manned security desk at the end where the tunnels met. I couldn't say if the desk is still active, but I'd bet the cameras are still set and that our presence will trigger them. However, in answer to your first question, I learned about it from the general."

"Which General?" Richard asked, his light green eyes filled with confusion.

Realizing and hating the slip, Andrea cleared her throat and answered, "General Knight, my father." Memories of him flooded her mind--none of them good. Her voice wavered for a moment, but Andrea brought it under control. "He was on staff then and privy to a lot of secrets. I learned of them because I was in his unit, for a time, and needed to know for an assignment."

Mykael spoke for the first time since last night. "But won't the others in your unit be aware you'll use it as an entrance for emergency purposes?"

"There are only three of us left from that unit: the general, Marlow, and myself. That brings the odds more in our favor. Not to mention that the general is more tightly lipped about these types of secrets.

They moved to an office in the back of the building. Andrea stood before a wall littered with pictures of people, each originally taken from the main bar room; the employees--The Wetted Whistle logo on their left breast pocket--and favored guests smiled at them.

She bent low and ran her fingers over the woodwork until she made contact with the strange circular lump hidden from sight. She pushed it. The latch clicked and part of the wall swayed inward, revealing a tunnel three feet in width and four feet in height. Andrea gave a quick glance over her shoulder. "It will be a tight squeeze, people, so is everyone ready?"

When none replied in the negative, Andrea entered.

Years of disuse had made the tunnel's air stale. Cobwebs coated the walls and floors. Small mercury lights illuminated the interior, and Andrea vaguely remembered it attached to the main generator at the other end. The scraping of shoes on the concrete interior let Andrea know the others followed. For the most part, the floor stayed level, but Andrea could tell they had gradually been sloping downward. Even after discovering this access, Andrea had never gone through to its end. Now she wondered how it would eventually bring them into their destination, an old structure that used to be a museum, with such a gradual decline. The answer appeared before she finished the silent question. In front of her gaped a large hole; however, closer examination revealed a shaft, which dropped straight down, a ladder attached to the inside wall. After ensuring the others were together, she positioned herself for the descent. The shaft didn't have lights, but some filtered from the top and below, making the footholds easy enough to see and maneuver. Once at the bottom, she waited for the others to follow.

Andrea glanced around her. She noted the passageway was bigger at this point, eight feet in height. They wouldn't have to walk the rest of the way stooped over.

Mykael and Kasey were the last to come down, and Andrea watched their progress, moving closer in case they needed assistance. Preoccupied, she didn't hear the approaching footsteps until Greg pulled his weapon and motioned them into silence. Kasey had stepped off the last rung when Andrea pulled her weapon free, and moved in front of the others.

She saw a man walking from the tunnel's end. Dressed in battle fatigues, he wore a military crew cut that made the grey more pronounced, his features stern and cold. "It took you long enough, Captain," he said.

Andrea felt the color drain from her face. Her soul felt frozen and empty. "General." She made the one word carry her emotions. Hate, disgust--and fear.

General Knight curled his lip in distaste. He moved forward to cover the remaining distance between them. Without explanation or provocation, he slapped Andrea soundly across her cheek.

"Wait Kasey," Greg whispered.

"Back off, Corporal, or I'll--"

Andrea heard the whispers, noted Greg holding Kasey tightly by her arm. She raised her own hand to halt Kasey from moving any further. Andrea tasted the blood in her mouth, but managed a cynical smile. "So good to see you, too, General."

"Do you realize the harassment I've had to endure when that damn bulletin came out? When my colleagues recognized the very same Captain Knight was my daughter?"

"How very bad for you," Andrea said sarcastically.

A crimson color painted his harsh features. "You have no idea."

As if only now aware of the others, he crooked his attention from her to them. "I suppose you're the ambassador we've all been waiting for?" he said to Richard. "Council will be pleased to know you're unharmed." He whipped his gaze back to Andrea. "Despite Captain Knight's attempts otherwise."

Richard's expression took on a look Andrea had never seen before. In view of his calling, she hadn't believed he could show such anger--hatred--actually. He replied in strained tones. "Your daughter," he addressed the General as if he was unworthy of an explanation, "has kept me from premature death."

"Both from terrorist violence, and your own militia's incompetence," Kasey said angrily.

Noticing the man was about to interrupt, Kasey hastily continued, "Don't explain how it's her job, she's done that on enough occasions to suit even you, I suppose. You're as barbaric as the damn terrorists are. Nice homecoming, General." Kasey finished caustically.

General Knight's left cheek twitched at the remark. "I'll be damned if I'll give any justification for actions toward my own daughter. Definitely not to a subordinate I don't know or remember."

He dismissed the presence of the others by only speaking to Andrea. "The United Presidents' will meet in three hours. Let's see if this ambassador of yours has anything worthwhile to share.

Then, I'll personally take care of you. Follow me. We've a secure room waiting." Raking his gaze over her appearance, he added, "And get into a proper uniform, Captain." He did a precise military about-face and strode down the tunnel's corridor.

Andrea watched his retreating figure. Inhaling a deep breath, she motioned for the others to follow, making her way after her father. Thoughts and emotions ran wildly through her head.

She'd always known there was no love lost between the two of them, but she'd never been assaulted in front of anyone else before, especially people she cared about. It humiliated and enraged her to the very core. Not that Andrea wasn't used to physical violence from her father.

That had always been part of their family's relationship.

The distance covered in reaching the room General Knight mentioned was relatively short. Once inside, he suggested they make themselves comfortable while he procured decent attire for them. As the door closed behind him, the others began to relax a bit from the tension brought on by the recent reunion of father and daughter.

Kasey moved a hand toward Andrea's face and tried to wipe away the blood that spilled from the corner of her mouth. Andrea stiffened immediately and gently pushed Kasey's hand away.

"Please," she said. "I'm all right."

"He'll pay for that," Kasey said quietly, handing her a neatly folded handkerchief.

Andrea knew nobody had missed the tone Kasey used. She glanced around the room to hide her discomfort at the compassion from her Lieutenant, which was getting harder to pretend didn't comfort her. Executive chairs and a portable bar with a sink were the room's furnishings. She hastened to the bar, wet one end of the handkerchief, and applied it to her mouth. All Andrea wanted now, strongly desired, was to find a hole and crawl in it. The looks of pity she received made her uncomfortable. She tried to avoid looking at everyone, especially at Kasey, anger and hurt danced in her eyes, contorting her beautiful features.

Chapter Fifteen

KASEY WATCHED ANDREA carefully, sensing her withdrawal and at a loss as to how to help. If only the others hadn't been there, General Knight would have paid for his actions with more than words, though she wasn't certain how she would have accomplished that feat. She could tell from Andrea's response--or lack of one--it wasn't the first time he'd hit his daughter. He probably didn't realize it would be the last. As long as Kasey lived--in this timeframe--she vowed the old man would never touch Andrea again.

She watched Andrea open a bottle and pour herself a drink. The embarrassment and hurt she saw in Andrea's eyes nearly ripped Kasey's heart out. Andrea quickly masked it. Kasey's anxiety grew as Mykael walked to the bar.

"Is there another glass?" Mykael asked.

Andrea pulled one from the shelf.

"You take quite a slap," Mykael said lightly.

The glass Andrea retrieved for Mykael paused above the bar's top. At first, Kasey felt surprised by the remark, as abuse wasn't acknowledged aloud in her time. Then, she realized Mykael's attempt to lighten the tension with humor. Kasey was inwardly relieved that not all changes in the future--her future--were negative ones. However, only one change would be a welcomed one for Kasey: Just once, she wished Andrea wouldn't be so hasty to respond negatively to her touch and would simply accept the comfort offered, without expecting that there were strings attached.

"SLAPS ARE NOTHING." Andrea flashed a smile so wide the inner wall of her cheek started bleeding again. Self-consciously she dabbed at her mouth. "Comes with the territory," she said, lifting an eyebrow.

Mykael nodded. "Anyone else for drinks?"

"I'd like one," Richard said.

"Me, too," Kasey and Greg added, simultaneously.

Drinks in hand, they moved the chairs and sat together in a circle, the conversation stopping as they drank. A woman entered with fresh clothing and showed them to an area where they could clean up and change. An hour later all five were reunited, and the tension changed once more, from personal to professional. Greg, Kasey, and Andrea checked their weapons, while Mykael and Richard sat quietly in prayer.

"It's almost time, Ambassador," she said. Andrea didn't want to interrupt the last few minutes he had to prepare, but needed to get a few details ironed out. "I know the general." She sighed, aware how ludicrous the statement was for her to make, but forged on. "He'll insist his men guard you. Given the delicacy of the situation, I think it unwise. We can't be sure of his men since we have no idea where he got them."

Mykael crossed her arms defiantly. "I don't trust him or his ethics."

Andrea paused, unsure if she were putting nails in her coffin. How would Richard take her suggestion? Would he use this opportunity to rid himself of her protection? "I'd feel much better if you would insist Greg, Kasey and I guard you for this last phase of your journey, sir."

Richard stared at her for a long time. Andrea didn't know what he expected to find written on her face. He flashed a quick smile. "I wouldn't trust anyone else with my safety but the three of you. And if you're all willing to put up with me for a little longer, I'd be honored if you'd be my personal guard tonight."

"Thank you, Richard," she said.

The door pushed open and General Knight stormed in.

"I'm here to escort you to the United Presidents' now," he said. "The others can wait for you in the back of the room. They'll hear your speech while staying out of the way of my people." He turned to leave, expecting they would obediently follow.

"Just a moment, General Knight." Richard stood, hands resting on his hips. "I already have my guards. They will be with me."

The General spun around and glared at Richard. "I don't think you understand, Ambassador. They are outlaws with the militia, and until charges are dropped, it wouldn't be good for you to be seen in their company. My men will take care of your safety."

"I decide who best meets my safety needs." Richard edged closer to General Knight. Imitating the tone Kasey used in the tunnel, he forged on defiantly. "Unless you wish to see what misconduct charges I can bring about, I suggest you lead the way for me and my entourage. Do I make myself clear?"

General Knight's left cheek twitched again. "It's your life," he said.

"Yes, it is. This way I keep it longer," Richard said, leading the way from the room.

Outside the main chamber, Andrea stopped them. Mykael gave Richard a hug and kissed his cheek. He smiled in acknowledgement. A cacophony of multiple dialects could be heard from inside. The dissonance made it difficult to understand actual conversation.

"Is everyone ready?" Andrea asked.

After they all nodded, Andrea opened the door and Richard walked to the center of the room, she and Kasey dogging his every step. Greg followed Official Hanako in much the same manner.

"The time has finally come. I only pray they hear and understand.

Sometimes, we need to go backward in order to move forward."

Richard prepared to address the United Presidents' council.

THE ROOM GREW deathly quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Richard said quietly, "Welcome."

Andrea had explained to Kasey that the equipment placed before Richard would amplify his voice; also, that the internal computer system of the conference room would translate his words and their responses into the respective native tongues.

"Mr. President, thank you for inviting me," Richard said, turning to the side. From the right, a man rose from his seat and walked to Richard. His ebony skin shined beneath the lights directed at the podium. He extended a hand and Richard clasped it in acknowledgment.

"Thank you for coming, Ambassador Caughley," President Granston said softly.

The front doors of the room swung wide. A maniacal laugh filled the air. Kasey could see figures filing in from the back of the room.

"Few are safe from my fury, Preacher." Billy walked forward, his men fanning out, weapons pointing toward all the dignitaries. "The rage of Barbarous Billy is far stronger than your God," he said, leveling a hate filled look at Richard. "You're about to find out first hand." Billy swung his gaze toward her, "Kasey, you've been avoiding me. Time working against you? I could help you with that, you know."

Movement caught Kasey's attention. Andrea.

AS BILLY MOVED closer to Richard, Andrea placed herself securely between them, her weapon poised and directed straight at Billy's heart. "Don't come any farther," she said.

"What are you going to do? Shoot?" Billy said. "Are you willing to risk my men killing even one of your precious delegates?"

"I'll do what I have to."

Billy laughed and nodded. "I bet you would."

"What do you want, Billy? You wouldn't have made a personal appearance unless you hoped to gain something."

With head tilted, he watched Andrea for a moment. "You're right. Definitely," he said. "I will gain something today." Billy paused. "Death." Billy poked a finger in her direction. "Yours included. You see," he added, turning to address the occupants of the room, "I've a little LTN just waiting to make a big bang." He turned back to Andrea with a hand over his mouth as if including her in a private joke. "One of those I salvaged from the 'Rock'. When I leave--BOOM--you die."

With long strides, he spun around and left the room. The Scepters followed him, closing and locking the doors from the outside.

Andrea had to think quickly.

It would take time for Billy and his people to move a safe distance from the blast area. Yet, he had to know they'd exit from the rear door, so why not seal that one, too? As she turned around, Andrea observed the door where they'd entered, was wide open. So, Billy expected some to escape and obviously didn't care. Why should he care? He would make his point while starting an International incident. Andrea frowned, remembering that Richard had assured her this meeting would be safe to attend.

Despite whatever, or whoever, lay on the other side, she had to get everyone out of there before the Nuke went off. "This way ladies and gentlemen," she shouted, voice raised loudly over the panic already taking place. Andrea saw Kasey grab Richard, and signaled Greg and Mykael to her. "Get him back to the tunnel, Kasey. I'll make sure the others get out. Direct the people to the tunnel as well, but don't travel all the way through, just far enough to be out of harm's way. Go."

Kasey's look shouted a silent objection, as did her stance. "That's an order, Lieutenant," Andrea said.

With Richard in tow, Kasey hustled toward her, anger flashing in her green eyes. "Just once, I'd like the opportunity to save your skin first."

Andrea involuntarily shrank back a step from the renewed fury in Kasey's voice. "Follow me!" Kasey yelled, hustling the others from the area. She stared after Kasey's retreating figure, in the rush of panicked bodies, leading the others away.

"Just once, I'd like to let you," Andrea said to herself.

Those of the United Presidents' Council hustled faster than she'd expected and in a short time, they were all out of the conference area. After the last one exited the conference room, Andrea followed, closing the doors behind her. She released the handle just as the blast ripped through the inner room. Andrea ran as fast as her legs would carry her.

She hadn't quite reached the tunnel before the aftershock rocked the entire structure, throwing her off her feet to land painfully on the floor. Remaining low until the final rush of air breezed over her and the last of the debris fell, Andrea waited. From her position, her arms covering her head from the fallout, one thought ran through her mind: General Knight was in charge of security. Why had he let this happen? He knew what Billy was capable of. He'd killed the dearest person Andrea cared about--their little sister, Marlee.

"Your own daughter, General," Andrea cried angrily into the floor. "He killed your nine-year-old daughter. Do the women in your family mean so little to you?" she asked in a husky whisper.

With the explosion's aftermath finished, Andrea dragged herself to her feet, her ears ringing.

Staggering a bit, she made her way around the chunks of plasticrete and charred remains of wood, furniture, and other articles destroyed in the blast. Andrea rushed to the tunnel. Many of the women were openly crying, the men shaking. Looking around for her companions, she noted the President of the America making his way toward her. "Is everyone all right, Mr. President?" His naturally dark skin seemed pasty, but he replied calmly, removing the handkerchief from its pocket and wiping his brow. "Yes, thanks to you and your friends, Captain Knight."

"It's our job to protect and serve, sir." She looked at him squarely. "Right now we need to do something about security. Any suggestions?"

"Not now. I'm smart enough to gather my own security let those people in, Captain. I do have a few men I can trust, at least long enough to transport us all to safety." He reached up and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I owe you my life, Captain. I don't take that debt lightly. Don't know how yet, but I'll repay it in any way I can. Remember that," he said, confirming it with a gentle squeeze of his fingers.

Andrea flushed. "Yes, sir, I'll remember, but what of your safety now?"

As his color returned, he frowned in thought. "I really believe the people involved will be more interested in your group. You need to get away from here. Let me worry about the others from here."

"But--"

"No buts, Captain. That's an order from your Commander-in-Chief." His gaze became distracted for a moment as he glanced over her shoulder, before he sighed in relief. "Besides, my trustworthy people have just arrived."

When Andrea turned, it was Official Sherman approaching them. "Sir, I really don't think that's a good idea," she said.

Official Sherman reached their position. His voice filled with concern as he looked at the President. "Sir, are you all right?"

"Quite, Sherman, Captain Knight's done a fine job of safeguarding our hides."
Sherman seemed to discern Andrea's character for the first time. "Captain Knight? Ambassador Caughley, is he safe, too?"
Andrea didn't keep the chill from her voice. "No thanks to your charming little bulletin."
"I did what I thought was best. For all involved," he said, before asking, "Where have you been since you arrived in town?"
She assumed he knew already, but decided to play his game out. "The Gateway Marriot. I'm sure your people were there this morning to retrieve Ambassador Caughley," Andrea said.
"I hadn't any knowledge of your whereabouts, Andrea. Neither did my staff," he said.
The remark surprised her for a moment. He'd appeared surprised by her news, but Andrea knew it could be a well orchestrated act. How could he not know? Greg used his DataCard and the people who issued the darn things could have easily traced it. She would have questioned Sherman further, but a militia unit's entrance interrupted her.
"We must take you to safety," Sherman addressed the President. Andrea began to move away, but Sherman clutched anxiously at her sleeve. "We need to talk, though, granted, not now. Get Ambassador Caughley and your team out of here. I'll find you later," he whispered urgently. Though Andrea didn't trust him, she consented.
Militia personnel were leading the delegates away. Quickly making her way through the throng, she located and joined her friends.
"Is everyone, okay?" Andrea asked. They all nodded. "Good. Let's take that tunnel and get out of here."
"Where?" Kasey asked.
"Hopefully, the last place they'll look." Curious eyes waited for her to verbalize the specific location. "General Knight's house," she said.
Andrea smiled as their shocked faces locked on hers.

Chapter Sixteen

ONCE THE TRUCK stopped, Andrea and Kasey did a quick check of the area before letting the others out. The area appeared free from any signs of violence, the front yards well tended and the structures of the homes on the street intact.
"I guess there's a distinct advantage to having the general live in your neighborhood," Kasey said dryly.
"Guess so," Andrea added, "Let's see how much has really changed." She strode forward. Halfway up the sidewalk she turned to Greg. "Dump the truck someplace where it won't be found, at least not easily."
"Yes, ma'am." He rushed to complete the task.
As the truck made its way up the street, Andrea led the others into the enormous brick structure that was her father's house. Inside lights blazed, indicating someone was home and Andrea hoped it wasn't her father.
Memories of childhood flooded back the moment Andrea entered. From the hallway's marbled floor, the long carpeted stairwell leading to the second floor, and the massive oak doors to the

study that had always been off limits to them. Each detail sparked its own recollection, good or bad, as if physically attached to the items.

The hall led to the kitchen. Sounds of lids placed on pots and soft humming issued through the house from that room. With a smile, Andrea followed the noise, the others in tow. She knew her father wouldn't step foot in a kitchen, let alone hum. That left one other person. She reached the kitchen door. At the stove stood a heavyset woman, her grey hair tied back in a bun without a single hair straying.

"Bettina," Andrea whispered with excitement.

Startled, the woman spun around, nearly catching the skillet's handle with her elbow as she jerked her hand to her chest in alarm. Twinkling brown eyes narrowed on Andrea for a moment before the light of recognition dawned. "Andrea? Is that you?" Bettina cried large tears. Arms reached out as she darted forward and clasped Andrea in a warm bear hug. "It is you. My dear child," she crooned.

As if making sure Andrea wasn't an apparition, the old woman clung tightly. When Bettina finally released her, Andrea's reward was a gentle slap on the shoulder. "How dare you stay away so long? Well," she said, "I know why, but it doesn't excuse it nonetheless. You could've let me know you were okay. The only time I have news of you is when the general's in an uproar, ranting and raving about your--atrocious behavior--the only remark I can repeat. As if you do anything wrong," Bettina said with a sad shake of her head.

"As if I ever would," Andrea said, trying to appear devastated by the consideration.

Bettina chuckled and slapped her playfully again. "Ah, here I am, going on like a fool while your guests hide in the hall. Come in," she called, moving forward as if to personally escort each of them into the kitchen. "I was fixing a bite for the general, but he's hardly home for meals anymore. At least it won't go to waste now. Let me add to this. Sit and get ready to eat."

Andrea watched her bustle about the kitchen, checking the pot's contents, then the skillets, pulling out silverware and laying them on the table. Then Bettina paused, covering the newcomers in a blanket smile of warmth.

Andrea took the plates and placed them in front of the others as she introduced them. "Bettina, these are friends. This is Ambassador Richard Caughley, Official Mykael Hanako, and Lieutenant Kasey Houston. One more will join us as soon as he finishes an errand for me."

As if on cue, she heard Greg from the kitchen doorway, "Done, Captain."

She waved him closer. "Come, have a seat, Greg. Bettina, this is Corporal Mitchell."

Bettina smiled at each in turn. "Welcome, all of you. Now, please, eat."

After the meal, Andrea stood and said, "I'll be in the general's study for a bit. Bettina will get you settled into rooms for the evening." She glanced at Kasey and chuckled. "As far as I remember, the television works, so you can catch up on those late night shows you love so much."

"Oh, my favorite pastime, too," Bettina said excitedly, as she took charge of the group.

Andrea went down the hall to her destination, the general's home office.

The study gaped large and dark, from the bookshelves lining three walls, to the wood molding.

Even the curtains hanging over the room's only window were gloomy. *As dark as his heart*, Andrea thought with irony. The only redeeming feature in the room was her mother's carpet choice, its rose and powder blue floral design added cheerfulness amidst the gloom. Andrea was surprised that her father hadn't changed it. Could it be possible he loved at least one female in the Knight family?

With some trepidation, Andrea moved to the desk and sat in the large, dark brown leather chair. Two intimidating chairs faced her like torture devices, reminding her of the times she would sit

in them, the recipient of her father's demoralizing lectures and subsequent corrective discipline. She remembered his desk as the epitome of neatness and not the least bit surprised to find that still the case; not a paper or pencil out of place, not a speck of dust marred the shiny top. Sighing deeply, she looked through it for something that might help her understand what went on between him and Billy. Rifling through the desk drawers brought nothing of use. Just the usual papers: mortgage, military awards, marriage and death certificate of his wife, and the birth certificates of his children. The trashcan placed under the desk held nothing of use either. Depressed she hadn't located anything to link her father with the terrorist activity, Andrea prepared to leave and see how the others fared with Bettina when a knock sounded.

"Come in," she called.

Richard walked in, his gaze taking in each object in the room before resting on her. "I thought this would be a good time to talk to you. Alone."

"What can I do for you, Ambassador?" she asked, resting her elbows on the desk after indicating he sit in a chair.

"A lot's transpired in the last few days. You, along with Kasey and Greg, have done much in protecting Mykael and me. I think it's about time to explain some things to you. So you'll understand at least some of what's going on."

He stopped. When he didn't continue, Andrea spoke, "If it's something you'd rather not talk about, then don't. However, I believe you're hiding important answers that I should know."

"No, no, I'm not trying to get out of explaining things." Richard squirmed a little in the seat. "It's something I've had to do, but didn't know how to approach the topic with anyone. You see, it's rather complicated, and hard for most people to believe."

"Just try, Richard. We'll go from there."

He chuckled softly, before inhaling deeply to continue. "I'm not sure where to begin, though I guess I should start with why I picked you for this mission. You may not like what you hear."

If Richard expected a reaction, she didn't give him one. Andrea concluded long ago that something else was involved in his choice. She'd hoped to guess the motive on her own, but hadn't. His comment that she might not like his reason meant it had to be something personal. Curious, yet cautious, she listened.

"I know you're related to Billy. I had to see for myself if you were anything like him. And, I must say I'm pleased you aren't. What you might not know is that he and I have a bit of history that I can't get into right now. But I also know that I'm the only one who can destroy Barbarous Billy. Truly destroy him."

"Why only you? You've no military training. You'll get killed."

"Ah, there it is in a nutshell, as they say."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not sure I understand. You know you'll die?" At his nod, she blurted, "That's crazy."

"Andrea," he said, "It's true. Billy isn't what he appears any longer. He's totally evil now. Only I can send that evil into the darkness." He noisily cleared his throat. "Do you think I want to destroy myself?"

"Ambassador," Andrea said, a bit shocked and baffled. "The strain--"

"I know what I said. And I know, for your own reason, you feel a need to destroy Billy, but you can't. You're the one who'll be destroyed if you continue to pursue him."

"Why must you destroy yourself in order to destroy Billy?"

Richard peered at her with intense green eyes. "You'll understand when the time comes. Good night, Andrea." He opened the study doors and left.

Andrea as if rooted to the spot, unable to fathom the meaning behind his vague insinuations, wondered why she hadn't pressed him for answers. *Maybe because nothing he said would change my objective.*

A knock on the front door refocused Andrea to her present surroundings.

Bettina, followed by Kasey, came from the front room. A look of fear shadowed Bettina's features as she glanced toward Andrea and shrugged her shoulders to indicate she didn't know who it could be. With a nod from Andrea, Bettina opened the door.

"Yes?" Bettina said.

"I need to speak to Captain Knight," came the voice from outside. "I'm Official Sherman. She's expecting me."

Andrea moved from her spot by the study and placed a comforting hand on Bettina's shoulder.

"It's all right, Bettina. Come in Sherman."

He entered quickly. When the door closed behind him, he said to Andrea, "Don't worry, Captain. No one knows I'm here. I promise."

Kasey moved into the hall and stood beside Andrea as she asked him, "How did you know where we would be?"

"Actually, it's a wild guess. I tried to think how Captain Knight would," Sherman said with a shake of his head. "Wasn't easy, either, I can tell you."

"How'd you know?" Andrea said calmly, amused he admitted to limitations in the use of deduction.

"Like everyone else, I know you and your father don't get along. I thought you might use that to throw everyone off the track.

"Shall we adjourn to the study?" Andrea said, leading the way.

Returning to the seat she vacated only moments before, Andrea sat and pointed to the chairs in front of the desk for Sherman and Kasey. "Why have you come?"

Sherman shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The hard contours of his features seemed strained.

"First of all, to explain the bulletin I had sent out to all C double-F M units. I thought it the best move when you ran off with Ambassador Caughley, and weren't inclined to let us know." He looked at her, waiting for an explanation. She didn't feel a need to give one. Her silence prompted him to continue. "I had to take action on my own, in case you were the leak. I had no choice. The ambassador's safety was at stake."

Kasey snorted. "We can't be sure you're not the leak, Sherman."

"I realize that," he said. "But a lot has happened since then to change my mind about your possible involvement."

"What's changed?" Kasey said. "Just because you're trusted by the President, who resembles Louis Armstrong by the way, doesn't automatically make you a good guy."

Despite herself, Andrea couldn't help smiling at the comparison Kasey had made to the President and the jazzman of her era. Andrea wasn't convinced of Sherman's innocence either. He didn't appear to be lying, but he was a government official, after all, and well trained in hiding the truth behind a brilliant smile. His simply being in the house was dangerous for them.

Sherman's gaze centered on Andrea. "If you were a threat to Ambassador Caughley, he'd be dead or given to Billy." He pulled a piece of paper from his coat pocket and handed it to her. "And this wouldn't have been left for you."

"What is it?" Kasey asked.

"A request for Andrea to rendezvous with Billy. If she was on his side, he'd know how to reach her," he said to Kasey, "unless, of course, that's to throw me off track."

As Andrea scanned the paper, she frowned. The message requested she meet Billy at an appointed time and place of his choosing. It told her to come unarmed and alone, and that he would do the same. After reading it through a couple of times, she handed the paper to Kasey. "You shouldn't go," Sherman said. "It's obviously a trap to get you out of the way. But I also don't see another alternative."

Andrea paled slightly.

"How did you get this, Sherman?" Kasey said. The paper didn't prove the validity of Sherman's sudden change of heart. From Kasey's point of view, it made him appear guiltier.

"It came by way of messenger."

"What messenger?" Kasey asked.

"Attached to the corpse of the Sergeant sent to infiltrate the Scepters. Her body was deposited on the front steps of my home." A tear trickled from the corner of his eye as he added, "She was my niece, Julie."

"I'm sorry," Andrea whispered.

"The best operative I had. Though family, I couldn't let my fears ruin any chance that could possibly help us. We needed to learn more about them, as well as identify the name of our internal leak. Now, we'll never know." He shifted uncomfortably, adding, "Unless you meet." Nodding, Andrea said, "You're right, of course."

KASEY JUMPED FROM her seat, angered and scared by the compassionate look on Andrea's face when she heard Sherman's story. What better way to kill Andrea than to set up a secret meeting, helped along by telling her a sad story, which very well could be true? From the look on Andrea's face, the tale worked. A knot tightened in her gut. "Don't do it, Andrea. How do you know he's not lying?"

"I don't," Andrea said softly.

A shocked expression crossed Sherman's face. "You're not going?"

"I haven't decided, yet."

"But you must." He gaped at Kasey as if looking for support. "She has to go, Lieutenant."

"Why 'must'?" Kasey asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Billy killed my niece!" he shouted. "You can't let him get away with this. Go, and exterminate this pathetic son of a bitch before he slaughters all of us."

"The letter states to go unarmed," Andrea said calmly. "If it really is a meeting to talk, I break the rules of trust by killing him."

Sherman brought his face mere inches from Andrea's, his fists clenching and unclenching. Kasey made a grab for him until she caught Andrea's raised palm, halting her. "Rules of trust?" he asked vehemently. "When could their kind be trusted? Where's the tough Marine Officer? Have you stopped fighting?"

"Back off," Kasey said, preparing herself in case he attacked. She almost hoped he'd try something if only it weren't Andrea he was threatening. Kasey wanted an excuse to slug this guy. Sherman inched back, shaking his head. "It's ironic, isn't it? Julie read about your career, Captain, wanted to be just like you. Strong and resourceful, she had said." Sherman raised a hand in Kasey's direction. "Somehow you brought this woman to life. No one really remembers her, she appears out of thin air, yet there are tales of missions together. Teamwork no one can deny, and all want to emulate. You took a veritable nobody, and made a somebody of her. Someone everyone wants to be now." Sherman stepped back. "Julie idolized your courage. Now I see what looking up to you can do. It's cost Julie her life."

Kasey didn't move to stop Sherman as he stormed out of the room and slammed the front door soundly behind him. Angered by his words, she paced the office floor. He'd come so close to the truth about her and that could have ruined everything for Andrea. However, the man obviously didn't know Andrea, either. How could he suggest she had no courage? Andrea had more than most men. It was suicide to meet with Billy, especially unarmed. Believing Andrea would realize Sherman's outburst for the helplessness it was, Kasey didn't expect Andrea's whispered remark. "I should meet him, I have no other choice. And, Kasey, I'll follow his stipulations to the letter." The resolve scared Kasey. "You can't, Andrea. It would be suicide." Andrea whirled in Kasey's direction, waving the sheet of paper at her. "Then who, Kasey? Sherman? Ambassador Caughley?" Her voice went lower and got cold, sending a chill down Kasey's spine, "You?" "If it would stop you from going," Kasey said defiantly. "I'd stand a better chance. No one would miss me, Andrea. However, they'd never forget if something happened to you. Let me handle this in your place. Maybe this is why I've been brought to this time." Andrea sighed heavily and shook her head. "I can't let anyone else do this." "Then don't do it at all. We'll find a way. We will," she said, grasping Andrea's shoulders as she spoke. Kasey needed to make her understand. They'd work this out, together. Solve the problem--together. When Kasey looked into her eyes, the grey depths showed the extent of her fatigue. She knew Andrea had reached her limit, physically and emotionally. "I don't know, Kasey. Let's go to bed. I'm very tired." "Andrea?" Kasey waited as Andrea raised her head, met her gaze. The pain and confusion radiating from Andrea tore into the core of Kasey's soul. But she couldn't do it: Kasey couldn't say the words, couldn't acknowledge what she felt in her heart. Afraid if she did, a mist would form, plunging her into her own time, a black void of emptiness without Andrea. Kasey wasn't ready to go back. She was sure she never wanted to go back. She knew Andrea had a fear of relationships; she had to stay, let Andrea figure out on her own just how much she meant to Kasey. They needed each other. Would the very acknowledgement return her to that collapsed cavern in 1945? Kasey feared it would. Why else was she here? "Good night, Andrea," was all she could get out. Her heart banged in her chest at the dejected look on Andrea's face. She watched Andrea leave, unable to say anything more. Once again, Kasey had the impulse to tell Andrea about her experience on the freighter, her time with Billy, and the things he said or hinted at. She didn't want to add to the burden Andrea was already shouldering. Kasey would kill Sherman for the pain he'd brought; and the doubts he'd placed in Andrea's mind. A small grin turned the corner of Kasey's mouth when she realized she threatened to kill two men-- General Knight and Sherman--for pain inflicted on her commander. How hard had that hit on her head been? Holy cow. Was I this brutal in my time, or is it only a product of this time? *No, Kasey decided adamantly, I'm just that much in love.*

Chapter Seventeen

AFTER STORMING OUT of General Knight's home, Sherman made a decision. If Captain Knight wasn't going to keep the rendezvous, he would and without any ridiculous rules of ethics.

Sherman knew Billy wouldn't keep to his word, which meant he had no reasons for guilt about going there armed.

The memory of Julie's body, tortured and partially dismembered, remained fresh in his mind. He wanted vengeance and believed Andrea the most qualified to meet that purpose. Until, of course, her recent defection from the cause.

Having memorized the appointed location and time of the meeting, Sherman knew he could make it early enough to get the drop on Billy. He wasn't going to let Billy and his Scepters get away with using another LTN; not in his damn town!

One advantage of being in charge of Militia personnel was access to state-of-the-art weaponry. After the War of 2020, body counts outrageously high, many weapons were banned. Most units still resorted to standard handguns.

That was all about to change.

He would get a prototype of the photon-laser handgun. It was the only way to destroy Billy, finally.

When Sherman reached the warehouse housing government projects and rejects, he paused behind the wheel of his hover jeep. Mercury lights usually illuminated the area. Tonight they were out. The darkness that pervaded made him jumpy.

He needed to decide the best course of action, realizing sitting in his vehicle wasn't even close. Sherman scanned the area, making certain he alone prowled the night, got out and rushed up the plasticrete stairs to the computerized security door.

Behind him came the sound of breathing. Spinning around, Sherman came face to face with Billy, a mock smile on his face.

"Aren't you glad to see me? I'm hurt," Billy said with mortification, the darkening of his eyes confirmed it as feigned.

Sherman feared for his life and couldn't keep the evidence from his voice, or the shaking that wracked his body. "W-w-what do you w-want? W-w-why are you here?"

"Well, Official," Billy said with a smirk, "for the same thing as you. Only the reason is a tad bit different, isn't it?"

The corner of Sherman's lip lifted in a sneer. "No way in hell."

Sherman aimed a punch at him, but was much too slow. Effortlessly, Billy captured his wrist and held it in an iron grip. Billy shook his head and inched closer, forcing Sherman to back up against the door.

"I'd hoped I wouldn't have to go this far, getting the weapons the hard way," Billy said. "You've left me no choice. Remember that."

FROM THE LIGHT in the hallway, Andrea could make out the shadow cast from the figure standing outside her door. It belonged to only one person.

Kasey. She seemed determined to know when Andrea left her room; especially if she went to make the rendezvous with Billy. Kasey knew her better than she'd guessed. So much for believing she had a small number of secrets.

The rendezvous with Billy had to be. No other options came to Andrea in the last hour, and she'd invited as many as she could. Andrea didn't fool herself, though she'd tried often enough. In all probability, this meeting was a trap.

Andrea had to rely on Billy being true to his word. Though iffy at best, there was that possibility. Andrea knew the confrontation had to arrive eventually, been too long in coming already.

"Sooner" had made an appearance and "later" ticked less than two hours away. With the meeting

came Andrea's only opportunity to ask him the question ripping her heart and gouging her soul for so many years--why?

Kasey had no idea about the layout of the house, Andrea assured herself. She could make an escape and Kasey would never be the wiser, at least for a little while.

Andrea shook her head and sat on the corner of the bed, her thoughts in turmoil and chaos. It had always been easier to think of him as the "General" than as her father, and she shuddered at the memory of having used the inappropriate word on a few occasions in the past day. How long had it been since she'd called him "father" to his face? Longer than she could, or cared, to remember.

Absently Andrea reached up and touched her cheek, mindful of the greeting he'd given. As a child she referred to his displeasure as discipline, now she knew it for the abuse it was.

Everything she did in her life geared itself toward gaining his approval; but no matter how hard Andrea tried, she failed. After too many pain-filled attempts, she simply stopped trying.

There were people who believed in her, respected her; special people who didn't care that she was General Knight's daughter. People like Kasey; also, Greg, Bettina, Richard and Mykael.

Even people like Julie, whom she'd never met.

The girl had no business infiltrating a culture barely understood by outsiders. What did it get her? Not fame, not fortune; and she'd hardly be remembered in days to come by anyone other than family. Julie's was just a useless death to end her youth.

Enough was enough.

More determined than ever, Andrea silently jumped to her feet. She pulled her weapon free of its holster and placed it into her left boot. It was a tight fit, but reassuring. Her hand trembled.

Reaching into her right boot, she assured herself the knife remained there in the folds of leather, easy enough to access, yet hard to recognize. Next to the empty holster, Andrea left a one-word note: Sorry. She straightened her back and inhaled deeply.

It had to be now or never. If she died tonight, then it had to be. Andrea had to acknowledge Billy could be on the up-and-up. There was a time, long ago, when she could trust him to keep his word. Now came the time to see if trust still had a part of their relationship--or forever lost. No matter what happened, once this meeting ended, Andrea would have to kill him. If not for all the people who'd been tortured and killed by his hands or under his direction, then for Marlee and Julie; and for her personal beliefs in right and wrong.

Andrea moved from the dresser to the window and quietly raised it. A quick glance confirmed the trellis clung to the brick structure as she remembered. She perched on the sill and swung her legs outside, especially careful not to make a sound to alert Kasey. Twisting, she gained a foothold, winced and paused when the wood squeaked in protest, then climbed down. At the bottom, she peered at the windows, then quickly at the door. Assured no one saw her, Andrea made her way across the yard and to her appointed destination.

HANK BRODIE WAS furious. No one knew what was going on and it was all because of that pinhead, Sherman.

The young marine standing in front of the desk only answered his questions with a deadpan voice, "Those are Official Sherman's orders. No one is to go inside the White House."

"I told you, I'm Official Hank Brodie. I have every right to enter this establishment," he said, his pipe jabbing the marine's chest with every syllable.

The man stood rock-wall solid, never budging. "Sorry, sir, no one enters."

Brodie threw his arms up and growled. Finally, he looked at the marine coldly, "I'll have your stripes for this!"

"Yes, sir," the man replied calmly.

Uncertain of what he should do next, Brodie stormed from the main hall and into the night. Sherman would pay for this if it were the last thing he did. This wasn't the time for Sherman to start doing his job. Why couldn't he have been passive longer, as he had in the last few years? What gave him a change of heart so late in the game?

Only one person could give him the answers he required and Brodie was going to find him, and beat Sherman to a pulp for the inconvenience his orders caused. After directing his driver to Sherman's address, Hank got in the rear seat and lit his pipe. He needed answers and he'd get them.

Everything was falling apart thanks to Captain Knight. What should have gone like clockwork was fast becoming a disaster. When he got through with Sherman, she would most definitely be next; he just wasn't sure which of their downfalls would excite him most.

THE BREEZE BLEW cooler at the dock. Andrea stopped long enough to enjoy it for a moment, listening to the waves as they slapped against the hulls of ships in port. Tired, she imagined how easily she could let herself fall asleep to the sounds of the ocean.

Reluctantly, she turned her attention to the matter at hand and began the walk to the warehouse, as instructed in Billy's note. It wasn't hard to find. Dark and poorly lit, Andrea wished she'd thought to bring a flashlight. Tense, yet alert for any sound, she pushed open the metal door and entered.

Inside, a lit lantern cast eerie shadows on crates stacked all around and in no apparent order.

Slowly she moved toward the center of the room and the light.

"Knew you'd come. Didn't think you'd pass up an opportunity like this," a familiar voice said from the darkness.

Andrea swung around.

Sauntering from the shadows, Billy emerged and walked to her side.

"Well then," she replied shakily, "I'm glad one of us knew for sure."

Billy laughed in the same maniacal way he had at the United Presidents Council and it grated against Andrea's nerves. Had he gone so far over the edge? Or was this a standard scare tactic? She had to admit, the creepy approach worked remarkably. If her nerves grew any tighter, they'd snap and fall quivering to the floor in a jellied lump of flesh.

"It's good to see you haven't changed much over the years. I've missed you," he said, serious, too quiet with emotion.

"I wish I could say the same of you. You've changed a great deal. What happened, Billy?" She looked him straight in the eyes, hoping to read answers there. It saddened her they weren't to be found. "You've become a hate-filled man and a killer. You used to be a wonderful, thoughtful human." Tears began to form, but Andrea repressed them. She couldn't help but feel pity for what he'd become, and anger toward whatever pushed him to this point.

His face burned red with rage. "That's in the past," Billy bellowed, turning from her. After several deep breaths, he turned back, his voice more controlled, but still chilling her soul. "I don't expect you to condone what I have or haven't done. I just want you to understand. I owe you that much. That's why I arranged this meeting."

Andrea's gaze continued to dart into the shadows, looking and expecting something or someone to appear. She wanted to believe, but couldn't bring herself to trust him completely. Billy must have noticed, not that she intended to hide her actions from him.

He sounded pained when he continued. "I told you this is between us. No one will interrupt unless you brought them. My people know better than to disobey me."

Outwardly, she tried to appear relaxed, but Andrea's senses stayed tuned for anything unexpected. "Then explain. Make me understand."

"I want to, Andrea."

She paced before him, her controlled temper faltering. "Tell me how you could kill so easily. Has human life become so insignificant?" Andrea halted and fixed him with a glare of repugnance, her voice shrill with emotions barely contained. "Tell me how it felt to order your sister to her death? Marlee always looked up to you, would do anything for you. That's how you repay adoration?"

Andrea angrily punched his shoulder with a fist. A dam broke inside her. Years of pent up anger finally released, made it impossible for her to stop with a small blow. Pivoting on her left foot, she raised the right and slammed a kick to his chest, transporting him backward.

"Did you laugh, Billy? Did it feel good to have a nine-year-old doing your bidding?"

While Billy balanced himself, Andrea curled her fists and landed two blows to his chin. The final blow she intended came from her foot as it contacted his groin, buckling his knees and dropping him to the floor.

She felt her body shake uncontrollably, became aware of tears streaming down her face, the stinging of her knuckles. Andrea wanted to hurt him for making her hurt--for so long.

Sobs broke her voice. "Was it worth it, Billy?"

"Andrea," Billy gasped, getting to his feet and wiping blood from his split lip. "You're angry, so you get away with what you just did. There won't be another opportunity. Next time, I hit back." Billy grabbed her wrist and held tight until she couldn't stop the moan of pain, then he pulled it to his chest. He loosened the grip just short of releasing her. His expression changed to one of pity and for a moment Andrea stopped struggling. "What happened to the strong sister I'd grown to know and love?" his voice gently teased.

Andrea had expected sarcasm.

"Instead I see vulnerability and it pains me more than I thought possible. You've vowed to kill me, after all." Her sobs grew unrestrained. Billy pulled her into his embrace and held her as if they were each other's lifelines.

Though she didn't know why she trusted him enough now, Andrea let him.

When the sobbing stopped and her breathing became more controlled, Billy released her. Andrea felt ashamed by her weakened emotions. Unable to believe she'd turned to Billy.

"Relax and smile. I promise not to tell." He chuckled.

However, Andrea couldn't relax. Even though he'd been the old Billy for a moment, the big brother from childhood she'd adored, he couldn't change who he was now: Barbarous Billy, Leader Supreme of the Scepters.

"Andrea. I didn't kill Marlee," he said.

"Damn it, Billy! Don't lie. Marlee was wearing your colors when they found her body."

"You've got to believe me, even if only in this instance. I didn't send her, and would never have harmed that silly little kid," he said, almost pleading. "Hell, I thought I'd killed the man who did, but I was wrong."

"What do you mean, wrong?" she said, confused and still not ready to entirely trust him. If she did, it would mean her quest to avenge Marlee had been in error; however, part of her desperately wanted to accept his word.

"I tortured him, Andrea," Billy said solemnly. "Even with his last breath, he denied it. Said he had no idea who told her to carry the nuke into the crowd. He insisted it wasn't him."

"And you believed him?"

Billy shrugged. "He was dying, had no reason to lie."

"Your people are loyal, if nothing else. They look up to you as a father figure, or something.

Maybe he didn't want to die knowing he'd failed you somehow." Andrea shook her head to clear it. "Who knows? I don't understand this terrorist gang stuff. It's all pretty sick."

He took a deep, steadying breath. "It's only sick to an outsider. Our codes are stronger bonds than you can imagine." Billy's black eyes gazed into her grey ones. "You can't possibly understand us."

"Isn't that why I'm here? So you can help me understand?"

"All right." He nodded. "Scepters are family. We're stronger, actually, because we have no one else, only each other."

"You all have families. You have a family."

Billy's features twisted with disgust. "Ha, ha, ha, some family, 'cause after Mom died, we had no one, just the general. You call that maggot family? Dogs get treated better than we did. We did everything the way he wanted, when he wanted it done. It was never good enough.

"At least with the Scepters, I have people wanting me, needing me. Men, women, girls and boys with no place left to turn and looking for direction. I give them direction, Andrea."

The attitude appalled Andrea. "You taught them to kill, to live off their anger and bitterness. Leadership? Taking kids and using them. You're no better than the general."

His face grew taut and red. "How can you possibly compare the two of us? There are things about him you don't even know." Billy studied her closely, the attention making her uncomfortable. "Maybe you should."

"Maybe I should." She crossed her arms, waiting.

"How do you think the Scepters began?" he asked. "Gangs were a dying breed, Andrea, and almost nonexistent. When the powers-that-be realized military basic training giving them their expertise, recruitment qualifications changed and became more stringent. The sand war was over a few years before, so recruiters could be more discriminating."

"You started them, the very gang that rose above the rest," she said.

He moved to a short stack of crates and sat down. "Those charges were false. After being dishonorably discharged, but before I left the brig, I had a visitor. General Knight. It seems the government felt they made a mistake in disbanding the military services as a show of peace, in 2020. There weren't enough jobs for everyone released. Because of the government changes beginning, there was no need to call anyone back to service. People had to fight to survive in order to keep their families alive and fed. Our great new government turned their backs on us. Don't give them all the blame. They had a mess, what with the economy and foreign relations being such a disaster. We had to fight to survive."

Andrea scowled. "I was part of those released. I'm aware of the resulting problems."

"It was all an individual effort up to that point. There was no unity. The weak were trampled by the powerful, again. I was told to unite these poorer people. Fight back. Told to use my powers and start a terrorist group, and so I gave them the Scepters."

Shock registered on Andrea's face. "You can't expect me to believe our own father instigated this. What could he hope to gain?"

"Dear old Dad wanted his military back, and not the shell remaining today. He wanted a true fighting force, not the resulting figureheads who couldn't fight their way out of a closed closet. He wanted people like you."

Andrea shook her head in disbelief, felt the disgust clutching at her throat and choking her.

"That's a bad example, Billy. I never met his expectations."

"Not as he expected, but you did. With you, and others, reinstated as Militia Advisors, you still responded heroically for each cause. Your record looked better than his ever did and it embarrassed him among his cronies. Dear 'ole Dad had to think of something that would bring his powerful career back into the limelight. But there was someone else involved."

"Other than the general?"

Billy smirked. "Yeah, and his reasons are far different."

"The traitor?" The tightening in her throat increased.

"My informer, actually." He smiled slightly.

"Is there a difference? Who is he?"

"No difference. Just sounds better. And no, I won't give you his identity. I will tell you this: his agenda is to take total control of the present government. Everyone wants to be Defosset. Guess that makes most of us crazy, too."

Andrea's mind whirled. She was having a hard time comprehending all that Billy was telling her. This was leading somewhere, even though she couldn't pinpoint where.

"Okay, Billy. You're approached to start the Scepters as a great government power play. The purpose was to make the CFFM look bad, and get the military reinstated, but you're turning young people into killers. It can't justify what you've done."

"I didn't teach them to kill. I taught them to fight for themselves. Why can't you understand that one simple point?" he said angrily.

She looked into his black eyes calmly. "I live with reality every day. Those poor, ignorant fools of yours wouldn't know reality if it hit them in the face. Neither would you, obviously. You haven't instructed them in the ability to stand up for themselves. They're just a different version of what they're against. Defosset, the militia, and your Scepters are all alike, carbon copies of each other. Wise up, Billy."

Billy jumped off the crate and stared down at her. She didn't remember him being so tall, so imposing. Determined not to be intimidated, Andrea stood her ground.

"What do you know?" he said. "You've become the perfect little soldier for the general and lost sight of everything else. Join me, Andrea, and feel what it's like to be appreciated and adored for what you can do. The Scepters are the victims here."

"What about the victims you've created in your endeavor to defend yourselves? There are other ways to combat unjust treatment. How about teaching a little compassion?"

"Was compassion shown to us? I never got any from the general. We had a lousy life."

"We had more than most. Why waste your life because of him? What you do won't change him, but it will affect you. Forever, Billy, forever."

He flashed a sarcastic smile, and sneered, "Like it hasn't affected you, right?"

Andrea felt her face heat up.

"That's right. You distrust men because of him, and me," he said. "Since Marlee died five years ago, you refuse to let anyone get close. Well, hide your pain all you want, little sister. The general did his damage and you have to live with it, too. I'll gladly live with my choices." He took a deep breath. "Have you ever wondered why Ambassador Caughley knows so much about what I'm truly capable of?"

"Yes, but he hides the answers like the secret of the ages."

Billy nodded. "Remember when the general sent me to military school?" At her nod, he continued. "It was more of an experimental lab for the perfectly crafted super soldier. This particular school only accepted kids with latent psychic abilities. They gave us regular injections of something that made us stronger, heal faster, etcetera. What the doctors, and Daddy Dearest, didn't expect is the development that came with the shots."

"Richard was there, too?"

"He and I were best friends. We presented powers that most of the others didn't, at least not to the same degree, and so got special handling and personalized treatment. We have the power to heal or kill, and so much more. So, I guess in that way, I do owe a debt to the general. The few who displayed powers similar to ours have died, some from exertion from trying to control the power, and a couple by my own hand, I'm afraid. Shouldn't have too many of a good thing. But Richard decided to be a good boy, wouldn't do as Dad wanted, and ran away."

"This was a better choice for you? You couldn't have gone along with Richard, or come to me for help?"

Billy shrugged. "I like my decision better. Besides, you were just a kid yourself. Would you have hidden me in the attic? No way I would have let you get mixed up in all the general's stuff. Only one more thing will make all this perfect."

"What's that?" she asked dreading the answer.

"Tell Kasey I almost have what I need. Now I'll have to send her back to her own time."

Andrea stepped two paces back. She wanted to slap him again, punch him, anything to lash out. But, that's what he expected--probably wanted, so he could return the favor. "What the hell does that mean?"

He grinned wickedly. "Ask her. Did she explain all that happened on Marlow's tub?" When she didn't answer, he added, "Didn't think so. Just know it's not an idle threat."

"I think we've talked enough." Andrea sighed heavily. "Nothing's changed between us except that, now, I won't hold Marlee's death against you. Heaven help whoever is responsible. You have to do what you feel is right, as do I."

She knew he understood because she could read it in the contortion of his features. Like a mask, it went from animated, as he explained his reasoning, to cold hatred.

"I don't want to kill you, Andrea, but I can't let you get in my way."

"Your way?"

"I've modified everyone else's plans. I intend to do the taking over. I won't be a puppet or answer to anyone ever again," he said in a bland voice. He spun on his heels and left.

As Billy stormed out of the warehouse, Andrea watched. Exhausted, she returned to the crate. Not all that she hoped to accomplish had happened. Billy, convinced the general had destroyed his options, planned to continue his reign of terror and murder without taking any of the responsibility. She guessed it was easier for him to do so and felt miserable she hadn't been able to dissuade him.

Had he been right? Was not getting close her way of keeping past hurts alive?

An unexpected sound interrupted Andrea's stream of silent questions. Had Billy come back? Did he want to try to persuade her through another avenue of questions and answers? If not, who could it be since no one else knew she was here?

Kasey knew. Had she found Andrea missing and come to get her? Though Andrea wouldn't like that the ambassador and Mykael were left alone, she could find out why Kasey never told her

what happened on the freighter. Why hadn't she shared it with Andrea? They had bonded in so many ways, become better than friends.

"Kasey? Is that you?"

Two shadows exited the darkness.

Chapter Eighteen

ANDREA SQUINTED, HOPING to see who approached from the dark. The light from the lantern fell on them and she gasped. Scepters, two of them.

"Oh dear, Scat," one said. "I think we scared her."

Scat laughed wickedly. "Yeah, Blades, scared her good."

"Don't disillusion yourselves, boys. What do you want?"

Blades stepped closer and pulled his knives free. "You. No way we gonna let you ruin Barbarous Billy's plans. We gonna take care of you for him."

Andrea felt betrayed. Billy promised her the meeting was between the two of them. She'd believed him, trusted him. She knew he wasn't pleased with the result of their meeting, but she truly hadn't expected this. The two men before her looked wicked enough, but she didn't doubt she could take them on. With the anger of her betrayal, she had an advantage over them. Her training would clinch it.

Bending to retrieve her knife as they lunged forward, she barely grasped the hilt when they were upon her. Her fist landed a sharp blow to Scat's jaw and sent him staggering backward. With an upward lunge, her knife made contact with Blades' thigh. He howled and pulled back. His hand clutched at the gaping wound, blood spurting between his fingers like a small geyser.

"You'll pay for that, bitch!"

"Not as badly as you. You boys are out of your league here."

Careful to avoid his knives, she propelled herself forward and tackled him. Both landed with a thud on the floor. She raised her arm, about to plunge the knife in Blades' chest when suddenly she was hauled off him from behind. After managing to pull her arms free from Scat, Andrea jabbed her elbow back into his stomach with as much force as she could. He grunted, arms falling free.

Blades had almost made it to his feet.

"Are you idiots sure you're up to this?" she said.

Andrea heard a hysterical laugh from Scat, crouching next to a nearby crate, and a snarling growl from Blades as he attacked again. Squatting into a more defensive posture, she waited until Blades closed the distance. When he did, she kicked upward, landed a booted foot into his gut, and sent him sprawling to the concrete floor. One knife fell from his grip and slid out of reach. A thin film of perspiration formed on Andrea's brow. It felt good to take out her frustration on the two goons Billy sent.

But the fun was over.

Making her way to where Blades lay, about to finish him off, she felt a painful jolt course through her body. Andrea spun around to see Scat holding a stun gun, the blue current jumping erratically, seconds before she was falling limply onto the floor.

Pure terror raced through her mind. Desperate, she tried to move but couldn't, all mobility gone. Andrea knew this was it; she would certainly die at their hands. Disjointed images danced without a symmetrical pattern as Blades and Scat walked confidently to her side. Her only consolation being she wouldn't feel herself die.

KASEY PACED THE hall outside Andrea's room. She wanted to go in and talk, but didn't want to push her. Finally, anxiety got the best of her and she knocked.

No answer.

After knocking again, Kasey turned the knob and walked in. The lights were on, a window open, the bed still made. No sign of Andrea.

"Damn it," she said through clenched teeth. Kasey turned to leave. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Andrea's gun and holster on the dresser and the paper next to it. She read the word "sorry" and wanted to scream her frustration. She put the weapon holster on. Uncertain whether she should alert the others or just leave and explain later, Kasey stood transfixed to the spot. Then she noticed something else. Grasping the small picture frame resting on top, Kasey felt the color drain from her face. A scream from the downstairs hallway jolted her. "Andrea," she whispered, certain she was the cause of Bettina's fright. She jammed the picture frame into a pocket.

When Kasey reached the stairs, she ran down them using every other step. At the bottom, her heart beat frantically, fear coursing within every vein, only to find Sherman instead. That could only mean Andrea was still with Billy. She had to reach her commander before it was too late. The sound of running footsteps on stairs caught Kasey's attention for a moment. Quickly, she made her way to where Sherman had fallen on the marble floor, blood seeping through a bandage wrapped around his hand.

"What happened?" Kasey said.

Sherman's eyes were glassy from pain when they met Kasey's. "You all have to leave here. They're coming for you," he panted, ending on a moan.

"Who's coming?" Kasey was tense with worry for Andrea. She wanted to understand what Sherman meant, but she also wanted to find Andrea, not play twenty questions. "What happened?"

Kasey received no answer as Sherman had passed out. Grabbing at Sherman's jacket, Kasey tried to shake him into consciousness, only to be pulled away by Greg and replaced by Richard. Mykael mumbled a prayer as she watched from her place on the bottom step.

Richard unwound the makeshift bandage on Sherman's hand and gasped. He turned toward Kasey and informed her solemnly, "His hand's been cut off. He needs medical attention right away."

Sherman regained consciousness and put his remaining hand up to halt them. "No, wait," he said, trying to get up. "Brodie--"

Kasey bent down to face him. "Did Brodie do this? Tell us what happened, please."

"Andrea--need to--tell her."

Fear for her commander swelled again. Kasey looked around at the faces staring at them. She singled Bettina out with a gaze and ordered her to get Sherman something to drink. Guilt began to build at not seeing to his injury first. *After he answers my questions*, Kasey justified. Luckily, Mykael handed a laser scalpel and clean bandages over her shoulder. She worked at the wound, using the scalpel as she'd seen it done on Okinawa by the real medics. When finished, she applied fresh bandages to the area, knowing it would be terribly tender for a while.

Now, she had to break the news, "Andrea's gone to meet Billy. You'll have to tell me whatever information you have."

Shock twisted Sherman's face. He looked at Kasey, his voice raspy. "You have to get out of here. Brodie's incorporated Martial Law with the Militia. They've got orders to kill Andrea, and you, on sight." His breathing seemed more labored as he continued. "Brodie said it was Andrea who stole the photon-laser prototypes and gave them to the Scepters."

"What? How could they believe--"

"But I was there." He indicated his missing hand with a nod, the memory turning him white.

"Billy cut it off and used my *TAP* to access the building. He left me to bleed to death and took the weapons."

Richard shifted his gaze from Sherman to Kasey in dismay. "Why?"

Kasey rose and faced Richard. "I guess we just learned who the traitor is. Get us out of the way and start a war in the same breath. I have to find Andrea. Please, see to Official Sherman."

Richard barred her way. "You wait. We'll all go together."

Bettina returned with a glass full of amber colored liquid. "I've called a medical unit. They'll be here shortly."

"Good. Watch out for him," Kasey said. "I need to find Andrea."

All remaining color vanished from Bettina's face and she began to sway. "My God, Andrea," she said, collapsing into a chair behind her and sobbing.

Mykael crossed to Bettina and placed an arm across her shoulder comfortingly. "I'll stay with her while you go find Andrea," she assured Kasey. "I'll make sure Official Sherman is all right, too."

"No! You all must leave," Sherman cried hoarsely. They turned as he staggered to his feet. "It isn't safe for any of you here. Hurry, get out."

Even disliking Sherman as she did, Kasey believed the danger real. She wasn't sure it wise for the group to separate. She had to act fast to get Andrea, hopefully before anything truly horrible happened.

"Okay, people, let's go," Kasey said, moving to the front door. She heard vehicles screeching to a halt outside, and from the sounds, there were a lot of them. A bright beam of light shot through the windows and an amplified voice demanded all persons leave the premise, empty hands exposed and held high.

Kasey heard Sherman mumble behind her. "It's too late." She spun around and watched him slide to the floor once more.

"Damn," Kasey said. Quick as a cat, she crossed to Bettina, squatting before her and meeting her gaze. "Is there another way out?"

Bettina gazed back with red puffy eyes, her expression blank for an instant before it changed to certainty. "The general has an exit in the basement. But I don't know where it leads."

"Can you take us to it?"

Bettina squared her shoulders as she stood, her stance like a soldier preparing for battle. Kasey would have cheered her under different circumstances, however, she didn't move, just stood in silent deliberation for what Kasey imagined to be a lifetime. "Bettina? Can you take us to it?" she asked tensely.

"No," Bettina replied, a deadpan expression confirming the finality of the word.

Her heart fell as Bettina's single word shattered her hopes of escaping and finding her commander. She wanted to shout, remind her Andrea needed them, but Kasey didn't need to because Bettina pointed to the kitchen and began giving directions.

"If you use the doorway in the kitchen, it'll take you down. There's a shelf against a wall that pulls out. Take it and leave." Bettina's hand grabbed Kasey's arm, her voice shaky with emotion. "Please make sure Andrea's all right."

"I can't just leave you here to face those men outside or, especially, the general when he finds out about this. You're coming, too. "

Bettina shook her head vigorously, releasing a grey wisp of hair from its knot. "If I go outside, it'll slow them down long enough for you to escape."

"I can't let you do that. It won't be safe for you."

"What'll they do to an old woman? I'll be fine." Her voice rose slightly, "Hurry. Andrea needs you."

Kasey remembered the picture, certain of its importance to being in this time. She pulled it out and showed it to Bettina. "Who is this?" she asked, pointing to a man of about eighteen.

Bettina gave a quick look, smiled and replied, "Andrea's great-grandfather, James Dalton. Why?" A chill ran through Kasey. "I'll explain later." She made one more attempt to dissuade her, "Please come with us."

Unexpectedly, Bettina gave Kasey a quick kiss on the cheek. "We'll have *time*, Kasey." The emphasis she made on the word gave Kasey pause. "I'll be fine."

Reluctantly, Kasey accepted Bettina was right; however, that was "her-time" thinking. People didn't respect anyone, let alone their elders, in the "nowtime." They'd wasted too much precious time already. "Let's go," she ordered, making her way to Sherman. After helping him to his feet, she motioned for the others to follow. Kasey glanced back one last time at Bettina and smiled encouragement while she silently prayed Bettina would be okay.

The old woman opened the front door wide. Arms lifted above her head, Bettina announced loudly. "I'm coming out."

HANK BRODIE WATCHED with a smile of satisfaction as the door opened. The plans he had painstakingly made were back on track. He wanted to scream his excitement, but held back the urge.

His enthusiasm quickly diminished. Only an old lady came from the house. Rushing forward to her side, ignoring the command to stop from Major Veit, Brodie demanded the whereabouts of Captain Knight.

A look of genuine shock crossed Bettina's face. As calmly as she could, she said, "Captain Knight? I was waiting for General Knight to arrive home." Her expression changed to embarrassment, "I'd fallen asleep. Your bright lights and the noise woke me."

Hank shoved her aside and stormed toward the door. Inside he stopped and gave a cursory inspection before he waved Major Veit in. When the man reached him, he ordered, "I want every square inch of this house searched. Do you understand, Major?"

"Yes, sir." Major Veit motioned his men forward and, after relaying the order, left Brodie in the hallway while he assisted his unit.

A single glass caught Brodie's attention and he picked it up. He sniffed deeply before jerking his head back.

"It helps my old bones," Bettina said from the doorway.

Brodie looked at her a moment, then turned away with disgust and caught a glimpse of a spot on the, otherwise, immaculate floor. Brodie bent down for a closer examination. It appeared to be fresh blood. He touched it with his index finger and it came up wet with the red fluid.

"And I suppose you cut yourself in your hurry out the door?" he said dryly.

A flush colored Bettina's face.

She didn't answer, ignoring him completely.

Shortly after, the major came back to report no one found.

"Where'd they go, woman?" Brodie demanded angrily. "They were here. The fresh blood tells me that much. Who was hurt?" The only response he received was her stony stare. "Answer me, damn you!"

When she didn't, he slapped her soundly across the face. "This isn't a game, you old hag. Where's Captain Knight?"

"They're not here," she said with watering eyes.

"I know that much, you old crone. Where'd they go?"

"I don't know," she said, trembling. "They never told me," she amended when he raised his hand again. "They left over an hour ago."

Brodie looked at her intently, hoping to see something that would give the lie away, but none came. He turned to the Major Veit, rubbing a hand over his balding head. "We gotta find them."

Major Veit nodded. "Where do you suggest?"

"Damn it! I don't know."

A terrifying aspect occurred to him. "We can't be here when General Knight returns. I'm not prepared to explain anything in my present mood."

"And her?"

"She's no good to us, leave her here." Hank twisted toward her and said, "Tell General Knight all you like, old woman. And if you see Andrea, tell her she can hide, but I'll find her. Then she's all mine. Not even her daddy will be able to save her."

Chapter Nineteen

KASEY DIDN'T KNOW how much time had passed since leaving General Knight's house, but she pushed them all onward. The tunnel from the Knight home was nothing like the one leading into the museum. This tunnel was dust free, as if used frequently. If her concern for Andrea hadn't been so intense, Kasey would have relished a conversation with him to learn the why behind its existence at all-- what psychological motivation prompted his like of tunnels, in the first place.

She would especially like to have a conversation concerning certain payback for his slapping Andrea.

Until Greg called out to her, she hadn't looked at Sherman. Now she did and noted he nearly dangled from her grasp. He had passed out.

"Drat," she said, laying her burden down.

The others caught up and leaned heavily against the tunnel wall.

"Sherman's not going to make it any further. We need to get him medical help," Kasey said.

"Probably something for the shock he's had."

"I'll have to heal him," Richard said.

"You'll what?" Kasey wasn't sure she heard him correctly.

Richard bent down and removed the gauze bandage. "I can heal him," he said. "It's not something that's too well known, Kasey, but we of the Church, some of us anyway, literally have the power to heal. One of the reasons we joined, actually."

"Why didn't you do it at the house, then?"

"A medical unit was coming. Look, this isn't something we like as public knowledge. It's only to be used in extreme cases. Performing miracles in this day and age--" He shrugged.

With the bandage removed, Richard covered the stump with his palms and softly whispered a prayer. In mere seconds, a green colored aura encased his hands and Sherman's arm, exactly as it had with Jinny. Though unconscious, Sherman responded with a moan. Soon after, the aura was gone and Sherman's eyes began to blink open.

Kasey was stunned. If she hadn't watched it happen, she'd never believe it possible. Official Sherman's recent wound looked completely healed; the skin perfectly molded as if the hand had been gone for years. Kasey gazed at Richard in awe and noted the pasty coloring on his face.

"Are you okay?" Kasey asked, as he slid to the floor onto his buttocks.

Mykael rushed to Richard and helped him to his feet. "He'll be fine. Healing takes a lot of his strength away. I'll support him." The woman placed her arm around his waist and waited. "Let's continue."

"Why don't you let me take him?" Greg said, supporting Richard from the other side.

"How long does the weakness last?" Kasey hoped it didn't sound unfeeling, but she was anxious to continue. She didn't want them slowing her down, yet didn't feel right leaving them, either.

From the corner of her vision, Kasey realized Sherman had regained enough strength to stand on his own. He stared at his healed arm with disbelief.

Richard, too, noticed him. "It'll take some time to get used to the hand being gone. Don't worry, though, it won't get infected or give you any more pain, physically anyway."

"Thank you," Sherman said.

Sherman still appeared dumbfounded. Kasey knew he had every right to be. Why not? She had watched the process happen and could barely believe what her eyes had seen.

"This is incredible," Sherman said. "And I feel rejuvenated, like after a good night's sleep."

"You're more than welcome," Richard said with a smile, then to Kasey, "Shall we go find Andrea now?"

Kasey nodded hesitantly. "Will you be okay to travel?"

"Yes. Mykael and Greg will make sure I keep up."

With that assurance, Kasey began down the tunnel once more, periodically checking behind her to make certain they followed without unwarranted difficulty. She wondered again about how much time had gone by since leaving the house, how much longer to reach the end. The tunnel seemed endless. In their haste to leave the house, Kasey wasn't able to put a pack together so they had no food or water, when the need necessitated.

More time elapsed before Kasey finally saw a door, a light shining above, about fifteen feet ahead of her. Leaving the others to trail at their own pace, she hastened forward. She reached into her pocket and retrieved the weapon she'd taken from General Knight's house. Careful not to alert anyone possibly waiting on the other side, Kasey, praying the latch unlocked, turned the handle and sighed when she was able to open the door.

Cracking it open about half an inch, all she could see were crates upon crates.

Kasey pulled the door closed when she heard the others approaching, hoping it shielded any noise they made.

"It's a warehouse," Kasey whispered. "I'll check it out."

"I'll come with you," Greg said. He forestalled Kasey's denial by raising his right hand. "It'll be safer if I watch your back."

"All right, but be careful. I don't know what we'll find."

Again, she opened the door. Since Kasey couldn't see anyone, she pushed it further and went in, Greg behind her. At first sight, the area looked to be empty, except for the stored cargo. Farther inside, she heard hysterical laughter and instinctively crouched low. Using the cover of the multi-sized wooden containers, Kasey inched forward.

She peeked out to spot whoever was laughing. By the light of a lantern atop a crate, she could barely make out two figures kicking at a bundle on the floor. Squinting, Kasey tried to get a closer look and the crate she had positioned herself behind slid with a loud scraping sound on the concrete flooring.

Alerted, the two men abandoned the bundle and, cussing and stumbling, they scurried off. Darting from her spot, Kasey ran after them, vaguely aware Greg was right behind. In her haste, Kasey tripped over the bundle and fell. She righted herself, about to continue pursuit when the bundle moaned. Kasey, painfully shocked, realized the mistaken bundle was actually Andrea. Fear and anger swelled up inside Kasey. Anger won. She'd make them pay. As she ran, Kasey noticed Greg dive at one man, whose flailing crashed both to the floor.

Before Greg could get a good hold on the man, he pulled free and attacked the corporal. A blue shot of electricity arced in Greg's direction. Kasey propelled herself forward swatting at the device and it slid across the floor. Balling her fist tight, she slammed it into the man's jaw.

As the man fell, Kasey rushed to where the device had fallen and retrieved it. With the stun gun in hand, she grabbed a hand full of the man's hair and jerked upward until he screamed in pain. Furious and out of control, Kasey shoved it close to the man's face. "How'd you like me to use this on you?"

Her captive replied with insane laughter.

"If Andrea dies, you'll die. Slowly and painfully," she promised. Kasey reined in her fury. She shouted to Greg, who had started after the second man. "Don't worry about him. Please, get the others. I've found Andrea and she's hurt."

Grasping her captive firmly, Kasey dragged him to the spot she'd seen Andrea, who still lay huddled in a ball. Kasey didn't want the man to get away while she went to her, so used the stun gun. The man's body jerked but didn't fall. A sick laugh escaped his lips and he squirmed to free himself.

"Scat, Scat can take more of that," he said.

Kasey let him loose, confused that the device hadn't worked. As Scat began to run away, Kasey aimed her pistol and fired. She watched him fall to the floor.

Running footsteps indicated the others approached, but Kasey was barely aware of them as she fell to her knees beside Andrea's body.

Blood oozed from gashes cut across the majority of her body, saturating Andrea's clothes.

Bruises had formed on her skin, including the greater portion of her face. Lifting Andrea's head and placing it on her lap, Kasey cradled her while wiping the stray strands of hair falling above her eyes. "My God, Andrea," she whispered. "What have they done to you?"

ANDREA'S EYELIDS FLICKERED before they slowly opened.

The affects of the stun were wearing off and Andrea felt excruciating pain. She tried to focus on the face above her, but could feel herself slipping away, dying. Where is the light? Shouldn't there be a light? All around her, eclipsing the sweet hovering face, was darkness, like a coroner's

body bag slowly zipping upward, leaving Andrea to face hell alone. Exerting every ounce of strength, she raised a hand and touched Kasey's cheek, unaware of the trail of blood left behind. When the hand had no more strength, its mission accomplished, it fell limply to the floor and blackness engulfed Andrea.

Tears streamed down Kasey's face, mingling with the blood left by Andrea's touch. "Don't die," she pleaded. "Please, my love, don't die."

Unaware and uncaring that the others witnessed her emotional weakness, Kasey pulled Andrea's inert form into her embrace, willing her back to consciousness.

"OH, DEAR GOD." Mykael bent beside Kasey and reached to touch Andrea's brow. Not an easy task since Kasey, in a state of shock, rocked Andrea's body back and forth. Tear filled eyes met hers pleadingly. "Kasey," Mykael whispered, but she didn't seem to hear. "You must let Andrea go. We need to see to her wounds."

A hoarse groan escaped Kasey's lips.

"Please, Kasey," she begged, her tone forceful. "We have to stop the bleeding. You have to release her."

Mykael tried to pry Kasey's grip from Andrea's still form.

"Her brother did this," Kasey said. "He wants her dead, just like Marlee. Andrea tried to tell me, but I thought she was exaggerating." Kasey's voice rose, "I'll kill him for this. If it takes me a lifetime, I'll kill him."

"If you don't let her loose, you'll have killed Andrea." Mykael hated herself for the pain the remark had inflicted, but felt a rush of relief when the hold slackened and Kasey released her. Mykael laid Andrea down gently and pulled away her ruined clothing. Blood flowed from the wounds as the material was pulled away. Aware Kasey watched her every move, Mykael decided it best if she left. "Kasey." She waited for her focused attention. "Maybe you should make sure no one is coming back before we've finished."

"No!" Kasey pinned Greg with a stare. "Greg, go watch the entrance. Official Sherman, make sure no one enters from the tunnel."

Kasey waited until they complied before standing. "I won't leave her alone again. Can you heal Andrea like you did Sherman?" she asked, glaring at Richard.

Richard bowed his head for an instant. When he spoke, his voice was shaky. "Her injuries are pretty severe." He stopped Kasey from interrupting with a raised palm. "I won't let her die if I can help it, but I can't promise anything. If it's meant to be, then it shall be."

"Damn you," Kasey said. "It's not meant to be."

"Kasey--" Mykael started.

"Just do it," Kasey choked out.

Richard joined Mykael on the floor. She removed most of Andrea's clothing and boots. Richard began to divest Andrea of the remainder of clothing, but Kasey rudely pushed him aside.

"I'LL DO IT," Kasey said. "Don't--"

"As you wish," Richard said, lifting his hands free.

With meticulous care, Kasey gently tugged, inched, and pulled the last articles of clothing free. Once done, Kasey gazed at Andrea's body. Almost every inch had a knife wound or bruise from the kicks applied by Billy's two men. Her stomach twisted at the sight. If Kasey could take Andrea's place, she gladly would. Andrea's breathing was shallow. With a deep sigh, Kasey shifted back to allow Richard access to Andrea.

He began by placing his hands on Andrea's heart and forehead. He squeezed his eyes closed and mumbled, but the words didn't make sense to Kasey.

Kasey waited for the green aura that accompanied Sherman's healing, but it didn't come. About to question Richard, demand where the glow was, Mykael stood and moved behind her, grasping Kasey firmly by her shoulders and holding her in place.

Bending forward and leveling herself with Kasey's ear. "He has to assess the damage. Be patient," Mykael whispered.

Both watched in silence as Richard continued.

A knot of anger clenched in Kasey's stomach, helplessly, while Richard touched Andrea's skin in places other than where the gashes were. She didn't want this man, any man--anyone--to touch Andrea in this or any other way. Yet a reluctant part of Kasey knew it couldn't be helped if she were to be healed. Richard knew what he was doing, had done it for Sherman. As though sensing the tension in Kasey, Richard faltered and clenched his fingers into a fist before renewing his examination, again laying his hand over Andrea's heart.

"Not much time. She's in too much shock and I sense she doesn't want to fight. If she gives up--"

"She's not giving up. Do it," Kasey shouted.

Inhaling a deep breath, Richard began working.

The green aura started slowly. It came from his palms and worked its way over her entire body, engulfing Andrea in its color, reaching upward from Richard's palm to his elbow. With his other hand, he touched Andrea's forehead and the color became darker, covering them both like a shell and encasing their bodies.

When he stopped abruptly, Kasey stared in confusion and frustration.

"This job is proving more difficult than anticipated. I need help, your strength," Richard said, the strain already evident in his glassy gaze and trembling hands.

Kasey immediately complied and positioned herself beside Richard, though unsure how she could help him. "What can I do?" She intended the question to display her eagerness, surprised to hear the uncertainty in her own voice. The fear she couldn't help.

Taking one of her hands, Richard stationed it over Andrea's heart, and Kasey could feel the slight beat. Andrea was still alive, albeit barely. Kasey stared into the unresponsive face wishing beyond reason for the closed lids to open. Her concentration was so intense, Kasey barely heard Richard giving directions.

"Just hold to this spot no matter what happens. You'll sense and feel my mind probing yours, but I have to get a connection in order to heal her. It'll be strange, but not harmful."

Impatient for the process to continue, Kasey nodded absently, willing to suffer anything if it meant Andrea would be all right. Like a dark room in which a door had been opened, Kasey could feel Richard extend his mind searchingly into Andrea's, via her own.

Their initial contact brought an awareness of intense pain.

Probing deeper, images flashed quickly, disjointedly.

All Andrea's memories, her feelings and reactions, became part of them both. They melded, giving each a new insight into Andrea's heart. They were sharing her strength, her weakness, and a stark realization. In her healing, Andrea inadvertently helped them mend a piece of themselves. It was frightening yet exhilarating. It came to them in patches of images and feelings; pieces of substance useless alone, but a beautiful quilt when woven together with friendship and love to provide warmth, insulation.

Kasey became aware of Andrea's confused feelings about the love she felt, unsure she could make their shared love last. There were fears of inadequacy at receiving, much less giving, her

heart when it could be turned against her and used like a weapon. Images of Billy, the General, and Marlee flashed vividly, along with Andrea's worries of love wrongly placed or not strong enough to protect love from harm. Kasey's heart filled at these revelations, learning Andrea blamed herself for an inability to prevent Marlee's death, which claimed and destroyed any residual family unity that may have remained. Kasey sensed fear that shared love would claim Kasey by catapulting her back to her own time; and Andrea would be powerless to control what she perceived as an ultimate destruction.

For Richard, the foundation of all he'd learned through the church and not fully understood became clear at this moment, the truth behind the power of love and loving. He saw where his true strength was, holding to values even when they were replaced with the haunting evils of men's hatred.

As understanding grew, Kasey and Richard smiled wider.

With their knowledge, the healing shield of green strengthened.

From where she crouched above Andrea, Kasey could see the wounds begin to heal and the trails of fresh blood evaporate. Once opened flesh melded and disappeared as if the injuries were never there. Andrea's breathing became stronger. Kasey looked toward Richard and watched him grow pale in color, though the smile never left his lips. As she watched, the aura around them faded slowly, until it vanished all together. Richard collapsed on top of Andrea's still form. Kasey reached for Richard, concerned the healing process had killed him. "Richard?"

She felt Mykael touch her shoulder. "The process, when this extensive, drains strength. It was no different for Official Sherman, just less noticeable."

"What do we do?" Kasey asked in genuine concern, knowledge received in the healing giving her a new view on the man.

"Help get him someplace safe to rest. Then you'll need to take care of Andrea." Mykael tugged and lifted Richard off Andrea and laid him alongside.

Kasey felt her stomach clench at the sight of them, looking like two corpses, thankful that wasn't the case. Surprised by the rejuvenated feeling, Kasey left the area to locate a room Richard could use, finding one in the back of the warehouse. It had a cot against one wall and another folded in the corner. She opened the second and saw the metal legs were broken. Pulling the thin mattress away, she carried it with her to where she'd left Mykael tending Richard and Andrea.

With Mykael's assistance, Kasey placed the mattress beside a tall stack of crates and they carried Andrea to it. She removed her jacket and laid it over Andrea's exposed body. When finished, she and Mykael picked up Richard. With slow steps, they carried him to the small room, and placed him on the cot. Then, they set about looking for blankets but couldn't find any. "I'll have to send Greg on a reconnaissance mission."

"We'll need food, too," Mykael said.

"How long will he be out?" Kasey asked, her concern growing at the sight of how oddly pale he'd become.

Mykael shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she said. "Andrea was hurt more than any of his other cases. I've lost track of time, but I can guess it'll be many hours."

"I'll see to the others and come back to check on you both later. Will you be okay here?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine." Mykael must have seen her gaze dart toward the door. "Go to her. I'll take care of Richard."

Smiling awkwardly, Kasey turned and left, though she wanted to race to Andrea. Prioritizing plans of action in her mind, Kasey knew Andrea would have to wait. She had to make sure they'd

all be safe spending whatever time was necessary for Richard and Andrea to heal naturally through the next hours.

Kasey went to Sherman first. He was standing by the tunnel door, a look of uncertainty blending with his already harsh features. "How is she, Lieutenant?" Sherman asked, with what appeared to be genuine concern.

"She'll be fine. I want everyone centrally located in case anything happens. Help me move some of these crates in front of the door." Her gaze caught on Sherman's injury. "I'm sorry. I'll get it." A thin smile lit Sherman's features as he responded matter-of-factly, "Just a minor inconvenience, doesn't make me helpless." Once they blocked the door, he asked, "What next?"

"If you watch the front access, I'll send Greg for food and blankets."

"Done," Sherman replied.

They both walked to the main entrance.

Greg sat on a crate by the door, his pistol resting on his lap, a troubled look on his face. Kasey wasn't sure, but she thought she knew the reason. Greg felt he'd failed when he wasn't allowed to continue after the second man. The young man seemed to have formed a combination of hero worship and little brother mind-set toward Andrea. The best way to handle the problem was let him resolve his inner turmoil on his own.

"Greg. You need to go shopping. Can you handle it?" Kasey asked in a commanding voice. One way to get a soldier to forget his troubles was to give him a mission.

"Yes, ma'am," he said dejectedly.

"If you can't, let me know," she said, not wanting to treat him like a child.

Greg looked sternly at her. "I can do it."

"Good," Kasey said. Since Greg didn't seem inclined to add anything else, she continued. "We need food, blankets, and some clothes for Captain Knight. Hers are beyond repair. Also, bring clean water and a cloth," she added, knowing she didn't need to elaborate on the purpose for the last items on the list.

"Is she all right?" Greg asked, doubt evident in his tone.

"She's resting, but stable." Since Andrea was unconscious, Kasey couldn't be sure of a more accurate diagnosis, but sharing the possible dark side would be inappropriate. "Richard's going to be well, also. However, they both need sleep in order to heal and will need food later, for strength."

Greg nodded and moved to the door. He paused and turned back toward Kasey. "I tossed the dead guy off the dock." Before Kasey could respond, he left. She'd totally forgotten, with everything else that had gone on since, about the one she shot when the stun gun hadn't subdued him.

Feeling certain Sherman had the entrance under control, and with her pistol in hand, Kasey went to Andrea.

Andrea hadn't budged since Kasey left the area with Mykael to settle Richard comfortably.

Kasey bent down and sat on the thin mattress beside her. Tentatively, she reached out and smoothed the stray hairs off Andrea's sweat slickened forehead. Kasey stared at the closed eyes. This was the first time she'd been able to touch Andrea without her being aware and reacting negatively. Kasey looked at her naked body and her desire for Andrea grew.

Uncomfortable with her response, with Andrea in a helpless state, Kasey moved and sat on the floor a distance away, trying to get her emotions under control. It proved more difficult than she'd originally thought, given the new insight gained when healing Andrea. Kasey took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and leaned back against a crate, hoping to find the strength not to touch.

At least Kasey knew Andrea loved her. Andrea was her heart and Kasey would protect her from Billy and General Knight. They'd have some time, if not a life together. Fully, finally, Kasey would share passion with--"Andrea doesn't know that I know she shares my affections," she mumbled. *Will Andrea ever admit her love? Probably not, she's too stubborn--too afraid. Great! I'm right back where I started.* Kasey shuddered. *Well, not where I started, exactly. Please, God, don't send me back until I let Andrea know how I feel.*

Chapter Twenty

IT WAS DIFFICULT for Andrea to open her eyes. They felt like leaden weights. She squinted a few times, blinked her eyelids rapidly to clear the fuzziness, and tried to focus. Once her vision cleared, she made quick note of her surroundings. Then, with sudden clarity, she remembered Blades and Scat. They were nowhere around. The observation gave her a small amount of relief. From the numerous crates stacked around her, she knew she was still in the dockside warehouse where she'd rendezvoused with Billy.

"Great," she mumbled grumpily. "When this is over, I hope I never see another crate or warehouse for a very long time."

Andrea tried to sit up, but it proved more difficult than she expected. The blanket covering her dropped to her waist and Andrea realized she was completely undressed. Embarrassed, even though she was alone, she pulled the blanket under her chin and surveyed the room more thoroughly, beginning with the thin mattress between her and the concrete floor. Everywhere she looked only revealed stored cargo. Her bloodied clothes were draped carelessly on top of a shorter crate, indicating it wasn't all part of a bad dream.

The only human presence seemed to be hers. The soft glow from a lantern illuminated a blanket, similar to the one she held, heaped on the floor. Someone had been with her recently.

Squeezing her eyes shut, trying to recall her last memory, the pieces came disjointedly and made Andrea painfully aware of the pounding in her head. Flashes of Blades and Scat, vague images of Kasey, Mykael and Richard, followed by a confused recollection of green and blue fire. None of it made sense to Andrea and she attributed it to her present condition. Surrendering to her weariness, she lay back on the mattress, clutching the blanket tighter. She wondered what her companions were doing now and how she came to be in her present, undressed condition. Who found her? Why wasn't she dead? Andrea couldn't sense anything unharmonious in the air, so decided to rest a bit more and get her strength back before she went in search of her team.

"How do you feel?" she heard Kasey's voice ask. Kasey had entered the area clutching a small box. Startled, Andrea sat up quickly. The room started spinning and she tentatively touched her forehead hoping to right herself.

First Andrea cursed, but then moaned, "Like my body was used for battalion training exercises." "Good," Kasey said.

The look Andrea shot her was supposed to intimidate Kasey, but only made her laugh. "Enjoy it while you can, Lieutenant," she said.

"Good, to mean that everything's still working," Kasey amended with humor.

"Your concern is enchanting. Thanks ever so much," Andrea said sarcastically. She became aware of the way Kasey looked at her and felt uncomfortable--exposed. *Of course you feel*

exposed, fool, you're naked. Kasey continued staring, as if seeing Andrea for the first time yet seeing more of her, almost through her, not just her present state of undress.

"What happened? I should be dead," Andrea said in wild desperation to find common ground to focus on. She needed to turn her attention to what she hoped would be safe territory.

"You almost were." The pain in Kasey's eyes made Andrea's heart tighten. "Richard--This will sound strange, but he has the power to heal. Unfortunately, it took all his strength to do it." The pregnant silence following reminded Andrea of someone telling a secret not meant to be uncovered.

"What about Billy's men?" she asked. Andrea needed to put questions to rest.

"One's dead, one got away."

"Richard and the others?" she asked, trying to sound casual. Andrea glanced to where her clothes lay, as if they were her salvation to the emotional crisis building within.

Kasey came over and sat cross-legged at the bottom of the mattress. Andrea hadn't missed the discomfort unsettling Kasey's usual calm; it shone in her eyes. "Mykael is with Richard in another section of this warehouse. Greg is watching the entrance with Sherman. Here," she said, passing the box. "Greg got it from Bettina, so it's definitely edible. We can talk more after you eat."

Shifting slightly to take the procured box, Andrea realized she wouldn't be able to grasp it without losing hold of the blanket. From the renewed gleam in Kasey's eye, she realized Kasey was aware of the situation, too. Andrea wanted to groan in frustration. Kasey was enjoying her discomfort and embarrassment far too much. "Just put it down," Andrea said harshly. "I'm not hungry," she lied, only to have it declared as such by the growl of her stomach when the delicious aroma reached her nostrils.

"SUIT YOURSELF, SKIPPER."

Kasey casually leaned her back against the crate, hiding Andrea from view of everyone else in the warehouse should they walk passed. She stared intently at Andrea's exposed milky white skin, the only flaw being the pinkish scar from a little over a week ago, on her shoulder. It didn't diminish what Kasey saw as perfection. The short hairstyle she wore accented the delicateness of her features, from the auburn hair to the grey of her eyes. Lips begging to be kissed; at least Kasey perceived them that way since she felt an incredible need to do just that.

One impression stuck clearly in her mind, Andrea was beautiful in any circumstance. Kasey wanted to reach out and caress her, but stifled the response with a determination she hadn't known she possessed. Inwardly, Kasey relished watching the discomfort, as it made Captain Knight more human; she became Andrea, the woman.

Not to mention, Kasey had an advantage. She had glimpsed into Andrea's mind and her heart. She knew Andrea's foremost secrets, knew the reasons for her uneasiness. Kasey would never use it against her, but reveled in the glorious glow of private knowledge.

ANDREA STARED BACK, wondering if she was so tired and drained as to be seeing what wasn't there. Kasey was being Kasey, carefree and childlike. She hadn't sprouted horns and a tail. But something had changed, though Andrea was unable to pinpoint what that something was. Kasey sorted through the box of food, turned to her, and in a voice husky with emotion, said, "I should help, since you don't have your strength back."

"That won't be necessary, Lieutenant," Andrea said nervously, finding strength in reminding herself of their status. "Just get my clothes and leave so I can dress. I actually feel better than I expected."

The last statement brought the onslaught of the memory of believing she would die at the hand of Billy's men and Andrea cringed inside. She'd come so close this time; closer to death than she ever had, the thought an unsettling one.

"No, ma'am, no can do. If you want clothes that badly, you'll have to get them yourself.

Otherwise," Kasey said with a shrug, bringing Andrea's thoughts back to the present, "You'll have to do it my way." Her green eyes twinkled mischievously and Andrea felt panic rise. Kasey had such an effect on her that Andrea felt her pulse race wildly every time Kasey looked at her. Andrea had no control over this current predicament she found herself. Part of her was ecstatic, the worst part being she didn't really understand why. This was new territory for her and a little--no, a lot--frightening. Andrea's gaze locked on Kasey's hands, watching every movement made, following them as she opened a container of soup and retrieved a spoon full.

"Don't argue. Open wide," Kasey said. Andrea accepted the liquid with reluctance, but didn't put up an argument.

Kasey watched Andrea's lips wrap around the spoon, her hand shaking from the powerful image the simple act played in her head. Inwardly, the mental picture her words brought on aroused her. *Get hold of yourself, Kasey.* However, her body didn't listen to her mind's plea. Kasey's blood heated to a feverish pitch.

A groan escaped Kasey's lips as she put the container aside hastily, and cupped Andrea's face in her hands. "You're going to need to fire me," she whispered hoarsely, before taking Andrea's lips with her own. She needed to confirm Andrea was indeed alive and well, here with her. Kasey's heart admitted the impulse as purely wanting to kiss her, needing to, as she needed blood to pulse through veins, needed the air she breathed into her lungs, needed Andrea in her life.

The contact took them both by surprise.

Andrea knew she should push Kasey away, but didn't have the strength, physically or emotionally. Instead, she drank freely of the offering, finding it more nourishing than the soup could possibly be. Her hands released the grasp on the blanket and wrapped themselves around Kasey's neck, not caring that she had exposed herself.

The need to touch Kasey was too great. Andrea felt a hunger that could only be satiated by physical contact--only with Kasey. Andrea tried to reason that desire was purely motivated by the need to feel a warm human touch, to prove she wasn't dead; even though Kasey's kisses made Andrea feel she'd achieved a heavenly status. She knew she was alive, more alive than she'd ever been and didn't want to lose this moment. She'd come so close to death and it could easily happen again.

As she freely savored Kasey's lips, returning kisses with her own demanding heat building, Andrea felt the gradual change. What began gently turned into a desperate battle to have it all, to devour every breath. They couldn't get enough of each other, and they responded in kind--hungrily. Two souls whose only lifeline was each other, realizing separating would plunge them into darkness, emptiness without feeling.

Kasey felt Andrea respond and it heightened her need. Ravenously she devoured every morsel, darting her tongue into Andrea's mouth to taste all she offered. Taking one hand from Andrea's face, Kasey reached down, cupped a firm breast, pleased, and exhilarated as a gasp escaped Andrea's lips. She felt so good to touch that Kasey didn't want to let go. However, she reluctantly released Andrea and pulled away.

Andrea's eyes glazed with passion. "Kasey," she whispered hoarsely, "This isn't right. What about the others? What if they come in?"

"Hell with them," she said, her voice guttural with need. "Andrea, this is right. I know you want this, too. I can feel the way you return my kisses."

Kasey could see passion battling logic, Andrea's expressions twisting and faltering. She sensed which emotion had won by the way Andrea's eyes closed tightly; logic was thrashing passion by a long shot.

"Don't let rank be a factor. You're a woman and deserve to feel like one. Let me show you just how it can be. How womanly you are." Kasey finished the statement with another kiss.

Each time Kasey touched her, Andrea could feel her resolve weakening. She wanted Kasey, wanted her badly, every nerve inflamed by the contact of her hands, her lips. A small light of logic kept glowing a warning: this would change everything. It would slam a door closed, even as it opened one.

How long could that door stay open? What if lovemaking flung Kasey back to her time, permanently? If it closed that portal for the last time with Kasey consigned to this time, they could never continue their life as it had been these last months. She could never order Kasey into a difficult situation or treat Kasey as a commander should, had a hard enough time doing it now. Andrea couldn't bear the thought of separating to different units, but they could never work together and expect it to be the same. Giving her love to Kasey the way she wanted to give it right now would be like the final nail in a coffin.

One other point of logic flashed in her already tormented mind. Andrea loved her and Kasey hadn't said the words aloud. Maybe Andrea didn't really know her. Could Kasey accept love and passion and then continue as if nothing had happened between them? Was Kasey's need based solely on the moment of opportunity?

Andrea couldn't respond to her own questions, wasn't sure she wanted answers. She couldn't just get up and walk away. Grabbing the blanket and pulling it close to her chest, Andrea wished she could disappear. Why was she allowing this? Was she reading more into Kasey's emotions than were there? Was it because of death's narrow escape?

Sensing Andrea's decision had been made, Kasey bowed her head and dropped her hands; Andrea's military mind was strong, but Kasey hadn't realized she would put logic before happiness. She could make Andrea happy, especially for the moments in each other's arms--time she would cherish forever.

Kasey wanted to make promises, but knew they'd be impossible to keep under present circumstances. If Andrea would only give her the chance to show how much she really cared, how she meant everything to her.

Why didn't she just explain that she knew and shared the same feelings? Impossible. If Kasey admitted to the knowledge, Andrea would feel violated. She would, if the situation reversed. So where did that leave Kasey? With the heartbreaking realization, she'd have to play along by Andrea's rules.

"Much as I hate to, I'll honor your decision," she said, not caring the pain in her heart might be obvious on her face.

Andrea felt abandoned.

When Kasey took her hands away, Andrea felt even more alone. Sorry she'd distanced herself, she felt the tears building and turned her head away.

"Don't you see, Kasey, it would change everything," Andrea said, her voice full of the sadness in her heart.

When Kasey chuckled grimly, her emotional torment evident, Andrea let the tears fall. Kasey's reply was soft, almost mournful. "Don't you see? It's already changing." Crying in earnest, sobs filled Andrea's throat and tears ran uncontrolled down her face, dripping warm and wet on her exposed chest.

Andrea was scared, but not like when she believed she would die and not be able to say goodbyes. Scared to lose a part of her she'd locked away for so long, a part she feared to release, her heart, her soul.

Kasey reached forward and pulled Andrea into her comforting embrace. "I'm sorry I upset you. Please don't cry." She held Andrea for quite some time. When the sobs stilled, Kasey gently shifted her away at arm's length. "Get some sleep. You're still weak from your ordeal with Billy and his men."

When Kasey shifted to move away, Andrea grabbed her arm, her voice pleading, "Please don't leave me alone. I don't want to be alone right now."

"I'll just be over there," Kasey said, indicating her own discarded blanket.

"No." Andrea dropped her gaze, unable to explain fear bordering on childish insecurity. She didn't want Kasey budging from her side, afraid Kasey would be lost to her forever if she didn't keep her close right now. "I know it's asking a lot, but I don't want you to leave me. Maybe what happened has made me lose a few screws securing my brain, but--" Andrea couldn't finish. In answer, Kasey wrapped the blanket more securely about her while nudging them closer against the crate. "I understand."

With Kasey positioned comfortably at her side, Andrea raised her head and placed it on Kasey's shoulder, then placed her hand on her chest, fingers spread as if to hold Kasey in place. She couldn't remember the last time she felt this safe, cherished.

Andrea closed her eyes and breathed deeply. "Kasey?"

"Yes?"

The emotional torment Andrea inflicted on herself and on Kasey, though unintentional, was taking its toll. Her strength sapped by the internal fight she waged, she felt unable to maintain any semblance of control. "I--" she started, then fell silent. Then she whispered, "Thank you." Kasey gently stroked her forehead in smooth soothing motions. The simple movements made Andrea's weariness stronger. She had to strain to add, "I wish you could understand."

"I understand more than you know," Kasey said, lightly kissing the top of her head.

Chapter Twenty-One

ANDREA WOKE FEELING disoriented yet safe. She listened to a soft thumping sound, and recognized it as Kasey's heartbeat. She smiled, glad Kasey couldn't see it spreading across her lips. It wasn't characteristic for Captain Andrea Knight, Militia Advisor. Careful not to rouse Kasey, she sat up, maintaining hold of the ever-present blanket. She wished she had clothes on. Andrea looked long and hard at Kasey, taking in every nuance. Gentled by sleep, her features took on a different appearance. Remarkably beautiful anyway, sleep gave Kasey a younger, peaceful quality.

Since leaving Okinawa, Andrea thought of Kasey in a new light. Caring for a friend was one thing, Andrea thought reasonably, but she'd gone beyond that stage now. She cared for Kasey

with every fiber of her being. Was caring enough? In her heart, she did love this woman. Did Captain Knight really know what love was?

Memory of their conversation had taunted her during her short sleep. Andrea knew Kasey was right, circumstances had already changed between them. They could never go back to their initial relationship and part of her gladly accepted this, yet another part became deeply saddened.

Andrea couldn't-- wouldn't--let Kasey disappear with so much unresolved between them. With Kasey, she felt strong, whole. Now she realized the strength was determination not to let Kasey down, to prove herself worthy of Kasey's affection, worthy of her love.

Thinking back, Andrea realized Kasey had come to this conclusion long before, in her own way; obviously, Kasey's knowledge on the subject proved better than Andrea's. It explained the look in her eyes during the quick kiss in the barracks and the school, her pledges to keep Andrea safe.

Kasey's personality made it difficult at times for Andrea to remember that she was from another era, having adapted quickly, with an attitude that gave the impression of a woman making difficult situations seem like fun. Andrea could no longer imagine Kasey not being around, though reality dictated that time was inevitable.

As Andrea continued staring at a sleeping Kasey, she recalled Sherman's comment about bringing Kasey to life. In a manner of speaking, she had created Kasey, with the manufacture of the DataCard. It had only been a while since Andrea pulled her body from the debris, pulling Kasey from one war into another. In that short time, Andrea had started to believe the false information herself. When she was with Kasey, it was hard not to believe they'd completed years of working together, as they had worked so fluidly every step of the way.

However, their friendship had taken a different road than the one mapped in her mind. Along the way, their friendship changed into feelings of affection. At least on her part, Andrea realized starkly, a love stronger and deeper than she could ever have believed possible.

Why had she never understood--acknowledged it--until now?

So what was she to do?

Careful not to wake her, Andrea gently rested one hand upon Kasey's chest, watching her and wondering dangerously: Would it be so bad to share her body with Kasey, since she already had her heart? At least Andrea would have a memory to cherish on the long, lonely nights they would no longer share. Nights Andrea would wonder where and how Kasey was doing. Memories of even a single night of passion, and knowing it would be passionate with Kasey, would sustain better than a long litany of "what ifs". Memories, which would be impossible to take away, even if Andrea came this close to death again.

Andrea's heart won. It sent a message through her body before her mind could react. She bent her head closer and gently brushed her mouth to Kasey's, needing to feel those full lips. Kasey's lips were as soft as she remembered and, even in sleep, brought a fire to Andrea's very soul. Andrea's fingers ached to touch Kasey's body, her own skin tingling at the thought of Kasey's naked flesh pressed close, but Andrea reined in that impulse, not sure she could stop once she started. Andrea tried to pull away.

Kasey's hand held her in place; mere inches separated them. Eyelids lifted and Kasey's gaze held Andrea as securely as her hand. Mesmerized by the emerald depths, Andrea's heartbeat jumped erratically.

"What an interesting wake-up call." Kasey said, taunting Andrea.

"I'm sorry," Andrea said. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It was worth it. You can wake me like that anytime," Kasey said, then smiled in her disarming way. Kasey didn't release her hold, but stroked her fingers in a gentle, soothing motion on Andrea's neck. "Care to try it with your target awake?"

"Kasey, I--"

"Hush," Kasey said softly. "One more kiss and I'll release you."

The look that crossed Andrea's face reminded Kasey of a trapped animal. Staring at Kasey for so long, her private emotions warring with one another, Andrea's face changed through a myriad of expressions. Kasey was about to relinquish her hold when she felt Andrea shift closer. With her eyes tightly closed, Andrea brushed her lips in a short kiss. Kasey removed her hand and let Andrea sit up.

"Was that so bad?" she asked, choked from the emotional havoc kissing Andrea caused her. Kasey wondered why Andrea only allowed herself to touch when she was asleep. Kasey was glad for it, no doubts there. However, was it only due to the stress of near death? Did she kiss Kasey only because Kasey was available and Andrea was--what? Scared? Mortal?

Why didn't Andrea admit what Kasey already knew from the healing?

Averting her face, Andrea responded with a quick shake of her head. She knew she wanted Kasey, body and soul, and couldn't understand why this was so difficult. It was her own private hell: to desire Kasey so much yet be so afraid to obtain her goal. A new wrinkle marred the fabric of her thoughts. What if she weren't good enough, and couldn't convey the right feelings with touch? She'd been so concerned with her career she'd never been intimate with anyone before; afraid that any woman would be no different in personality from the men of her own flesh and blood. They were cold and calculating; wanting what they could get, and then discarding; use her for personal gain and never looking back. What if she failed Kasey's expectations of intimacy? Andrea couldn't let Kasey know just how naive she really was in emotional expression of any kind.

Kasey gently rubbed her back and asked, "How about a little something to eat? You're probably famished."

Andrea turned to face her, agitated. As usual, Kasey was giving her a way out by acting as though nothing had happened between them. "I don't want food, I want you." She held Kasey's surprised gaze, unable to turn away, astonished she'd blurted her thoughts into words she had never intended to utter.

"Oh."

"It's just tha--" Andrea broke off in total mortification. The distress she felt relayed the message to her hands, twisting the blanket until her knuckles whitened.

"Just what?" Kasey laughed nervously. "Either you want food, or you want me. Which?"

Andrea moaned in her frustration, angry Kasey wasn't making this easier, and subsequently blurted her response. "What if I do it wrong and disappoint? What if you think I'm willing for all the wrong reasons?" Not certain what reaction she expected, Andrea knew Kasey's rich laugh wasn't the one on her mental list. "It's not funny, Kasey." Embarrassed, Andrea started moving away.

"Not so fast," Kasey said, sitting up and catching Andrea's arm.

"Please, let me go," she whispered in shame.

"My darling little captain," Kasey said, locking her gaze to Andrea's. "Afraid of no one, and yet so afraid to be with someone; sure of every battle, but not sure of such a basic maneuver."

Andrea scowled at her. "Not just anyone. You. And I think this is something more than 'basic maneuvers'."

Kasey reached forward, clasping Andrea's face in her hands. She looked into the grey eyes that had become almost silver in Andrea's distress. "How could anyone as beautiful as you have doubts? Hasn't anyone ever told you how special you are?"

"Most people don't get that close to an armed woman, especially one with my shooting record." Andrea chuckled, but the sound lacked humor.

"Then let me be the first and last to do so."

Kasey felt a new height of exultation, an odd and exciting feeling knowing she would be Andrea's first and, if she had her way, only lover. She placed her hands on Andrea's shoulders and caressed them tenderly, leaning forward and kissing her scars slowly, taking time not to miss any part. As she reached the lower end of the damaged flesh, Kasey felt Andrea clench her hands. Kasey sat up and noticed a strange look in Andrea's eyes, and then recognized the reason for the new tension, her scars.

"Just because a woman has a flawless body doesn't mean she isn't flawed. Your scars aren't hideous, just proof of what a strong woman you are," she said, meaning every word. Kasey laced one hand into hers, releasing them. "You don't need such a death grip, you know. I won't hurt you. I just want to devour every inch of you with my eyes, my touch and my lips."

Reluctantly, Andrea released the blanket, embarrassed by Kasey's stark perusal of her naked form, startled when she moved completely away. Sure she'd already done something to displease Kasey, Andrea asked, "What's wrong?"

She simply chuckled. "Nothing. I just thought you'd be more comfortable if we were both undressed. Equal terms so to speak."

As Kasey removed her clothes, Andrea contemplated turning away but couldn't find the strength to do so. Every article of clothing Kasey eliminated made Andrea's eyes open wider. She'd always perceived Kasey to be a well-toned woman, but her stature seemed to grow in all her naked glory. Arms and shoulders were well defined, abdomen tight and flat, breasts full, firm and high. As Kasey removed her pants, Andrea saw her calves and thighs were as toned as her upper body. Suddenly, Andrea felt very unsure of herself. What could Kasey possibly see in her? Kasey was a perfect example of womanhood.

Kasey didn't miss Andrea's reaction to whatever turmoil tortured her thoughts. Returning to the mattress, she extended a hand to turn Andrea's face back toward her. Smiling, she whispered, "We're even. You see all that is me, as I do all that is beautifully you. Are you disappointed in me so far?"

"No."

"Nor am I with you." Kasey stretched out beside her, an elbow on the mattress, her head resting on her hand, gazing at Andrea. Though Andrea hadn't attempted to retrieve the blanket again, Kasey knew she wanted to when Andrea glanced helplessly in its direction. "This will ensure you don't use it as a barrier between us," Kasey said as she grabbed hold of the blanket and flung it out of reach. Andrea's hands moved nervously, not knowing what body parts to cover. She finally laid them at her side, her hands balled into fists.

Taking one hand in her own, Kasey pulled it against her chest, holding it there until Andrea relaxed enough to open it, her fingers extending over Kasey's skin, her palm warming the breast instantly. "Don't be afraid to touch me, Andrea. I assure you I'll have no similar difficulty," she murmured, nuzzling Andrea's ear with her lips.

The initial contact astounded Andrea. Kasey's silky-smooth flesh was warm beneath her fingers, which trembled at the contact. Heat seemingly extended outward into Andrea's fingers and coursed through her body. She felt the toned skin on Kasey's chest gently lift with each intake of

breath. Slowly Andrea moved her hand and touched Kasey's other breast below the nipple, shifting her fingers upward and tracing it, then bent and tenderly kissed its contours. Kasey groaned at her initiative. Andrea felt her shiver just before Kasey pulled away. "Turn-about is fair play," Kasey whispered. As she cupped a breast, outlining it with her tongue; it firmed beneath the onslaught. Andrea moaned in short gasps, arching her back and pushing herself closer to Kasey. As Kasey switched to Andrea's other breast, one hand roamed down to her flat stomach and rested on the curls of Andrea's mons. Andrea immediately jumped at the intimate contact, but Kasey went lower, testing the warmth between her legs. "Mmm, you're so wet, so--"

The touch was gentle, but Andrea felt oddly frightened. Her mind wanted her to pull away, but her body only raised itself closer. Kasey's fingers explored her, and she wanted to cry out from the astonishing torment it wreaked on her senses. Biting her lower lip to stop any sound from escaping, Andrea closed her eyes tightly.

Then the wonderfully torturous movement stopped. Andrea opened her eyes hesitantly to find Kasey staring at her. Andrea opened her mouth to ask what she'd done wrong, but clamped it shut when Kasey shook her head, as if sensing her inquiry. Kasey bent again and captured Andrea's lips with her own, beginning slowly, gently, then more demandingly.

Andrea's body was on fire from head to toe, in burning need for more. The sensations changed again to hunger for Kasey, as they had earlier. All the while knowing Kasey shared the same appetite by the way her lips possessed Andrea's. Andrea responded heatedly, unable to get enough. Arms locking behind Kasey's head, Andrea pulled her even closer, trying to meld their very flesh.

In answer, Kasey positioned herself above, her body nestling between Andrea's thighs, her face buried into Andrea's neck as she ran her tongue from ear to collarbone, retracing the path with warm kisses.

Andrea sucked in her breath when Kasey entered her with a gentle thrust of a finger. Almost before Andrea could respond, Kasey possessed her lips, drawing the cry into her mouth. Kasey began a rhythmic motion that set Andrea's insides aflame, bringing her to new heights of pleasure. Then Kasey stopped the tempo, scooting herself lower.

"Honey?" Andrea said in alarm.

"Hush. I won't hurt you." Hurt, no--surprise, yes.

Andrea jolted when Kasey's tongue darted back and forth across her clitoris, the finger inside her mimicking the tempo, Andrea moaned and it sounded like a whimper, her breathing erratic.

Andrea thought she would die of the sheer intoxication.

She was wrong.

Just when Andrea didn't think she could take any more exquisite torture, Kasey tenderly clamped her teeth against her swollen nub and with a last push sent her over the edge of pleasure as her body quivered to completion so intense Andrea believed she might pass out.

Kasey raised herself on her arms, and with a satisfied smile asked, "Are you okay?"

Andrea laughed, but the exhaustion had it sounding like a grunt. "I will be, soon as I catch my breath." She inhaled deeply, her body steadily returning to normal. With an outstretched hand, Andrea whispered the command, "Come here, woman."

Complying, Kasey rejoined her on the mattress, stretching alongside and tugging her into a spoon-embrace. "You're incredible," Kasey whispered into her ear, kissing her just behind the lobe. "You should get some rest, though."

Twisting until they faced each other, Andrea tucked a few strands of Kasey's perspiration-dampened hair behind an ear. "There's time." She could feel the incredible press of Kasey's breasts against her own, and the contact was amazing. She grinned, pushing Kasey back just enough that their bodies no longer touched. "I think, since knowing you, I've become a breast connoisseur. Yours are by far the best I've laid eyes on." Andrea bent her head and flicked her tongue across the closest nipple until it puckered. "Or tasted." She ran her palm down Kasey's waist, over her hip, and along her thigh, before stopping at the knee and drawing the leg across her hip.

Then, Andrea reached between the two of them, scooting closer as she did, and rubbed her palm across Kasey's mound. The hair was a tad coarser than it looked and tickled a bit. Imitating as best she could, Andrea's own hands and fingers explored every inch of her, relishing in the soft sounds of pleasure from Kasey.

Increasing the cadence, her exploration in the damp warmth felt so incredible to Andrea. Kasey exploded in a gush of wetness of total fulfillment, her thighs clamping Andrea's hand as she reached climax with a final, shaking spasm.

Spent, they both lay together, breathing irregular and staring at one another as if seeing for the first time. Andrea gave Kasey a kiss and hugged her. As Kasey nudged closer, Andrea shifted until they were spooning again.

"Lieutenant?" Andrea spoke in a hushed tone, glad she wasn't looking at her.

"Yes?" came the drowsy reply.

"Thank you for teaching your Commanding Officer how ignorant she is."

Kasey chuckled faintly. "Anytime, Skipper. Anytime."

Andrea sighed and gave the arm holding her a fierce hug. She hadn't felt tired a few moments before, but did now. It was like a great burden had been taken away.

"I love you," she murmured, before falling into a sound sleep.

Kasey, aware Andrea had fallen asleep, whispered, "And I, you." She made a mental note to repeat the statement when her lover was awake. Then she, too, let slumber overcome her, a wide smile on her lips.

Chapter Twenty-Two

ANDREA KNEW SHE hadn't slept for long, but something had awakened her. When she opened her eyes, Kasey no longer lay beside her. Anxiously looking around, Andrea caught her sitting on her blanket, lacing the last eyelet of her boot.

"What's wrong?" Andrea asked, sitting up.

"Someone's coming. I thought it best not to find us as we were," she said with a smile. "Sure glad the military taught us to dress quickly." Kasey finished, stood and tossed Andrea the blanket she'd removed when they made love.

Andrea quickly covered herself, only seconds to spare.

Sherman entered with a scowl on his face. "Something's going on out there. I thought you should know." He glanced in Andrea's direction. "Glad to see you're feeling better. You gave us quite a scare for a while."

Clutching the blanket close, Andrea thanked him, her face flushed at being without clothes. Casting a glower at Kasey, she said, "I'd like to get dressed, Lieutenant. Do you think you could leave long enough for me to do that?"

"Yes, ma'am. Greg brought new ones to replace your damaged clothes," Kasey said with a nod in the direction of the box she'd brought earlier. "We'll be out front waiting."

After they left, Andrea got up and dressed, finding her boots with the rest of her destroyed uniform. Her pistol lay on top. Appalled at the state of her original clothes, her stomach churned at the sight of the dried blood caked over such a large portion, the material almost shredded. The memory of the knives Blades used made her wince and she shut her eyes tightly to block out the image. She would have to ask Kasey just how close she'd been to death.

Dressed, she squared her shoulders before following the direction Kasey and Sherman had taken, ready to get back to her duties. The quicker she finished all of this, the sooner she could carry on with her life, no matter how painful it might be. So much had changed. Andrea didn't know how these new complications would work out, but knew it had to be done. No matter how agonized and devastated it left her heart.

She found Kasey and Sherman with Greg. From the look on their faces, the situation wasn't good. Authoritatively, she walked toward them, glad for a task to keep her mind on business.

"All right, people, what's the status?"

Three pairs of eyes turned, her position as leader instantly recognized and accepted. Greg switched his gaze to her, deferring any briefing of details to Kasey, reestablishing military protocol.

"Well, Captain," Kasey said, shoving her hands in her pockets. "Greg's just come back from Bettina's with more food, and information."

Andrea immediately thought the worst and her voice caught in her throat. "Is she all right?" she asked, shifting her gaze from Kasey to Greg.

"Oh, yeah. Sending her best, too." Greg said, reassuring her.

Satisfied he spoke the truth, Andrea returned her gaze to Kasey so she could continue. "We knew martial law was instated when Sherman came to the house. You'd already left to make your rendezvous," Kasey added, to set the timetable of events. "The city is in an uproar. From the information being broadcast, the chaos is everywhere."

"Why?" Andrea asked simply.

"Apparently, a lot more has happened in the last few hours than even we've been aware of."

Kasey pulled her hands from her pockets. "I think all hell has broken loose, Skipper. We need to formulate a course of action. Before we do, I think we should include Official Hanako and Ambassador Caughley."

"Let's do it." Andrea started to move away, and then hesitated. She had no idea where they were. Kasey, having realized her dilemma, took point and they followed. Along the way, Kasey gave a brief summary of what she'd learned from Greg.

They all gathered in the small room where Mykael and Richard already sat on a cot, Sherman and Greg leaned against the far wall, while Kasey and Andrea stood on either side of the doorway.

"The time's come, people," Andrea said. "Whatever we're going to do must be decided and initiated. The city is now undergoing a war between the Scepters and CFFM. I've learned from Billy that General Knight and our traitor have been helping his cause, though unknown to each other, and having separate, yet similar, agendas. Since the beginning, Billy's had his own goals and used the other two as a stepping board for his own gain. We need to combine our knowledge

and formulate a plan. Many loose strings need tightening. First of all, we need to find out why this particular warehouse was selected by Billy as a rendezvous point."

"And why it leads to General Knight's house," Kasey said.

"What?" This bit of news startled Andrea.

Kasey shrugged. "With all that's happened recently, I haven't had a chance to tell you how we happened upon it. The Militia came to the house to arrest us for stealing photon laser weapons. They had orders to kill us on sight. Bettina told us of the tunnel in the basement. It led us here." Kasey gave her shoulder a supportive squeeze.

"I just assumed you followed the address on the note," she said to Kasey.

With this new evidence, Andrea couldn't doubt a large portion of what Billy told her had been true. "Who incorporated Martial Law?"

"Hank Brodie. Do you think he's our traitor?" Kasey asked.

"I don't know." Andrea shook her head. The idea opened up many other avenues of thought. If Brodie wasn't involved, why come to the house? How did he even know to try? Yet, Sherman figured it out, so why not him? "We can't assume he is and we can't let our guard down. It still could be anybody."

Andrea looked at Sherman, still unsure of his involvement. Her attention caught on his missing hand for the first time. "What happened?"

Kasey answered for him. "That's how we knew they were coming for us. He'd gone to a storage area to get the lasers and make the meeting with Billy. He didn't think you would," she said when Andrea raised an eyebrow in question. "Billy was waiting. Cut his hand off to use the *TAP* for access. Barely conscious, Sherman came to us. We wouldn't have made it out of the house if it hadn't been for his warning. And the tunnel."

"Yes. The tunnel." Andrea turned around and stared out at the numerous crates throughout the warehouse. "Maybe we should find out what's in those before we continue."

She saw the broken metal cot. Bending, she retrieved a broken leg to use as a crowbar and moved to the closest crate. After placing the metal tip between the lid and side, she pushed downward. The wood didn't budge. Warm hands covered hers, sending heat through her body. She withdrew slightly, not wanting the others to notice the effect on her. She looked up to see Kasey smiling at her.

"I'll get it. Please?" Kasey said. "You're still recuperating, remember?"

Reluctantly, Andrea gave in, not wanting to cause a scene.

Once opened, Kasey tossed the lid to the side and pulled out the packing material on top. She let out a low whistle. "If all the crates are like this one, the General's planning one hell of a war." To substantiate her statement, she pulled out a rifle and inspected it completely, finally checking the front sight. "Wow."

Andrea took it from her and did the same. "They're M-1911A1's, with grenade launchers. This thing even has an infrared scope. The general's obviously been planning this for a while, if all the crates have weapons." Andrea frowned and mumbled to herself, "But the government would have supplied artillery power for the military once reestablished." Then the answer came to her. She spoke louder to include the others. "Of course. That's why Billy knew about this place. Dear ole Dad's been the supplier of Billy's arsenal."

Sherman broke in. "Then why steal Tactical Nukes from Okinawa, especially if they already had access from General Knight."

"Billy's other inside man didn't know. He's been playing them both for weapons. He's really serious about this takeover, and it's not on any small scale, either." Andrea ran her fingers through her hair. Answers seemed to fall into place.

The answer to an old question that had been nagging her finally became clearer. Something she hadn't perceived as a problem--until now. Andrea hoped she was wrong.

"Greg. How could you use your DataCard at the hotel and it not show up?"

Six sets of curious eyes turned to him.

He stepped back defensively and held up his arms in a self-protecting fashion. "Captain, please. It's not like you think. I swear."

"What do I think, Greg? Tell me, please," she said, amazed she was able to keep her tone level.

He laughed nervously. "I'm not a traitor. It may look that way, since I've been in on all the information from the start. You think I conned my way into your good graces to tell Billy, or the general, of every step you've taken, but I swear I haven't. There's another reason. Another person involved that you haven't met yet."

Andrea didn't want to imagine the prospect of being such a poor judge of character. She had really grown to trust Greg, even care for him like a younger brother. Right now she hated having to accuse him, but the evidence was convicting him with probable guilt, no matter how insubstantial the proof to this point.

"Who haven't we met? And, why didn't your DataCard register?" she asked, quietly. She didn't want her tension to show.

"It did register," he said. "Just not as Corporal Greg Mitchell."

Andrea didn't understand. Who was he?

"I know I should have been up front with you," he said.

"Yes, you should have. How about now?" Andrea said, getting testy.

"I enjoyed the intrigue so much, having a little adventure, you know, before giving it up for my real identity."

"What is it? Your real identity."

He paused before answering and cleared his throat. "You haven't met Ambassador Harley, Head of Security to America's United President. My mother."

Official Sherman interrupted. "She's dead."

Greg turned toward him and sneered. "No more dead than I'm a corporal."

"Aren't you military at all?" Kasey and Andrea asked in unison.

"No, I'm not." He sighed. "My mother's been trying to uncover the traitor for quite some time.

She almost had him, but they found her out before she could expose him. As Head of Security, my mother noticed strange activity on General Knight's part and thought I could get closer. You know, watch and report it, but only possible as a military person. The DataCard's got a fake chip in it. It's a duplicate of my TAP."

"Where's your mother now?" Sherman asked.

"Where no one will ever find her, and I plan on keeping it that way."

Andrea rubbed the back of her neck. Everything continued getting more confusing: prior military who weren't military, Militia takeovers, government takeovers, a traitor who could be anyone from anywhere, and a gang Leader Supreme wanting it all.

"Greg, why didn't you explain this to me before now?" She was hurt he hadn't confided in her. Yet, she was angrier with herself for not seeing past, or expecting, the ruse.

He shuffled his feet. "I wanted to, Captain. I really did. I knew all along General Knight was your father, so I couldn't. When I saw how he treated you, I knew you weren't in on any of it. I

would have said something then, but the opportunity never came up. So much began happening, I didn't know where to go next; or what to do, who to trust."

Her face flushed from his mention of the general. She'd never live down the episode with her father, though she'd learned to accept distrust because of who her relatives were. Right now, she couldn't afford to lose an ally. No matter how hard she tried to understand the bizarre story, she had to admit it was a plausible one.

"It's all right. Some points, I understand." She glanced at Kasey for her support. "I guess we can cross Greg off the list of suspects. The next problem will be what to do with Richard, Mykael, and Sherman while we go get Billy."

"No you don't, Andrea!" Richard jumped from the cot. "I won't have you hide me away, not when I have a job to do. My mission still isn't completed."

Standing her ground, Andrea looked him straight on. "Well, Ambassador, we seem to still have a problem, then, don't we? You haven't seen fit to inform me of just what your mission is. First, it's to get you to the United Presidents. I did that. You allude to being the only one to rid us of Billy, but don't explain how that can be possible. Seems to me, no one is who or what he or she says. Are you really an ambassador for the church? Or are you on an undercover mission, too?"

"Yes, I'm an ambassador. But you wouldn't understand my reasons for keeping secrets any more than the United Presidents."

"Billy told me about the military school and what they did to you," Andrea said, "how you two used to be friends."

He placed his hands on his hips and glared at her. With his blonde hair pulled back neatly, he appeared ready to give a lecture before a group of students. "You can't understand because of your background. You've been trained to see things as black and white. Avoid the grey. Certainly don't see the underlying powers behind it on a metaphysical reality. Hard as it will be for you to comprehend, good and evil exist only to destroy each other. Most people believe you can't have one without the second, but if wickedness grows too strong, it will happen. There's ultimate evil as well as ultimate good."

"You believe Billy is your ultimate evil?" she asked incredulously. "He's my brother." Andrea realized she'd raised her voice. She sighed. "Billy's just confused and hurt. When we capture him, I'll make sure he gets help."

Richard walked closer to her. "I know it's hard for you, Andrea, accepting your own brother tried to have you killed. Isn't that evil enough?"

She hadn't forgotten his betrayal, or mutually acknowledging a readiness to kill one another to do what each felt was the right thing to do. Billy had some good left. He demonstrated that by comforting her after she attacked him while they were discussing Marlee. He had to have some good; he could change.

Andrea felt the shattering of her heart again. She was losing control, losing her power to make a difference. Billy just needed help, though the evidence was in front of her. Even if it pained her, she had to make sure this turned out right. The only way to do that was to stop her brother.

Her mind raced with the knowledge of what had to be done, and she couldn't let her friends see her fall apart. She needed time alone, to think this situation through and find an alternate route.

"I'll be back. Wait here." Her voice cracked when she spoke.

She hurried from the area at a near run.

Blinded by tears, Andrea barely found the mattress, falling on it, defeated. For so many years she'd kept from crying, yet it seemed all she could do these last hours. Footsteps sounded and she lifted her head to see Kasey approach. Andrea wiped her face with the butt of her palm.

"When did I lose it, Kasey? At what point was I no longer in control of these stupid emotions?" Kasey sat beside her and pulled Andrea into her arms. "You haven't lost anything, honey. You'll do what's right when the time comes."

"Then why is nothing making sense? I've even said I'd bring Billy down, but I never thought I'd really have to. When a confrontation came, I honestly hoped I'd be able to get him help." She disclosed to Kasey the conversation between her and Billy, her attack on him. "He just took it. I even split his lip in the process." Andrea hiccupped. "He never hit me once. He could have, but he didn't."

Kasey chuckled. "Wish I could've seen that. You're hell-on-wheels once you get started."

Andrea turned from her embrace to look Kasey in the eyes, her heart melting at the tenderness she viewed in their green depths. She wanted to kiss her, but curbed the impulse.

"What am I to do? Take Richard to Billy and say 'Okay, guys. Have at it.'"

"Not exactly," Kasey said, clasping Andrea's hands. "Andrea, we all have a destiny. For Richard it's apparently Billy. Greg's is to find the man who forced his mother into hiding. For Sherman and Mykael, I hope it's to get the government back on the proper track, as much as is ever possible."

Andrea bowed her head. "And what about us?"

Kasey placed a light kiss on her forehead. "I'm not sure. I hope we'll always be together, sharing the love I feel for you. Right now, we have to finish this. We need to be rid of your father's powers and influence and stop the terrorist violence. Hopefully, we'll find the traitor along the way." She stood and tugged Andrea to her feet. "Let's arm ourselves with your dad's supplies and, as they say, kick some butt."

"Very well said, Lieutenant," came a gruff voice behind them.

Both spun to face General Knight, a rifle poised straight at them. Kasey hastily positioned herself in front of Andrea to shield her from harm, knowing Andrea was too stunned to object. "If you're going to shoot us, do it, before the others come," Kasey said venomously.

General Knight seemed oblivious to Kasey's presence. He glared at Andrea, before he peered down at the mattress, "Sleeping with tarts and troops? Indulging in such matters of the flesh?"

Andrea's face burned at the insult to Kasey. "That's low. Even for you, General."

He rolled his eyes. "I won't lose sleep."

She moved forward, despite Kasey's outstretched arm. "Let her go. If you shoot her, I'll see you rot in hell."

"Oh, such a tough little former-Marine, I've taught you well." His voice was filled with self-pride, his chest puffed. "Unfortunately, you won't have a chance. You'll be dead, too."

"Billy was right about you, Dad." She spat the last word as if it tasted foul to speak. "You want glory, but aren't man enough to get it by proper means."

General Knight's lips twitched. Still pointing the rifle at Kasey, he walked forward and jabbing her roughly in the chest with the muzzle, until she fell to her knees. Then, he reached across her and backhanded Andrea in the mouth. She, too, staggered to the floor. "Your brother has no room to talk. He's my puppet in all of this."

Eyes watering, Andrea returned to her feet. "Don't hit me again."

Angrily, Kasey edged closer to Andrea. "I'm going to enjoy killing you," Kasey said. Despite the gun leveled at her, she made a move toward the general, fury fueling her.

Andrea looked away, her gaze off the general, intending to stop Kasey. Afraid she'd be hurt needlessly, because of her. It was too late.

General Knight saw Kasey's approach and grabbed Andrea to use as a shield, awkwardly leveling the barrel on her head. "Any closer and you can pick her brains up with a mop, Lieutenant." "Is this the kind of bravery that earned you your stars?" Kasey asked angrily. If Kasey rushed him, she'd surely be shot. Where were the others? Why hadn't they come? Couldn't they hear any of this? Andrea felt helpless. Calmly, despite the quivering in her gut, her fear for Kasey gnawing at her, Andrea addressed her father. "Your puppet cut his strings. Billy isn't doing any of this for you. There's an inside man calling shots right along with yours, and Billy isn't listening to either." "That's bullshit. My son wouldn't dare betray me." "Wake up and smell the coffee, General. You lost control of him after Mom died. He's using you like you used us. As a means to get exactly what you want." "Let her go, you bastard! You can just walk out of here," Kasey tried to reason. "Better yet, we'll leave you to your guns. Just don't hurt Andrea." Her voice cracked with emotion. However, Andrea knew Kasey was reasoning with a mad man. One who couldn't care less if he lost another daughter, as long as he didn't lose his power. A sneer curled General Knight's lips. "Too late, soldier. She's going with me. And you, well, you'll be dead." "No," Andrea cried, trying to pull away from his grip. A shot rang out and Kasey fell.

Chapter Twenty-Three

GENERAL KNIGHT COULDN'T believe his luck.

All bad.

It started when he tried to enter the door from his tunnel and found his way barred. He never thought he'd have to use the trap door, pleased with himself for having it installed. The initial shock he'd felt turned to pleasure at finding Andrea with her Lieutenant, and no one else in sight. The thought of someone privy to his arsenal had been weighing heavy on his mind recently, turning his ulcer into volcanic acid.

His daughter he could deal with easily enough, he resolved, shifting her dead weight onto his other shoulder and switching his rifle to the opposite hand. As he did, he noticed the large bruise forming where he'd slammed the rifle butt into her cheek. "Well, girl," he said to her unconscious form, glad she couldn't talk back, "You asked for it. If you'd come along quietly, I wouldn't have needed such measures. Didn't stop me, though, did you? How dare you threaten your own father?" His laugh echoed in the tunnel, the maniacal sound music to his ears, unaware it was identical to Billy's.

"Almost there," he said, finally seeing the doorway to his basement. After climbing the final steps into the kitchen, General Knight advanced to the living room where he could hear sounds of the television.

ONCE INSIDE, THE General tossed his daughter's unconscious form on the couch already occupied by a sleeping Bettina. Startled awake, Bettina let out an ear-ringing scream. Seeing Andrea's condition turned the peal into a bout of tears.

"Oh, my dear child," she said, tentatively touching the bruise. Bettina turned on the General with a glare. "If she's seriously hurt, I'll--I'll--"

"You'll do nothing," he said contemptuously.

"What're you going to do?" Bettina asked, her eyes not leaving Andrea. "Where are her friends?" When he didn't answer immediately, Bettina twisted her head in his direction. She saw the wicked smile and the coldness in his eyes, and shuddered.

"Her Lieutenant's dead. She will be, too, after I find my son."

Bettina's heart sank, appalled by the callousness toward his own daughter, though she wasn't surprised. He loved his power, and using the people that could give it to him. Until they were no longer needed, then he discarded them like so much rubbish. She turned pleading eyes toward him. "She's your daughter. You can't kill her. Besides, you've already destroyed her if you've killed her friend."

"Hah!" He shook his head and sneered. "Then she'll welcome death. I'm helping her."

Rage and adrenalin filled the older woman. With fists balled, she lunged at him, pounding his chest and screeching, "You animal!"

"Enough." Effortlessly, he pushed her away.

Bettina landed on the couch with a grunt.

"Wake her up," he said. "I leave in five minutes and want her ready to join me." He stormed from the room and into his study.

Bettina retrieved a wet cloth and bowl of iced-water from the kitchen. As she applied it to Andrea's cheek, she received a moan in response. Bettina, filled with concern, moved to the decanter of brandy and poured some into a glass. Returning to Andrea's side, she held the glass to Andrea's mouth, slowly tipping it so it drained past her lips and down her throat.

It worked.

Coughing, Andrea lifted her hand to push the offending article away. Disoriented, she opened her eyes and found Bettina beside her. "Where's the general?" she said, sitting up. Every muscle and joint protested, and her cheek throbbed in pain.

"He's in the study," Bettina said. Her eyes filled with tears. "My dear child, I'm sorry. I know how much she--"

Andrea squeezed her eyes shut, vividly recalling Kasey falling to the floor. Dead. The pain in her heart numbed the pain in her body. She touched her lips with shaking fingers. The memory of Kasey's kisses, her touch would always remain just that--a memory. Why hadn't Kasey been transported back in time? At least that way, Andrea wouldn't have lost her forever, just given her back to the era she belonged. Death was too final. Kasey had just helped Andrea to live.

Shaking her head roughly, Andrea pushed aside any worry about the others; knowing they would find Kasey's body. She would reunite with them later. Right now, she had a job to do. Andrea had hoped to help her brother somehow; however, that too, would wait.

Her father came first right now; and take care of him she would. She doubted she could ever kill Billy, but the general was a different matter. He'd never shown the slightest bit of compassion or love for his children. That emotion had always come from her mother, her siblings, when younger, in Billy's case.

"I don't know how, Bettina," she whispered angrily. "But he'll pay. I'll kill him the first chance I get. Just as easily as he killed Kasey."

"I doubt it," General Knight said from the doorway. "Rest assured you'll join her soon."

He moved into the room and roughly pushed Bettina aside. "All right, Captain, on your feet. And don't give me any trouble. I have no qualms with killing you now as opposed to later."

"Then do it! Each second I'm alive brings you closer to your own death," Andrea said while hauled roughly to her feet.

"That's why I'm taking precautions." General Knight laughed. Before Andrea had a chance to protest or fight, he slapped a pair of handcuffs around her wrists.

The metal dug into her flesh and made her wince. In retaliation, Andrea lifted her manacled wrists and swung them at his head, catching him unaware. Blood was drawn and he cursed, clutching his face. She laughed bitterly as she noted an imprint from the handcuffs decorated the left cheek.

General Knight raised his hand, about to hit her, when he stopped it in mid-flight.

"Do it, General," she taunted.

"If I do, you'd only pass out again, and I need you awake." He grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her ahead of him in the direction of the front door.

Bettina ran between them. Using all her weight, she shoved her body into his. He staggered, but quickly recovered. He slammed his fist into her jaw. She fell to the marbled floor with a thud, her head made a cracking sound at the contact.

Andrea hurried toward her, only to be jerked away inches from Bettina's limp form and shoved out the door.

"KASEY?"

She moaned groggily, trying to sit up, disoriented. Her head throbbed. Then memory came like a flash. "Andrea?"

"She's not here, Kasey. What happened?" Mykael asked with concern.

"General Knight came. He's got Andrea. I've got to go after them."

Kasey pulled herself to her feet and felt dizzy. She clutched her head and pulled her hand away. Blood smeared her fingertips. "Thank God he aimed wildly. He had a lot of trouble controlling Andrea," she told them proudly of her lover. "He could've killed me. If he had, it would've spoiled all the fun I'll have in repaying him for this little kindness." Kasey added the last dryly, tapping near the wound with her index finger.

Mykael looked at her with wide blue eyes. "You'll have to find him first. Right now, we'll see to that wound."

"It's just superficial. I'm fine," she said.

Richard seemed distressed. "Will he hurt her?"

"He will. He threatened to kill us both only minutes before." Kasey stared at all of them, speaking to them honestly. "Look. I have to find her before he does anything stupid. If you want to join me, I suggest we get ourselves armed and get the hell out of here. If not, you're free to go your separate ways. I'll protect you as best I can, but Andrea is my main concern." No one said anything, just stared at her as if she'd sprouted horns. Interpreting the lack of a verbal response as a non-objection, she started to leave.

"Kasey, wait," Mykael called. After Kasey paused, she continued. "We're in this with you. I'll bandage the head wound and Greg will get some of those guns you found. You'll be no good to Andrea if you pass out from the loss of blood, will you?"

Sherman chimed in. "No, she won't. I'll help Greg."

"Yes, and I'll take care of that wound for you," Richard said. He closed in on Kasey and raised his arm.

Kasey grabbed his hand before it touched her. "No you don't. If you really are the one to take out Billy, I want you to have all your strength. "

"I understand." Richard lowered his hand.

After Mykael had tended to Kasey, they geared up with as much ammunition and rifles as they could carry without hampering their progress. Then they went to the dock and waited for Kasey to decide which way they should go.

From the skies, they could see the lights from the battle already taking place. Kasey pointed in that direction. "Best bet's to go directly to the source. General Knight was livid when Andrea told him Billy modified his plans. He'll want to hear it from the horse's mouth."

Kasey turned to the four, none of them ready to see the carnage they were most likely going to find, but gave them one last chance to back out, just in case. "Greg. You know General Knight is involved. Shouldn't you go to your mother and tell her?"

"No. I want to do this, for Andrea." He bowed his head slightly. "And myself, Kasey."

"Official Sherman, you can go, too. No one expects an official to actually go into a battle."

Kasey pointed to his missing hand. "You've suffered enough."

Sherman's face burned red. "Are you suggesting I'm incapable?"

"No, sir, just unqualified."

"I'm not bowing out. I have a debt to pay and I intend to do it." Sherman squared his shoulders defiantly.

Kasey accepted his reply and turned to Mykael. She hadn't taken a weapon, stating she could help with the wounded, and promising she wouldn't slow them down. Lowering her voice a decibel, "Mykael, I know Richard has to do this, but you don't. Go back to Bettina and stay with her. You shouldn't go where we're going. It's too dangerous."

Mykael's eyes lit with indignation and she raised her voice. "Lieutenant Houston. I think we've wasted enough time. Let us get on with it. Preferably before it's too late."

Accepting, though not liking, the answers, Kasey shrugged. "Okay. Let's go." Her statement was followed by a loud crack of thunder that made her jump. "Great. Hope that holds off until after we find Andrea." Then a niggling thought struck her, made her heart skip a beat. Hadn't there been a storm brewing when she entered the cave on Okinawa?

The city was in an uproar.

Buildings burning, people screaming, and gunfire echoed from all directions. As they moved closer to the heart of battle, Militia Units scurried past them. All armed to the teeth. Field Medical Units darted in and out of the area, their packs, filled with the necessary supplies for emergency care, slung over their shoulders.

Kasey stopped next to one of the casualties, barely conscious and in pain. It was Sergeant Garcia from the Delta Unit on Okinawa. "Julio? What's Delta Unit doing here? What happened on Okinawa?"

Garcia tried to smile through the pain. "We were called back, Lieutenant. They said the island wasn't worth saving. We're supposed to let the locals handle their respective countries."

Kasey shot an angry look at Sherman. The official shook his head and Kasey acknowledged his silent answer that he wasn't aware of any such order. She then looked at the Medic helping Garcia. He, too, shook his head in answer to Kasey's silent inquiry.

The shake didn't go unnoticed, Kasey realized, when Garcia grabbed at her arm.

"Lieutenant, don't take the civilians in there. They've got some kind of weapon that's tearing us apart. It isn't live ammunition."

Grasping Garcia's hand, Kasey gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Let the Medic take care of you, Julio. You get well. There's still beer out there that we haven't tasted." She got to her feet. "Thank you for the warning about the armament."

Kasey walked a distance away. The others followed. Once out of earshot of the people running around, Kasey turned to Sherman. "It's those photon things, isn't it?"

"Yes." Sherman's gaze moved back to the dying man. "It works with radiation. It subdivides electromagnetic energy. Quantum Mechanics is not my field, Kasey, so I don't know how to explain completely. I can tell you, though, that hit by the photon is to literally have your cells divided; like ripping apart from the inside out. That's why it wasn't ever used during the other wars. The Council decided it was too inhumane."

"War is inhumane, Sherman." Kasey shook her head to clear it. This wasn't the time to get into a political or philosophical discussion. "Why weren't they destroyed?"

"Possible needs or uses for the future. We didn't want to see progress wasted, I guess."

"Well, progress is helping Billy win. We have to stop him. And fast." Kasey studied the group. She wanted to try to talk them out of going farther, but the expressions on their faces told her it was a lost cause. Moreover, she didn't have time to try to save their souls. That was Richard's department. "Watch yourselves. We have bullets and cell-disperser-things flying out there and either one will kill."

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE SOUNDS ISSUING throughout the room were deafening. Hank Brodie found it difficult to think a solitary thought amidst the noise. He'd come to Billy for answers and hadn't received a single one. From the confusion going on, he doubted he ever would. Then, to make matters worse, Hank wasn't sure he wanted to interrupt the Scepter leader anymore.

With commands and orders dispensed, Billy started to live up to his name: Barbarous Billy, Scepter Leader Supreme; certainly not a man to disappoint. Nonetheless, his people seemed intent on doing just that. Only moments ago, two Scepters brought the news--the northern perimeter was lost, even with the use of the laser pistols. The subsequent results to the update were devastating to watch, but Brodie did.

"You what?" Billy howled.

"Lost the perimeter, Billy," one stupidly repeated.

A strange red glow filled Billy's eyes.

Hank took a step back, afraid of the feral glare. Then the most frightening thing he'd ever seen happened. Billy raised his hand and pointed it at the two men. The fingertips twitched, slowly at first, barely noticeable. The speed picked up, and with it, the red glow turned to flame. It actually appeared as if fire lit Billy's pupils. Brodie couldn't control the trembling of his body, couldn't turn away either; some unknown power had taken control, rooting him to the spot.

"I'm tired of incompetence," Billy said in a breathy voice.

Red flame shot from his fingertips then, catching and coating both the men. Their screams and squirming caught the attention of those around the room. Smoke began to filter from the men as they burned, their flesh charring and falling from the bones beneath.

As quickly as he started, Billy stopped and glared down at the lumps of burned flesh that had been human, still were--barely. Billy pulled his knife free and advanced, gutting both men before Hank's very eyes. The scene would have appalled him, had he not witnessed what went on before.

The very reason he needed Billy in the first place was for his callousness, his ruthlessness. It made Brodie's stomach turn to see it done. Nervously, he wondered just where he stood. Also, how he would extricate himself without incurring Barbarous Billy's wrath.

Brodie was willing to deal with the losses later, hoping his own life wasn't one of them. Finally able to move again and about to leave, he immediately stopped when an angry Billy called out his name. Hank twisted to face Billy, more scared than he'd ever been in his life.

"I didn't mean to intrude, Billy. I wanted to ask if you've seen Official Sherman or Captain Knight," he said, stating his business quickly. He didn't care anymore if he received an answer or not.

Petrified, Hank couldn't even look Billy in the eyes.

The lack of attention didn't go unnoticed by Billy, who eyed the man, conscious of his discomfort. "Is there a specific reason you needed Captain Knight?"

"No, no. Just thought she'd know where Sherman was?"

"Well, I've seen Knight recently, but she's alone. Is that all?" Billy said. He knew Hank hid an ulterior motive, but didn't push at this time. He'd find out soon enough.

"Yeah, Billy, that's all."

Billy smiled wickedly. "Hank, you look upset.

Something wrong? You've been around my people before, so it can't be them. What is it?"

Brodie reached for his pipe, placing it between his teeth and clamping down hard. He blew out a stream of cherry scented smoke. "It's just that I've never seen anyone killed before. Not close up, anyway. It was unsettling."

One truth was clear. Official Brodie was terrified he was next, little knowing the thought had already crossed Billy's mind. Brodie was no longer of use, only an obstacle to remove-- permanently.

Then it would be General Knight's turn. He would eradicate his father with as much feeling as scraping mud from a shoe. Every moment would bring him pleasure as his father died.

What of Andrea?

Billy knew she meant well and wanted the best for him. She felt a need to salvage his soul and return the brother she had once loved with childhood adoration. After their meeting, he realized, even if she didn't, Andrea would never be the one to take his life. Tough, yes, and dangerous in her own right; but she would never be able to kill him, no matter how much she protested otherwise.

Billy Knight was a killer and he enjoyed it, very aware how dark his soul had become. If any light still burned in him, it would be because he still loved his living sister. Andrea was the only brightness in a family of sinister spirited men. Bright like their mother and Marlee had been before their deaths. He wouldn't pray, but fervently hoped she wouldn't put him in a position to force him to change his mind, force him to destroy her.

From the corner of his eye, Billy noticed Brodie tremble, pulling him from reflection back to attention to the current dilemma. Hank Brodie. The only way he could deal with the trouble properly was to keep the man in his sight. "I need you to stay beside me, Hank. You helped make all this possible. I want you to see firsthand how it turns out." Billy watched him go pale. "Is there a problem?"

Hank pulled his pipe from his mouth and wiped his forehead. "Billy, that's out of the question. I have to leave. No one is supposed to know of my involvement."

It was a ludicrous demand. The frayed string holding him together would surely break if he got any tenser.

"Your point being?"

"If anyone saw me, Billy, how would I explain?"

"It's not possible. By now, someone will have figured out your part in this." Billy crossed his arms over his chest. "Neither you nor General Knight are getting out of this as unscathed as you'd both planned. The ball's in my court."

"General Knight? What's he got to do with this?" Brodie bit hard on the end of his pipe.

"Didn't I tell you?" Billy appeared nonplussed. "Why, the general wants the government to give him his military back. He's made sure my men are armed against your Militia."

"He's been supplying you, too? What about all the information I've supplied to lead you right to storehouses of weapons? What about getting you Captain Knight and Ambassador Caughley, for heaven knows what purpose?"

"All gratefully accepted," Billy said graciously, "as one can't be too prepared for battle."

Billy walked to his chair, aware Brodie followed. Billy's black eyes scanned the number of people entering the building for medical help and more supplies. At least the battle seemed to be going as planned, except for a few minor discrepancies. He ached to join in the foray, annoyed Brodie was keeping him from all the great fun. "Heaven may not know, but I do. Destroying Richard will prove my power over the Government and Church. But it isn't working out that way, is it?"

"Captain Knight's fault, not mine. She's been a thorn in my side since this began," Hank said. "I can't figure out why you wanted her involved in the first place."

"But, then, you aren't expected to understand. That's my job."

Brodie puffed harder. "Just tell me, Billy. At what point were you going to fill me in?"

"In my own time. If at all." Billy shot him a warning look. Brodie involuntarily stepped back.

"I'm tired of your whining. If you have a complaint, tell me. We'll settle it. Otherwise, do as you're told. You'll be filled in sooner than you think."

As Billy rose to his feet, he noticed another shudder shake Brodie. He had long since become tired of dancing around with Hank and his father. Both underestimated him.

Both were all too soon going to regret it.

THE METAL HANDCUFFS bit into Andrea's flesh, bruised but no blood drawn. She intently watched everything around her, waiting for the first opportunity of escape, or retribution, whichever came first.

With the loss of Kasey, Andrea's body felt heavy, a great burden dragging it down. Flashes of Kasey being shot tormented her mind and heart, mingling with memories of the attack on Bettina who, though no match for the general, had valiantly tried.

Andrea felt empty of all emotion, save one: cold, calculated anger.

Part of her wanted to hide and grieve for Kasey, a loss she would never get over. Part wanted to lash out at the world, especially at her father. Her heart felt like crushed glass, ripping her insides to shreds. She wanted to personally make sure Bettina would be all right, but couldn't. Andrea wondered how long Bettina would lie there on the hallway floor before someone found her and could assist.

Now, Andrea sat in the car, helpless, and the anger continued to swell. Silently, she marked the speed of the car, scanning the area around her for a relatively soft place to land. She had to get away and free of the handcuffs before exacting her retribution. Slowly reaching for the door handle to jump, she was yanked backward by her hair, making her eyes water from the force.

"No you don't," the general said.

Pain ricocheted through her scalp as she wrenched free.

"How much longer?" she said, the mental list of reasons for harming her father growing.

He snorted, and then his lip twitched. "Soon, then you'll regret your hurry."

Some moments later, General Knight pulled up before a large, stone structure that looked like an abandoned church. After getting out, he came to the passenger side and dragged her from the vehicle. He took the stairs two at a time, forcing Andrea into a run just to keep pace.

They approached the main door as a group of men and women were leaving. Green and gold streamers alerted Andrea to where they were. This fueled her already furious state further, knowing they could desecrate a church in such a way and not care one iota.

After the last one exited, Andrea, pulled inside, saw pews filled with moaning bodies of the injured Scepters; the altar and cross, symbols of this holy place, thrown into a corner like discarded trash. Shaking her head in disbelief, Andrea paused to stare at the sacrilegious work done by the terrorists, and roughly tugged for her action toward a stairwell in the back of the room. At the bottom, they entered another room large enough for dancing or as a reception room for special occasions. From the number of people and the noise level, Andrea knew it to be the main hub of Scepter activity.

In the back, facing them, sat her brother. A man stood before Billy, his back to her and the General. Billy noted their entrance and raised a hand to silence the man. He didn't seem surprised to see the general, but irritation registered in his black eyes when he noticed Andrea's presence. Billy's astonishment quickly reflected anger when his gaze studied her face, scanned the bruise, and dropped to the handcuffs on her wrists. As the general pulled her forward, Billy rose menacingly.

"Why'd you bring her here?" Billy demanded, meeting them halfway.

"I could ask the same about him." The general pointed at the man behind Billy.

Andrea focused her attention on the man in question, for the first time recognizing Hank Brodie. He looked shocked to see her. It confirmed the identity of the traitor instantly, though admittedly, too late. *It seems the balls have all landed in Billy's court.* Now it was time to play.

Billy was turning cold eyes on the general, seeing the smirk that indicated his father thought him bested. "I'll rip that grin off your face."

"It's obvious I have the upper hand," the general said.

"How wrong you are," Billy said. "Let's go to battle. Finish this."

From the look on Hank's face, almost a match for the appalled one the general wore, Andrea knew they hadn't expected to actually go into battle with Billy. Although, despite their inner qualms, neither hesitated to follow. Their silence made it clear they were formulating a way out of the situation.

Once outside, a small band of Scepters joined them. Lightning was flashing through the sky, thunder boomed all around. The weather seemed to please Billy. He issued orders heard only by his men. Andrea strained to catch even a hint of the conversation, knowing Hank and General Knight, also, tried. Their scowls showed they had no luck at it either, and it brought a small amount of satisfaction to her.

The small group marched determinedly to the area that would evidently be the focus of Billy's battleground. Corpses, both Militia and Scepter, lined the streets on their steady course. Darting from body to body, Medics looked for those still alive and in need of medical attention.

Firefights echoed around them, bullets whistled by, explosions rocked the streets. As if immune to the dangers under a protective shell covering them, the group continued forward, the artillery stopping short of reaching them.

After a short period, they stopped traveling.

Andrea watched Billy survey the area and knew this was it, the place he'd chosen for his final stand. A look of genuine amusement crossed his face and she felt her stomach clench in anticipation of the worst.

Billy raised his hands toward the sky. "This is where they will all come to me. Witnesses to my power."

"All will witness your defeat," General Knight said.

The night air crackled with Billy's laughter. He swung his head toward his father. "You gave me the power to defeat you and can't take it back. Official Brodie gave me power and neither can he. My triumph is at hand."

He laughed again and Andrea felt a shudder wrack her body. Three men made mad with the drug of power; two outsmarted by their own tool of destruction and chaos.

Andrea, stuck with them, her hands bound. Unable to enact the vengeance she so desperately needed. Unable to forget or get over the image of Kasey--dead--and all because Andrea had let herself love the wonderful woman from the past. Let Kasey love her when Andrea knew how fatalistic the emotion would be.

All because of Andrea.

Chapter Twenty-Five

KASEY AND HER group were weary from all the walking and discouraged by the number of bodies they'd encountered along the way. They had already confronted three small bands of Scepters and dispensed with them easily enough. She was thankful none of the three carried the photon guns.

Discouraging Kasey most was not finding Billy or General Knight. She believed that if she found either man, Andrea would be there. A pain clutched her heart when she thought of her commander, her lover. She wondered how Andrea fared, believing Kasey might be dead, after having watched her fall from the bullet wound. Would Andrea do something rash? Would she court danger openly to destroy the man she believed killed Kasey?

Another thought struck her, threatening to remove the composure Kasey tried to maintain. What if General Knight had already killed Andrea? Was her body lying somewhere, the cold hand of death claiming another victim in this hellish battle? A cry caught in her throat, sounding like a strangled gurgle to her ears. Though a distinct possibility, Kasey believed she'd have vanished to her own time if Andrea was dead. Yet, she was still here.

From the directions the skirmishes were leading, Kasey realized the fighting had changed course again, this time westward. She instinctively knew it would take them to Billy. Certain they weren't going to balk at the change of direction, Kasey picked up speed.

With each step Kasey took, she silently prayed Andrea lived. She hoped beyond reason Andrea was of some use to father and brother in order to prolong her life. Anticipating an opportunity where she could tell Andrea what she should have already spoken a hundred times.

Let Andrea know how much she loved and needed her.

Forever.

AS TIME PASSED, Andrea watched silently as more groups of Scepters joined with their Leader Supreme. They surrounded him like expectant children looking to a father for guidance, for salvation.

Andrea knew the final showdown was about to start.

Tired and annoyed that the handcuffs remained, Andrea went to an empty spot away from the others. No one prevented her from doing so and she sat down, though she remained in a Scepter's sight at all times. Her mind raced with numerous possibilities of escape, only to push them aside with the reasons each would fail.

If only she could get hold of a weapon. With all three men in the same vicinity, Andrea was sure she could take them out before they executed her. It would be worth her life to kill these power-hungry fools. Besides, what did she have to live for? Bettina, in all probability, was hurt too bad to do anything on her own; and a medic unit wouldn't be available with all Hell breaking loose. She had witnessed Kasey's death. What did that leave her?

Alone and empty: alone, without her friends and loved ones with her; and empty without Kasey to fill the void that was once Andrea's heart. The years of "if only" had boiled down to "if only I had sooner." The concept of military morals had prevented her from acting sooner. Nothing compared to the pain of loss.

Movement drew Andrea's away from her thoughts.

Someone stood beside her. When she looked up, she saw Brodie looking down at her. His expression intent with thoughts she couldn't, nor did she care to, guess at. He didn't move to speak first, so Andrea looked away, annoyed that her skin crawled in his presence.

After a while, he did speak. "Everyone in your family has been a trial for me, from youngest to the oldest."

Andrea shot to her feet, leveling a cold stare at him. "As the youngest, I intend to be more of a trial for you."

Hank gave a sarcastic grin. "But you're not truly the youngest, are you?"

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"That wasn't always the case, was it?" he said in a low tone.

"Make your point, Brodie, and then get the hell away from me." She didn't want to hear what he felt compelled to say. If her intuition was correct, she couldn't understand what he hoped to gain, other than a wish to die now rather than later.

Casually, like all the time in the world was his to command, he pulled his pipe and began filling the bowl from the pouch in his pocket. Once it was lit, he continued, preening as though he knew he'd pushed the right button. "Didn't you wonder who sent Marlee into that crowd? Or did your naive little mind always blame Billy?"

Andrea had believed she couldn't feel any emptier, but she was wrong. Tears of aggravation filled her eyes and she blinked them back. Andrea locked her fingers together to hide the telltale shaking. "Why?" she choked. "She was a child."

"She was a tool. Told her Billy really needed her help, if she did one little thing for me, I'd take her to him. And it worked well. Better, actually, than I suspected it might. Billy looked at his people for the culprit and you looked at Billy. It kept both of you so preoccupied you never looked elsewhere."

Andrea dove, falling on top of him. Her hands pounded viciously at whatever part of his body she could make contact. Mostly, she pummeled his face, unhindered by the awkwardness of the handcuffs that helped to inflict punishment.

Her assault was so intense that she never felt the arms that pulled her free. Realizing she was no longer within range of Brodie, Andrea turned on the person who separated them. Billy stared at her in confusion.

"Why'd you stop me?" she demanded in pure rage.

"What's that all about?" he asked, pointing to Brodie.

She glared in Brodie's direction. His face was a bloody mess from her attack. Looking down at her hands, Andrea steadied herself with a deep breath and answered, "He confessed to sending Marlee, as a way to control the both of us."

Andrea hadn't believed Billy's eyes could get any darker. They did. The rest of him remained cold and aloof as he walked casually toward Hank, pulled to his feet by General Knight.

"Is it true?" Billy asked too calmly.

Hank paled. "It was a misunderstanding, Billy. I intended Andrea to be so upset and catatonic she would prove no difficulty to you. I wanted her to suffer during her final hours of life, as I suffered when she ruined all my--your carefully laid plans," he said, sweat beading on his brow.

"Is it true?" Billy repeated.

"No, Billy. I'd never use a kid, especially your sister."

"Why don't I believe you, Brodie?"

Hank shifted from one foot to the other. "I don't know why, but it's the truth."

Andrea knew Brodie's discomfort wasn't fear alone. He had lied in an attempt to save his own skin. She hoped Billy could tell, reasoning he had from the hatred in his eyes.

Billy barked with contempt. "Since when have you been honest? You're a politician, Hank, so 'truth' isn't in your vocabulary."

As Billy stepped closer, Hank moved back. "Okay, Billy. It was a mistake." He said shakily, his arms raised to ward Billy off. "I didn't think the kid would actually do it, even though she kept pestering me to let her help you. I was totally surprised when she went through with it."

"Not as surprised as you're gonna be." Billy motioned to one of his men who quickly joined him, then handed him a photon gun at his silent request. A wicked smile lifted Billy's lips as he aimed the weapon at Brodie's chest.

Andrea knew Billy would easily kill him. Much as she wanted Hank to pay for his part in Marlee's death, this wasn't the way. It was too inhumane.

"Please, Billy. Let the authorities take care of this. His own peers will try and sentence him. If he dies by your hand, he'll be remembered as a hero for going against the infamous Leader Supreme. People need to know his part in all of this."

She glanced from Billy to Hank. Then her attention captured the neutral expression on her father's face, and she sighed dejectedly. He couldn't have cared less that the identity of the man who'd killed his youngest daughter had been revealed. His only concern seemed to be how he would fair with Brodie out of the way.

Andrea looked back at her brother, her next words sticking in her throat. "The same goes for the general. Let the courts decide this."

Billy shook his head in disappointment. "Andrea. In a few hours from now, I'll be the only court system. They'll fall under my jurisdiction no matter what."

"Billy, you can't win." She lowered her head for a moment to calm her jangled emotions, before bringing her gaze back to his. "I can't let you."

He chuckled dryly before replying. "Dear little sister. You can't stop me."

Raised voices and movement caught their attention and they swung around to face the newcomers. Kasey, along with Greg and Sherman, stood with weapons poised at Billy, Hank,

and General Knight as well as various Scepters who'd made a move toward them. Behind them, several Militia units filed into the area, enclosing them within a circle of people. Stunned to see Kasey alive, Andrea's knees weakened and her lips spread into a heartfelt smile of joy. "Kasey," she whispered.

Kasey acknowledged Andrea with a broad smile of her own, and then added a bold wink. Richard walked toward Billy with determination.

"She can't stop you, Billy," Richard said in calm tones as if addressing a congregation. "But I can--and I will."

BILLY SCOFFED AT the man. "A preacher can only save my soul; if, and only if, I want it to happen. Neither my soul nor I want saving. But thanks for joining the party. Almost like the old days at school, isn't it?"

Richard's face flushed at the reminder. He looked at Billy, assessing him. "You do know I can remove your threat from the world. Do they think you're the only one who has powers? Are you afraid to admit it in front of your people?"

From the angry glare shot at Richard, Andrea realized he'd caught Billy's full and undivided attention. She was able to comprehend the underlying message Richard gave Billy because of the information Billy had shared with her; however, she also noticed the accusation of cowardice struck a discordant note. Both she and Billy squirmed at the sound.

"Don't make me laugh, Preacher. If it's your wish to die with these other mongrels," he said, indicating Brodie and General Knight, "then go right ahead. But no one, not even you, will strip me of my goal."

"Don't be too sure," Richard said, not willing to budge from his belief, his assurance of his cause. Then a skirmish began. The area was supercharged in chaos.

From one of the Scepter groups, a woman rushed forward firing at the Militia, her voice screeched, "You'll never take our leader!" Shots blazed through the clearing, hers the first body to fall. Those better trained dropped to the ground, making themselves smaller targets than those who remained standing.

Andrea propelled herself forward on her elbows, her wrists and hands still locked together in the handcuffs. She made her way to Kasey and gratefully accepted a weapon. More Scepters than Militia fell, until the photon pistols joined the battle.

The first person hit was Official Brodie. He fell to the ground squirming, his face twisted in terror and disbelief. Too soon, the expression became fear and pain, as he died a torturous death. When Andrea saw Brodie go down, she scanned the area to see who had fired the lethal shot. Her gaze found Billy. He shrugged in answer to her silent question; a look of satisfaction on his features instead of the remorse Andrea hoped would be there.

Her attention was so engrossed, Andrea nearly forgot about the dangers to herself until Kasey screamed her name, and raised her pistol. Twisting toward Kasey's voice, Andrea noticed a Scepter strike the weapon with a club, propelling it from Kasey's hand. Then Andrea caught Kasey's intention as she watched her father approach, with hatred burning brightly in his eyes. He held a rifle above his shoulder like a club. With her hands still bound, it proved difficult to maneuver entirely out of harm's way, the rifle butt grazed painfully against her shoulder.

Before he could aim his next attack, Kasey was shielding Andrea's prone body. A glint of steel caught in the moonlight before Kasey rammed it upward and buried it deep in the General's throat. General Knight glared maliciously at Kasey, then down at Andrea, his cheek twitching. Drowning in his own blood, he collapsed.

"Good thing you taught me the knife in the boot trick." Kasey helped her stand. "Are you all right?" she asked in a voice shaky with concern.

"What about you?" Andrea asked. "That guy hit you pretty hard."

"And the guy took my pistol. No pain, no gain," Kasey said. She winked, "Isn't that a marine motto or something."

"Something like that. Get these damn things off me. Please," Andrea said, feeling equally shaken.

"Gladly," Kasey acquiesced, bending to search General Knight's pockets for keys.

"Thank you." Andrea shook her wrists and arms, desperate to get the circulation flowing regularly.

"Not quite the look I'd envisioned for you, but I would have made concessions," Kasey said, mischief sparkling in her eyes, one corner of her lip lifting slightly in her amusement.

"Cute, Lieutenant, but I prefer you droning on about being hungry more than your attempts at humor when directed at me," Andrea said. Still, she gave Kasey a smile, weak as it was, appreciating her attempt to take Andrea's thoughts from the general. Kasey was reaching into her medical bag. Andrea stopped her. "After this is done, I'll let you be my personal nurse."

Kasey responded, "Gladly," while running a finger down Andrea's cheek.

Andrea looked down at her father's body to make certain he was no longer a threat. The blood ran from his throat like a shiny red silk scarf. Andrea shuddered. However, she couldn't help thinking how she'd lost another family member. Only Billy remained. If he died, she would be the sole survivor of the Knight name. This realization was somewhat disconcerting as the family had been so much like the name: Knights were knights; fighters, champions in their own right, but dark, so very dark and frightening.

Andrea shook her head to clear these thoughts. Too much was going on, and she still had to try to persuade Billy to stop this course of action. She had to save him from himself. With the general gone, he'd have nothing left to prove or to gain.

During the skirmish, the Militia managed to retrieve photon weapons from dead Scepters. These Scepters had been the only ones who believed there was still a chance for them to win. The idea that they could defeat the Militia was as hopeless as Billy's cause. Their drive and motivation had been as mad as the leader who brought them to this. As the Militia corralled the remaining Scepters, Richard and Andrea walked closer to Billy, who stood alone in the middle of the clearing. Barbarous Billy gazed furiously upon his people in the custody of the Civilian Freedom Force Militia. Andrea noticed that the captives wouldn't meet Billy's gaze. Some Scepters bluntly turning away from him when his gaze turned in their direction.

"I would bring you victory, yet you choose not to fight for it," Billy said with disdain.

Andrea took a step closer to her brother. "They only chose not to die."

He shifted to glare at her, and she noted his pupils were glazed red. "They chose wrongly," he said. "Even death has its glory, for their freedom."

"The cost was too great, Billy. They're human, after all," she said. "They aren't ready to die for you."

"I would have been their leader, yes, but not to die for. If necessary, I wanted them to die for themselves, for having life as they wished it." Billy bowed his head. "Power, Andrea, yes, but power to control their own destiny."

She turned to Richard, looking on silently. From the determination in his eyes, she knew he wasn't going to let it end here, like this. Andrea needed to stop him from his course of action against her brother. "He has no fight left, Richard. Let me take him, help him."

Billy laughed, but without humor. Only coldness reverberated. "You're wrong, sister of mine. I've plenty of fight left." He tossed his head in Kasey's direction. "Ever wonder about your time traveling girlfriend?" Andrea felt the blood drain from her face. "How she got here?" At her nod, he continued, "She's part of an experiment gone awry."

"How do you know this, Billy?" Andrea asked, not certain she wanted an answer; fear for Kasey like a punch to her solar plexus.

He started to reach into a pocket, and paused. "May I?" he asked. Andrea raised a hand to forestall any weapons fire, signaling Kasey closer, while simultaneously worrying that she wouldn't be able to protect her, should the need arise. "Here we go." He pulled a wad of papers, yellowed with age, from his pocket.

Andrea saw Kasey's body tense, heard the sharp intake of breath. "Kasey?"

Staring at Billy, Kasey asked, "Where--how did you get those?"

"I thought they'd ring a bell for you. Don't want your ticket home?"

When Kasey began to shiver, Andrea grabbed hold of her. "Kasey, are those from the blue notebooks?"

"The papers the scientists' had, in the cave, before the explosion transported me here. At least I think they are."

"And I shall use them to get what is owed me," Billy said, waving them for emphasis. "You know it works, Kasey, as I proved while you were on the ship." He directed his attention to Andrea, "Unfortunately, I have to take Kasey with me."

"No, Billy, you don't. I know why you'd want to play with time, but what purpose would sending her back serve?"

"Don't you see? I've figured out the secrets. I can go anywhere in time, do anything I want and when I want. I can't leave her here to help them come after me. She knows too much." He shrugged. "I know, Andrea, you have grown to care for her, but I'm Barbarous Billy, after all." Kasey took a shaky step back. "I don't want to return."

"The choice isn't yours," Billy said, stuffing the papers back into his pocket. He raised a hand and encased Kasey in a red bubble.

Andrea watched, horrified. "Please. Stop this now, Billy." Tears of fear for Kasey ran down her cheek. She grabbed Billy by the shirtsleeve. "Let her go, please."

The Leader Supreme dropped his gaze to her. "I told you not to interfere. I didn't want to do this, Andrea."

Confused, she stared at Billy, horrified by the brightness of the red glow in his eyes. "Sorry for wh--" Before she could finish, a bolt of red energy coming from Billy's eyes and fingers threw Andrea into the air and back. Her insides felt jarred and pained as she landed with a heavy thud on the ground, the breath torn from her lungs. From her position, Andrea noticed her brother completely encased in the red field of energy he had placed around Kasey.

"Billy, no!" she yelled.

Instantly, Richard shielded himself in blue. "Andrea, are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

Kasey looked to her, worry in her eyes, and lowered her voice sadly. "We can't stop this, honey."

Andrea watched the three for an instant; then, she focused on Kasey. "I can't let you go," she cried. Before she could think otherwise, Andrea made a mad dash toward Kasey and threw herself into the red barrier, which only threw her back painfully. "Damn you, Billy. There's no reason to do this. At least send me with her," Andrea pleaded, her gaze never leaving Kasey. She became more terrified when a grey mist began to envelop Kasey, slowly blocking her from view.

"I can give you a few moments," Billy said, before he twitched his head.

With unexpected force, Andrea felt herself propelled into the shield that held Kasey. Though her stomach churned, Andrea called out for Kasey, barely able to focus on her through the grey.

"Kasey?"

"I'm here, honey," she said, before her hand rested on Andrea's shoulder.

Without thinking, or caring, who witnessed her actions, Andrea embraced Kasey. "I can't let this happen. I need you."

Billy's voice echoed through the mist. "Say your goodbyes, Sis."

Furious, Andrea yelled, "I won't let you take her, Billy. I'll let Richard destroy you."

Kasey whispered into Andrea's ear. "We can't let him achieve his terrible goal." Kasey placed a kiss on Andrea's forehead. "If he transports him and me, then I'll kill him in the past, future, wherever he takes us."

"No, I don't want you to go at all," Andrea said. "Maybe Billy can't finish with me holding on to you." She pulled Kasey closer.

From outside the shield, Andrea heard Richard's voice. "I have to finish this, Andrea. I don't know how it will affect you and Kasey, but I can't wait any longer."

"Billy," Andrea pleaded. "This can't be how you planned it."

The shell gave his voice a static quality. "I haven't lost yet."

"You can't win," Richard said from within his blue shell.

"Then let the games begin." Billy lifted his hand and a bolt shot out and slammed into Richard's sphere.

Electricity charged the air and Andrea felt it prickle her skin, wondering what it was like from outside the shell. She couldn't see because of the grey nothingness that surrounded them, tensing with the "whomp" as Richard and Billy returned volleys.

Inside his red sphere, Billy could feel it collapsing, his strength sapped from the exertion. He concentrated all his efforts into sending jolts more powerful than the last to penetrate the blue sphere, but none did. Giving up never entered his mind. This would never stop him from his goal and he would prevail. From the depths of his soul, he called up all the hate he could muster and slammed another ferocious attack at Richard.

Keeping Kasey in her shield was becoming more difficult, too. He didn't need her, but, damn it, he was tired of being told what to do. He wanted to hurt someone for all he had suffered. Billy had memorized the formula. He could go back in time, steal and perfect the process just before the scientists realized what they had, and rule the world.

Andrea felt panic: Kasey became more insubstantial as the battle between Richard and Billy continued. Andrea knew Kasey felt it too. Kasey caressed her face with gentle fingers, lowered her lips to Andrea's, and kissed her fervently. Tears fell and mingled with their kiss. "Goodbye, love."

No sooner were the words spoken, and Kasey was gone.

Andrea stood within the slowly collapsing bubble, and let the pain of loss consume her; engulf her in the emptiness of the grey.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE CRAZY GREY emptiness left Kasey feeling horribly disoriented. She couldn't gauge how much time had elapsed since Andrea had disappeared, rather vice-versa, but it felt like an eternity. Kasey expected to find herself transported beneath the rubble on Okinawa at any moment. What she didn't expect was to hear Billy's voice.

"Now I can finish this," he said excitedly.

"Are you taking us back to Okinawa?"

He shrugged, and then pulled two centrifuge tubes from his pocket. "Ready for an adventure?" Though he seemed thrilled, Kasey noticed his pallor, and his posture showed fatigue.

Kasey knew she couldn't let him complete his plan. If she stopped Billy here, then maybe Andrea's life would be better in the future, and she wanted Andrea happy most of all. Certainly, if she didn't stop Billy, there was no telling how messed up the future would be. Slowly, while he was scanning the papers, Kasey put her hand inside the medical bag feeling around for something to use against him. Her fingers connected with cold metal, and she remembered the shrapnel taken when Andrea had unburied her in the future. It was sharp. It should do.

Billy smirked. "Naughty, naughty," he said, and raised his left hand. Suddenly Kasey couldn't breathe. Panic engulfed her and she tried ineffectually to remove the unseen force. Kasey knew if she didn't stop Billy soon, it would be too late for everyone. Ignoring the invisible pressure at her throat, she inched forward. The grin on Billy's face told her he didn't feel the least bit threatened. Moving the hand that still held the shrapnel, Kasey raised it like a knife and rammed it into Billy's chest.

The expression on Billy's face changed instantly to shock. Around them, the grey emptiness began to flutter. "Guess I had this wrong," Billy said, dropping to one knee. "Imagine that." As more light began to come into their space, Kasey reached forward and snatched the tubes from Billy's grip. His body seemed to convulse. Maniacal laughter echoed from Billy. Kasey stared hard and realized the man inside was no longer Andrea's brother. Instead, she saw a man filled with more hate and anger than Kasey believed one human could feel. It completely changed his features, darkening them until they became unrecognizable.

She inwardly cringed, frightened by the sight.

"Should've known you'd be too much trouble." In his weakened state, Kasey noticed his eyes lost the red coloring. "Tell her something, will ya?" She nodded. Hoarsely, he whispered to her. "I did love Andrea."

With that comment, in an instant, Kasey was alone.

ANDREA FELT THE last of the red shield dissipate. She wanted to cry out over her loss, but heard Mykael call out Richard's name.

Mykael rushed forward to Richard's side, heedless of the blue energy still surrounding him. He raised a hand, halting Mykael in her tracks, leaving her poised precariously like a jumper on a roof's top.

"Stay back," he said tiredly. "It's all right."

Andrea hung her head. Until--

Billy's blood-curdling scream pierced the dawn, and then a sharp bolt of lightning hit the earth. When it ceased, Kasey's body lay inert on the ground.

Her legs wobbled like gelatin, yet Andrea managed to make her way to Kasey's body. Cradling her head on her lap, Andrea whispered her name. Kasey's eyes opened slowly and focused with difficulty. "Hello there, honey."

"Thank God," Andrea said in a voice husky with emotion. "Can you get up?" she asked, as Kasey already attempted to get to her feet. "What happened?"

"Not sure, but I think Billy's gone, for good."

"As long as you're here," Andrea said, squeezing Kasey tightly in a hug.

The Militia and Mykael gathered around Richard. From his features, Andrea comprehended he, too, was dying. When she maneuvered her and Kasey closer, he turned his head in her direction. Andrea knelt beside him to clasp the hand he lifted toward her.

"I have fulfilled my destiny, Andrea," he told her, attempting to smile. "Thank you."

Richard motioned to Kasey weakly. "Show her the way, Lieutenant. If your heart desires to return to your time, you have the vials, and I can return the mist for you this one last time.

Decide now. You can stay in the arms of your destiny, now." His body rocked in a spasm, his eyes fluttering in pain.

"I want to stay," Kasey said.

"The right choice." Richard took a last wracking gasp.

PEOPLE IN THE thousands witnessed the funeral for Ambassador Richard Caughley. Crowds of mourners came from all parts of the world to pay their respects; the highest honors given to the man who saved the world from certain annihilation.

Not so for Billy Knight.

Held in a remote corner of the cemetery, only two people, Andrea and Kasey, visited the site and service. Andrea would have cried for him, but her tears no longer came. She believed in her heart that what had transpired was for the best. The only way it could have ended for her brother. Part of her held to the thought that he could have survived, could have made it to another time where he was healed, both physically and mentally.

Clothed in full dress uniform, she stared at the simple headstone. Carved into the marble were only his name, date of birth and death. No blessings and no epitaph graced the marble. Bending, Andrea placed the flowers she carried upon the grave's soil covering.

Kasey placed her hand gently on Andrea's shoulder, signaling the time to leave. She watched Andrea walk away, never turning back for a last look, her posture ramrod straight. Silently, she followed. Neither of them spoke.

What could Kasey possibly say? Andrea had lost a brother, a father. Though not much to brag about, they were family. Plus she'd lost two men who'd become close friends to them both: Richard and Sergeant Julio Garcia. Each death was a devastating loss, in one way or another. Kasey couldn't simply say, *I love you, Andrea, run away with me*. She wanted to, but the timing left a lot to be desired.

Andrea's confidence was non-existent, replaced with a strange detachment Kasey couldn't penetrate. Years of pain, ending in the final loss of Billy, had made Andrea's features harder. Her once-expressive grey eyes were now lackluster. It appeared that only the shell of Captain Andrea Knight existed.

It tortured Kasey.

She wanted to reach out, clasp Andrea tightly to her chest, and let her know she wasn't alone.

Instead, Kasey accepted the signals for privacy, giving Andrea the chance to work this out on her own.

How long did she have to wait? Richard said she wouldn't have to return to her time, be swallowed by the mist, if her heart desired to stay, and she wanted to stay. Kasey had destroyed the notebooks she found in the old church, though some of the pages had gone wherever Billy's

body had gone. The vials were emptied, no others were ever located. How could she remain in this time if Andrea didn't need her, didn't want her? Didn't she realize Kasey was here for her? Andrea couldn't hide in herself forever. Would Andrea's silence be the new catalyst to send Kasey back--forever?

Most important to Kasey was Andrea's continued silence. Unwilling to let Andrea conceal herself within the shell of her Captain Knight persona, Kasey spoke the question plaguing her the last few days. "What do you plan to do after the ceremony?" Her gut twisted with the fear of what the answer might be.

Andrea turned blank eyes toward Kasey; she felt numb inside. There were so many things Andrea wanted to say, yet none sounded right in her mind, wouldn't form on her lips. She just wasn't sure about anything anymore. In her heart, she knew she loved Kasey, wanted to spend the rest of her life with her. The future, even plans for it, seemed so vague and unrealistic.

What kind of life could Andrea give her? A legacy of mad men in her family would haunt her forever; afraid she could become the same at any time. Could she? She wasn't like Billy or the general. Her blood flowed with the same cells of her mother, Katrina, who'd always been gentle, loving.

Andrea had been a hard and exacting commander, demanding from her troops no more or less than she could give. Did strength mean lack of feelings? No. She cared about those she led. Most of all, she deeply cared for Kasey. However, would it be enough? Could Andrea allow Kasey in her heart and keep her there long enough to prove it without failing her?

She wanted to--needed to--desperately, before the empty space in her heart became vacant forever. Only time could tell. If only she knew for sure that Kasey wanted the same. Kasey still hadn't said the words and Andrea didn't know why. Nevertheless, she had to hear them. Had to know Kasey felt the same about her.

Stepping into Kasey's embrace would be victorious providence for her, bringing great light and warmth back to a soul gone for so long. Andrea was afraid, if it happened, she'd no longer be able to control anything that came along with it. Andrea didn't want to feel that fear anymore; equally terrified not to.

Either way, Andrea had to move on. Finish her life.

However, she'd settle for finishing this day.

Even the thought of the ceremony with the United President of America, President Granston, seemed vacuous, as if she wasn't really a part of it, couldn't be. What about after the ceremony? She couldn't answer. With a weak sigh, she responded. "Let me get through the ceremony before expecting answers. Please?" After Kasey nodded, they moved on.

A LIMOUSINE HAD been provided to escort them to the award ceremony. Thankfully, the driver picked them up at the cemetery, and drove them to pick up Bettina so she could participate in the events. Kasey stepped out when it pulled up in front of the house, offering to go inside to get the matronly woman.

No sooner had the door closed before Bettina pounced on her. "Is she any better? Has she asked you to stay with her forever?"

Fighting the tears building behind her eyes, Kasey shook her head. "I want to stay, Bettina. But I'm afraid if Andrea doesn't acknowledge loving me, I'll be transported back, no matter what Richard or Billy said." She shrugged. "I don't fit into my time. If I had, I would never have snuck off ship in the first place."

Bettina clasped her hand affectionately. "Time won't take you again, dear."

"How do you know? Moreover, how did you know about me? You never explained."

"Wait here," she said before rushing into the kitchen. She was wearing a purple evening gown that billowed and floated around her as she moved. Kasey smiled at the warmth the sight brought to her heart, finally feeling she found her family, though tenuous with Andrea's current state of mind. When Bettina returned, she held a small frame in her hand. Holding it out to Kasey, she said, "Take it, it's truly yours after all. I've just been keeping it for you."

Kasey inspected the picture, yellowed by age, and the tears from earlier flowed freely. "Where did you get this?" her voice croaked. "I had nearly forgotten." The image the paper held was of Kasey standing beside Jimmy, his arm draped across her shoulder. They had the photograph taken while at the USO they stopped at prior to boarding ship.

"You made quite the impression on James. He sent this home in a letter to his wife and daughter, talking all about how great you were to him."

"But how did you come to keep it?"

Smiling, Bettina's expression clouded in memory. "I guess you could say I'm a lower cousin. Katrina was always looking after me when my mother, her aunt, passed away. Prior to that, Katrina's mother shared such stories of Jimmy in his youth, and the letters he sent home. The last letter he sent mentioned how you were "out of your time" and how he wished life would give you the treasures you deserved." Looking down at the picture, Bettina chuckled. "For ages I'd been wishing someone like you would be here for Andrea." Bettina raised her head, and gazed adoringly at Kasey. "Now I know wishes come true."

Startled by the revelation, Kasey gave a nervous laugh. "Be careful what you wish for?"

"I got the prize, Kasey. So did Andrea, and soon she'll realize what I know." Bettina squeezed her arm reassuringly. "Don't you see? I wished for someone like you for Andrea. Time, along with Jimmy's love and adoration for you, knew you belonged here--now. Besides, you have to stay here." She puckered her lips and folded arms across her chest. "Storming the beaches of Okinawa in 1945? Really, Kasey, how could time send you back after that?"

Kasey smiled broadly. "Well, I hope you have an in with time, because I've never felt as right and normal as battling the bad guys by Andrea's side."

"Be patient, dear. Andrea will come around and things will all work out. Now we have to go to the ceremony. I didn't get all gussied up for nothing, you know."

THE OFFICIAL CEREMONY took place in the main hall at the White House.

Prominent members of the Militia, Officials Hanako and Sherman, stood at attention behind Kasey and Andrea. Greg Mitchell stood proudly beside his mother, Ambassador Harley, across from them. The United Anthem announced the entrance of President Granston. Proudly, he made his way to the center and began his speech, formally thanking all those involved with ridding the world of a great menace.

Methodically, he made his way through the formation, congratulating and pinning awards to uniforms. The last to receive a medal was Andrea. The President smiled down at her, but with eyes focused straight ahead, her bearing tall, she couldn't and didn't return it.

"You, Captain Knight, I thank most of all. You saved my life, and the lives of the council and the world's United Presidents, who have gained control of their respective countries, now that the Scepters have lost their leader. You alerted us to the problems of food shipments to other cities. Those are debts I can never repay."

The President pinned the medal to her uniform.

As he took a step back, Andrea promptly saluted.

"Is there anything you wish I could grant as repayment?" he asked for her ears only. Her hesitation was long. Even at attention, she could sense those around them leaning to hear their conversation. She knew what she wanted, but doubted it was significant enough to interest a President. How do you speak what's in your heart when you're unsure of reciprocation? She loved and wanted Kasey. Andrea knew she should have talked with her. Asked, directly, where they stood and demanded an answer, as any good, self-respecting officer would have. However, Andrea was too afraid of the answer. Too afraid it wouldn't match the desire in her own heart, and she'd be lost. Lost in the green depths of Kasey's eyes and unable to think clearly, that's where Andrea wanted to be.

Did Kasey love her? Only one way to find out, she thought.

Andrea took a deep, steadying breath. With a commanding voice, she continued with the knowledge, once spoken, she could never go back. Andrea didn't care anymore. "Mr. President, may we stand at ease and I speak freely?"

"Of course," he said, directing the call given.

After the ranks complied, she spoke. "I would like to be released from all duties, Mr. President."

"Is that all, Captain?" he asked, pulling his handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing at his brow. For an instant, Andrea wanted to ask if he played "the horn" as Kasey called it. Each time she looked at the President now, she had to agree with Kasey that he looked just like Louis Armstrong. However, this wasn't a time for levity, even silently.

A knot tightened in Andrea's stomach. She was about to ask for a favor that had her frightened almost witless. Not the prospect of asking, but the responses she would get once she uttered the words. "No, sir."

"Then name it, Captain," Granston said, hiding a grin behind the ever-present piece of linen, but not soon enough for her to miss it.

Stiffly, Andrea turned toward Kasey, signaling her over. She came, standing at Andrea's shoulder with a confused expression. "If the Lieutenant will have me, I'd like to leave my military career behind." Kasey wrapped Andrea in a fierce hug before remembering her place and getting back into a character more befitting an Officer.

The President laughed. "I take that as a, yes. So be it, Andrea Knight."

"Thank you, Mr. President." She smiled, her face flushed.

"I have an opening as Ambassador of Defense, if you want it. I need to get my military men and women back in proper service and uniform."

"Thank you, sir, but no. I'd like to try my hand at being a civilian." Andrea saw the look of disappointment on his face. "But you could offer the job to my Lieutenant. She's just as qualified, sir, more so."

"Done," he said, before announcing it time to move on to the banquet.

As the others filed out of the hall, Kasey shifted at Andrea's side, her joy written on her face.

Once they were alone, a heated kiss spoke the love in Andrea's heart.

Pulling away, Andrea looked into Kasey's beautiful green eyes and felt the drowning sensation again, willing to swim in their depths forever. "I guess you're stuck with me, in this time. Think you can handle it? Oh yeah, I've asked Bettina to continue living with us."

"Before you knew the answer?" Kasey said with a mischievous grin on her lips.

"In case you said yes. I tried to cover all aspects of the mission."

"Am I your mission?" Kasey gave a mock frown.

"A battle I will fight with my dying breath, to keep you safe, happy, and whatever else requires strategic defensive and offensive maneuvers."

Kasey answered with another long kiss. "I can handle anything, Skipper. Including proxy in-laws, who know more about me than I do myself, it seems." She shook her head at Andrea's frown. "Just remember you're a civilian and who will have the rank from this day forward."

Her eyes glowed mischievously. "I do--soon to be Ambassador."

"You know I love you, don't you?" Kasey asked quietly.

Impulse, from the joy she felt, catapulted Andrea into Kasey's arms. She began to cry, her heart pounding wildly. "Oh, Kasey, not any more than I love you. You'll never know just how much. I'll spend the rest of our lives proving it. You forget that I helped create you, my beautiful time traveler."

"And believe me, the feeling is mutual." Kasey pulled Andrea into her embrace and kissed her heatedly.

When she pulled away, Andrea saw the mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "What are you thinking?" she asked, not sure if it was a safe question.

With a wicked grin, Kasey said, "I was thinking we should forget the banquet. Let's find a quiet spot where we can feast on each other."

Epilogue

THE FREIGHTER PULLED out of the harbor with its new shipment of cargo, different from the usual crates and machinery.

Very different.

Captain Marlow stood on deck and surveyed it thoroughly. The crew's job was as armed guards. They would supervise work rather than do it themselves. Marlow's lips lifted in what he hoped passed as his most menacing smile. "All right, you filthy low-life scum, listen up. First, we start with those streamers. Men," he directed at his crew. "Rip off and burn those disgusting things so I don't have to look at them ever again."

The group of men and women looked distressed, as torn from them, were the last symbols of their life as Scepters. Of course, Marlow suspected part of that was that their TAPs were modified to incapacitate should they stray too far from the monitor, which was hidden on the vessel. In his hand, he held a smaller version, keyed to his DNA, for warning purposes. One man from the group protested violently. Pushing his way free from the freighter crew, he ran for the rail and jumped overboard; his scream heard on deck for an instant before going under the water. From where he stood, Captain Marlow could see the man float to the top. He remembered the man's name as well as his threats.

Blades.

As he watched the man swim away from the freighter, Marlow's attention caught on the fin speeding to its victim. It only took an instant, before he was pulled into the depths. Blades didn't resurface. The red stain clouding the blue sea indicated he never would.

With a grunt, Captain Marlow turned back to the others. "The same fate awaits anyone who doesn't want to be here. This isn't a joy ride, people. This is about hard work and justice. You'll be fed and properly cared for in your Community Rehabilitation, or whatever the Government wants it to be called." Marlow smiled, knowing this project was his own doing. He had suggested the initial program, over dinner with Andrea and Kasey, and their friends Sue and Janine. It had

been a bit of a joke, until Kasey put on her Ambassador of Defense persona and, well into the earlier hours of the next morning, they had worked out all the details. Of course, seeing how happy Andrea was with her lover and partner, Marlow couldn't deny either of them his assistance in anything they proposed.

He shook off the memory and continued. "I expect an honest day's work on this voyage. If I don't get it, you'll be fish bait too." He pressed a button on his handheld unit and the new crew's bodies spasmed from the mild jolt to their systems. "Understood?" he asked of the motley group, receiving nervous replies murmured in return. "Good. Let's get started. This ship has business to tend to and you have a long voyage ahead."

One woman raised her hand. Seeing his nod, she continued, her voice trembling with fear. "How long are we to be here?"

Marlow laughed as he pushed his thinning hair off his face, only to have the wind blow the frizzing mass back over his eyes. "This tour of sea duty lasts two years--at least."

ANDREA QUIETLY OPENED the bedroom door and, with a gentle nudge from her hip, careful not to drop the items on the tray, placed it on the dresser. She heard the steady breathing coming from the bed's occupant, and tiptoed toward the sound. The rush of contentment that filled her was a feeling she would never get enough of, as long as she lived. She removed her robe and let it drop to the floor.

Raising the sheet, Andrea crawled back into bed. She scooted close to Kasey's naked body, laying her head on the firm shoulder. Andrea lightly nibbled on an earlobe as she massaged Kasey's nipple between her finger and thumb.

"Your wake-up calls get better all the time," Kasey whispered huskily.

Giggling into her neck, Andrea replied, "Can't have you getting tired of me, Ambassador."

Kasey grasped Andrea's hand and held it to her chest. She shifted until they were facing each other. "Honey, you know that will never happen, right? I'll always want you." Flicking out her tongue, she traced Andrea's lips with the tip. "If anything, you'll get tired of me. After all, I still get anxious whenever I see fog or smoke. And I haven't given up watching classic movies well into the night."

Andrea adjusted herself so she covered Kasey's chest with her own. "Bettina hasn't been so happy in a long time. Thank you for that." She wiggled the fingers of the hand Kasey still held, and let the tips dance playfully against the closest nipple. "No need to fear, love. Just latch onto me when you're afraid. I won't let go of you. Ever."

"That's good to hear." With speed that could still startle Andrea, Kasey rolled her onto her back, pinning her wrists above her head. "Because, right now, I'm gonna make love with you, and it may last forever." Kasey winked and grinned wickedly, as she inhaled deeply. "Then breakfast, I'm hungry."

The End

Another Title from Sharon G. Clark

Tears Don't Become Me

GW (Georgia Wilhelmina) DIAMOND, Private Investigator, dealt in missing children cases - only. It didn't alter her own traumatic childhood experience, but she could try to keep other children from the same horrors. She'd left her past and her name behind her. Or so she thought. This case was putting her in contact with people she had managed to keep a distant and barely civil relationship with for fifteen years. Now the buried past was returning to haunt her. When Sheriff Matthews of Elk Grove, Missouri, asked her to take a case involving a teenaged runaway girl, she believed it would be no different from any other. Until Matthews explained she had to take a cop as partner or no deal. A cop who just happened to be the missing girl's aunt... ERIN DUNBAR, received the call concerning her niece from an old partner, Frank Matthews. It should have been from her sister, but their estrangement, compounded by her having moved to Detroit, kept that from happening. Now she would have to work with a PI. One had nearly killed her and Frank years ago; she expected this one would be no different. Matters were only made worse by discovering it was a "she" PI - a Looney-tune one who gave new and literal meaning to: "Hands Off." For the sake of her niece, Erin would put up with just about anything, until... GW seemed to be strangely affected by this case and Erin, to her chagrin and amazement, was strangely affected by her. If Erin could solve GW's past, give her hope, could they have a hope of finding her niece?

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But when secret agents learn of Van' s leap through time, Van faces an even tougher decision. This time one of life or death.

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The Ties That Bind

by Andi Marquette

When the Albuquerque paper reports that an unidentified white man was found dead along a remote stretch of road on the Navajo Reservation in northwestern New Mexico, UNM sociology professor

K.C. Fontero thinks she might be able to use the case as an example of culture and jurisdiction in one of her classes. But it's soon apparent that this dead man might have something to do with a mysterious letter that River Crandall, brother of K.C.'s partner Sage, recently received from the siblings' estranged father, Bill. What does the letter and Bill's link to a natural gas drilling company have to do with the dead man? And why would Bill try to contact his son and daughter now, after a decade of silence?

From the streets of Albuquerque to the vast expanse of the Navajo Reservation, K.C. and Sage try to unravel the secrets of a dead man while Sage confronts a past she thought she'd left behind. But someone or something wants to keep those secrets buried, and as K.C. soon discovers, sometimes beliefs of one culture jump the boundaries of another, threatening to drive a wedge into the relationship she's building with Sage.

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by Brenda Adcock

Royce Brodie, a 50-year-old homicide detective in the quiet town of Cedar Springs, a bedroom community 30 miles from Austin, Texas, has spent the last seven years coming to grips with the incident that took the life of her partner and narrowly missed taking her own. The peace and quiet she had been enjoying is shattered by two seemingly unrelated murders in the same week: the first, a John Doe, and the second, a janitor at the local university.

While Brodie and her partner, Curtis Nicholls, begin their investigation, the assignment of a new trainee disrupts Brodie's life. Not only is Maggie Weston Brodie's former lover, but her father had been Brodie's commander at the Austin Police Department and nearly destroyed her career.

As the three detectives try to piece together the scattered evidence to solve the two murders, they become convinced the two murders are related. The discovery of a similar murder committed five years earlier at a small university in upstate New York creates a sense of urgency as they realize they are possibly chasing a serial killer.

The already difficult case becomes even more so when a third victim is found. But the case becomes personal for Brodie when Maggie becomes the killer's next target. Unless Brodie finds a way to save Maggie, she could face losing everything a second time.

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