



SUMMARY: An elite fighting unit sent out to kill a female target, are instead captured and by their target who brainwashes them and turns them into her own personal fighting force.

ROLL WITH IT

by Valerie Hope

NICK CALLAHAN TAPPED his partner on the shoulder to announce his silent return to the position. Jerry Martin looked up from the gunsight for a brief moment, blinking precious tears into his drying eyes and giving his partner a solemn nod.

Seven hundred meters away, the starlight goggles gave an eerie luminescence to the walls of the Victorian manor house where the target waited. Nick's perimeter sensors were in place and quiet, giving them advance warning of any intruders into their net. The brass wanted this kill quick and silent. It would be, if she would only show herself at one of the bay windows of her estate.

Nick looked over the photograph issued in the dossier on their mark. She was an attractive woman, albeit severe. Her light brown hair was gathered in a twist at the nape of her neck, setting off a long swan's neck and a thin, angular face with very little feminine softness. Intelligent blue eyes glinted behind light, stylish eyeglasses and a well-defined brow. The full, expressive lips were parted in conversation with a dark figure in the foreground of the covert photograph, showing even, chalk-white teeth.

There was the beep and crackle of the radio earpiece, then:

"Sparrow One, situation."

Nick subvocalized into the microphone attached to his throat. "Sparrow One, all clear. No sign."

"Changeover."

"Roger."

Nick lay flat beside his partner, letting the bigger man crawl over him into the spotter's position to his right and inched his way back to the gun. He positioned his weight carefully over the stock of the AR-21 and fitted his eye to the eyepiece. The crosshairs centered on an opening in the thick white drapes of the window, giving the barest glimpse of a lavishly appointed sitting room beyond.

"Clear," Nick reported.

"Sparrow Two, situation."

"Sparrow Two, all clear. We think she's asleep." Don Sullivan reported from the hidden nest on the other side of the house. Nick could almost see Charlie Cavanaugh, his spotter, adding his characteristic shrug to punctuate.

"Negative, Sparrow Two," Steve Quentin contradicted from his hidden position deeper in the pine woods surrounding the estate. "Motion sensors report she's still moving around in there."

Nick did a quick pan across the other windows. Nothing.

"C'mon, already," he mumbled. "It's a nice night. You should look at the moon."

Jerry grunted tacit agreement. Duty and honor set aside, it was fucking cold out there laying on the ground. It wasn't the first time the sniper teams had wished they could pop this bitch and be done with it. Nick, with a frustrated sigh, settled down for a long wait on the gun.

"Waitaminnit," Jerry said in the clipped manner which denoted agitation. "Sparrow Nest, we have perimeter breach from the north and southwest." He was peering intently at the screen Nick had just finished rigging.

"Animals?" Steve asked.

"Stand by," Jerry said, querying the sensor array for body temperatures, speeds, anything that would give him a clue to the nature of the intruders.

"Negative," Jerry reported after a moment. "They're moving in threes and staying too close together."

"Damn," Steve swore. "How long?"

"They'll be on top of you in three. Sparrow Two has about five minutes and we have about six."

There was a tense pause. "Roger that," Steve said. "Sparrow Two, fall back to my position. Once you reach the treeline, give word to Sparrow One to bug out and scrub the op. I'm falling back to the dustoff position."

Nick swore under his breath. "Damn."

Jerry had their gear packed in about ten seconds and Nick had the AR-21 stowed in the back sling shortly after. They both unslung their MP-5 submachine guns and waited for the bugout order.

"Sparrow One, we're clear. Get moving," Don squawked. Nick and Jerry were on their feet and moving before he'd even finished speaking. They set off at as fast a pace as they could manage and still remain noiseless. The sparse pines began to thicken as the ground took on a gentle upwards slope, gradually becoming thick enough to impair visibility. The partners ran on in complete silence for several minutes, covering ground in muted, gluttonous steps. They'd covered about two kilometers when they broke into a light clearing. Nick pulled up into a tired stop, muscles complaining.

"What the fuck?" he whispered.

The dustoff area was empty. Steve should have been there, at least - his position was only a few hundred meters from the dustoff area. They were supposed to meet here and make tracks for the extraction site by dawn. Something was very, very wrong.

Jerry slammed the cover on the GPS locator. "We didn't fuck up. This is it."

"Then where the hell is Sparrow Nest?"

"Wish I knew."

Nick tried the communicators quickly but got no response other than static.

"We have to assume they're compromised," Jerry said. "Our orders are pretty specific."

"We can't just leave 'em behind," Nick protested.

"I don't like it either," Jerry said bitterly. "But it's not our call. We're ordered to proceed to extraction."

Nick hung his head in defeat. "What the fuck went wrong?"

"It wasn't us," Jerry said. "I'm planning to have a long, long talk with the scouts once we're back."

"C'mon, then," Nick said heavily. "Let's roll."

The two men readied their weapons and gathered up their rucksacks from where they'd been hidden. Jerry took point and struck out east, along the ridgeline and towards the extraction point fifteen clicks distant.

Nick followed closely, stepping in his partner's footprints to mislead any pursuit. They hadn't traveled two hundred meters before Nick's instincts, which had saved and protected him through eight tours in Asia Minor and two tours in the Middle East, began screaming a warning. He brought his weapon up to his shoulder and began to scan the thick trees for enemies. Ahead of him, Nick could see that Jerry was doing the same. He'd survived in those wars as well. They covered in the trees paralleling their path.

"I don't like this," he said.

"Me neither," Nick confirmed.

"Going to infrared," Jerry announced, slipping the thermal viewer over his eyes. There was a tiny little whine as the viewer went online and Jerry began scanning their surroundings.

"Got 'em," Jerry grunted. Nick brought down his own IR hood and waited for the power-up.

"Bearing two-four-niner, elevated about two meters," Jerry said.

Nick swung his head quickly, used to the swish-pan effect of the IR goggles and marked the two figures making careful way through the forest in a loose cover formation. One of the figures turned to one side, and the shapely thermal profile left no doubt as to her gender.

"There goes the hope that they were Don and Charlie," Nick muttered.

"What do we do, Nick?"

"We don't have much choice but to ice 'em," Nick said. "Unless you want to try non-lethal and question 'em about the others."

"Non-lethal my ass," Jerry said roughly. "It's too big a gamble."

"Roger that," Nick chorused. They slid back the bolts on their weapons silently and waited for their quarries to approach. The thermal blobs got bigger and bigger through the view screen. Only a few more meters and then the tension could be released. Just a little more.

Nick was brought up short of firing by a hard, cold object forcing itself into the back of his neck. Very obviously the muzzle of a gun.

"Don't move."

An echo told Nick that Jerry had been similarly caught. The whole platoon, and some of the most finely trained assassins the government had to offer. All veterans, and all caught like schoolboys. Whoever this Dr. Sylvia Gimmel was, she employed the highest-quality protection there was.

Nick relaxed and gave every indication that he was surrendering, even though surrender was the farthest thing from his mind. His orders were very explicit in the event of capture, as well. But damned if Maggie Callahan's youngest son was going to go without taking some of these fuckers with him. Nick turned to face his attacker slowly, hands raised, all the while offering his soul to the Infinite on very easy terms.

Nick was taken momentarily aback by his captor. She was in standard blackweave to throw off thermal imaging and loaded down with some pretty intense government hardware and her curves did spectacular things to an otherwise uneventful ghillie suit. Her dark eyes regarded him levelly, without flinching. She was an extraordinarily tall black woman, muscled like a panther and built for speed in the way that only black women could be, long-limbed and sleek. Her thick hair was skinned back against her head to explode in a thick tail behind her head. Her full lips drew back from her teeth in a half-snarl, half grimace.

"Drop the weapon," she ordered.

Nick stood rooted. She looked too familiar, but he couldn't place her.

"I said put it down!" she hissed.

Nick unslung the weapon and bent to place it on the ground. Uncoiling like a striking snake, he swung the abbreviated butt of the submachine gun up in a rising arc which connected solidly with the woman's jaw. She staggered backwards, trying to bring her weapon to bear, but she couldn't react in time. Nick put a bullet into her and spun, drawing a bead on Jerry's attacker and stitching her across the thigh with a quick three-round. Jerry sprung to his feet and opened up on the figures they'd been tracking in the woods, causing a mad squawk and flutter in the pines as the woodland wildlife took to foot and wing.

Nick rolled out of cover and duckwalked to Jerry's position, firing as he went. Between the silence of the MP-5's and the ironclad fire discipline of both sides, the firefight was punctuated by long, unearthly silences in which no living thing moved.

Nick scanned the body of Jerry's captor. Another attractive woman, this time a short brunette with doe-brown eyes and a delicate, bird-like face with a porcelain complexion. Her feather-soft hair fell in velvet waves around her lifeless expression. She, too, looked entirely too familiar.

"What the hell is going on?" Nick queried.

"We're hemmed in," Jerry announced, giving the surrounding woods a quick going-over with the infrared. "I count ten marks in the surrounding woods."

"Next time I say let's go someplace like Bolivia, let's go someplace like Bolivia," Nick breathed, quoting one of his favorite movies.

Jerry grinned. "You got it, Sundance."

"If we stay put they can starve us out," Nick said, stating the obvious.

"So, you ready to do this?" Jerry said.

"It's as good a day as any."

"Better company than most."

A look that spoke volumes passed between the two men, then they rolled out of the cover and charged, weapons spitting. The peaceful woods erupted in fire and motion.

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Nick awoke slowly, filtering into consciousness through a wall of blazing white light. His eyes refused to open against the glare, but he did manage to run a fuzzy tongue over his teeth and mumble something incoherent. He tried to cover his eyes from the light, but his wrists seemed to be restrained.

"Relax, Nick," a comforting voice said. It took a moment to place. Steve Quentin, their op commander.

"Steve?"

"Roger that," he confirmed.

"Where's Jerry?" Nick asked.

"Right here," his partner's voice answered.

"What the hell did they hit us with, man?"

Steve coughed. "Best I can figure, some kind of neuroinhibitor. Like snake venom. Lucky it only affected the voluntary nerves, or we'd all be worm food. It's powerful stuff, though. Nobody's recovered yet and the sun's already up."

"Tell it to go away," Nick muttered. "I feel like shit."

"It gets better," Charlie Cavanaugh said.

"Charlie? You made it too?"

"Me and Don both," Charlie said. "They didn't kill a man of us."

"Me and Jerry put four or five of them on ice," Nick said.

"That means we got about twelve of the house guards, total," Steve said. "Not even a good dent in the fender. Damn. I wish I'd thought to throw a grenade or something."

"Can't take it back," Jerry said. "So what now? What does this woman think she can do with us? We're government troops, for the love of the Almighty."

"Shit, I don't even know why we were supposed to do her in the first place," Nick said.

Steve sighed. "I guess there's no harm in telling you," he said. "Dr. Sylvia Gimmel was head of a bioweapons plant that was developing the R78 toxin for use in the China War."

"No shit?" Charlie chimed in.

"No shit," Steve continued. "She succeeded way too well. The viral carrier was completely foolproof. It could infect through the air, through ingestion, contact, anything. And completely resistant to every known vaccine on the books, even the ones currently under development by foreign nations."

"So what happened?"

"They used the R78 carrier as a vehicle for a re-engineered version of the ebola virus developed somewhere else. They tested it on some chimps for the Military Council. Dr. Gimmel saw it and had a nervous breakdown. She flipped out and torched her lab, along with all her notes, and killed all the coworkers who had access to her work that wouldn't come with her to this place. She swore that she'd develop vaccinations and immunities to the bioweapons that the government had decided to develop."

"And for that she gets a bullet," Don said. "Shit, I agree with her."

"Me too," Nick said. "But we don't question orders. The G-ment says kill, we kill. That's the job."

"That's not all of it," Steve continued. "A bunch of other scientists decided she was right. They supplied all the inside skinny on their work for the G-ment and disappeared. They're not here, to the best of our knowledge, but we can't find them anyplace else. Gimmel's a threat to the government arsenal. And we're not the first team to try this. There's been four or five attempts on Gimmel's life so far - every one has failed."

"Which explains why we're here," Charlie said. "I thought we were a little overqualified for this op when I first read the briefing. Was I ever wrong?"

"There have been rumors of Gimmel keeping a sizeable private force, well-trained and well-armed. I guess the rumors are true. From everything I've been able to remember from the sensor data before we bugged out, they had at least twenty-five on the ground and a stealth ghost for each regular. Figure they use standard government procedure, that means there were that number again on overwatch and twice that number in reserve. That comes out to roughly two hundred troops, half of which are stealthy."

"Shit," Jerry remarked. "That's some long green, fielding that kind of force."

"Gimmel's got it to spare," Steve explained. "On top of holding several hundred patents and pulling a government check for twenty years, she's got her hands in about a million private ventures all over the planet. Even if the G-ment freezes her assets, she's still one of the ten richest people in the world."

"So why doesn't the G-ment just send in a damn airstrike or an armor column and reduce this place?" Nick asked irritably. "Why all the sneaky shit?"

"No good," Jerry pointed out. "They need her research, her work. Come in and level the place, it's all gone. Better to put a bullet in the nice lady and go through her stuff while she decomposes."

"So how come all Gimmel's troops are women?" Don asked.

"Dr. Gimmel is a member of the Order of Minerva," Steve said. "Y'know, the freaks who keep preaching that the world's problems would be completely solved if women were in charge. She eats that shit up. It doesn't surprise me a bit that she only uses women in her operation."

"Waitaminnit," Jerry cut in. "If Gimmel's such a femi-Nazi, how come the troopers that jumped me and Nick there were all babed up? I thought they didn't believe in makeup or anything like that because it was just a way to please us men."

"Wrong group of people," Nick said. "The Order of Minerva isn't anti-male. They know that both men and women are crucial to the survival of the species. All they're saying is that in the five thousand years that men have been in charge, there's been nothing but war and carnage. They think that if women get a chance to run the show, then all the war and suffering will cease, since women are more inclined to take care of people than men are. Men wouldn't get ousted. They'd just be kept away from positions of power."

"Fuck that," Charlie said. "One competitive spirit among 'em could take the whole thing over. We'd have another dictatorship in a couple years."

"Nobody ever said that the Order made any damn sense," Steve corrected. "All I'm saying is that Gimmel thinks it's fucking gospel."

"Which doesn't answer the most immediate questions," Jerry said. "Which are, how in the hell do we get out of here and what the hell is Gimmel intending to do with us?"

"I wish I knew," Steve said in a faraway voice.

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There was no real way to account the passage of time except through the tiny barred window. Nick calculated that it was well past midday by the time a shapely woman came through the room's only door, wearing a white lab coat over a fuzzy sweater and skintight slacks which left nothing to the imagination. Nick recognized her from the intel they'd had on the estate - Dr. Mary Krelle, a prominent genetic engineer and fellow member of the Order of Minerva. She'd been one of the first to rally to Sylvia Gimmel's banner when she'd led her little scientific rebellion.

By then, Nick had a partial make on his surroundings. The five of them were restrained to tilted tables by the arms, legs, neck and chest. The tables were arranged in a circle which placed the platoon's heads nearest the center. All of them were hooked up to biomonitors which kept a readout of all their vitals and brainwave activity.

Dr. Krelle checked all the men's vitals and plugged a nutrient bottle into the IV units beside each bed. She met any and all questions with flat silence and a measuring stare. When she came to Nick's bedside, he glared at her. Her full red lips pursed with amusement.

"Relax, soldier boy," she said in a hoarse contralto. "You can spare me the withering glances."

"You talk a big game when your opponent is strapped down," Nick hissed.

"Of course I do," she replied airily. "I wouldn't let you near me otherwise."

She made some notes on a clipboard computer and exited, her walk sexy and self assured. The door slid shut behind her with a clang. Nick let out a long, nervous breath.

"I don't like this, Lieutenant," he said to Steve.

"I don't get this. Not one bit," Steve replied. "If we're imprisoned, then it's the damnedest prison I've ever seen. What the hell does that woman want with us?"

"Guinea pigs?" Jerry asked.

"Possibly," Nick replied. "That would explain all the data she's gathering on us beforehand."

"We have to find a way to get a report out to central," Charlie said. "This could constitute a war crime. If they can make the charge stick, then Dr. Gimmel won't have anyplace to live. International codes specifically prohibit allowing a war criminal legal sanctuary."

"D'you think she really cares?" Don shot back. "The way I see it, we only have one option. We get out of here. Isn't it our first duty as prisoners to escape at the first opportunity?"

"Right," Steve confirmed. "The floor is open for suggestions."

"I think I can slip these restraints in time," Charlie said. "But as soon as I rip loose of this biomonitor alarms are going to go off all over the compound. We wouldn't make it ten feet."

"And we're all weak as kittens," Nick said. "I don't think I could manage a walk in my condition, much less an escape attempt. And I doubt they'll kill us. My guess is they'll zap us with that neurotoxin again and we'll be back to square one before we know it."

"This isn't very fucking encouraging," Steve grumped. "I want solutions, not more problems."

"Maybe we can make a stand here," Jerry remarked. "Does anybody see anything we could use as weapons?"

"I got a fire extinguisher and a coatrack against the wall," Don reported.

"Nada," Charlie chimed in.

"A table we could break the legs off," Jerry said.

"A ventilation grating," Nick said.

"Damn," Steve swore. "One good gas grenade through that door and we'd be toast."

"It's not looking good," Jerry added.

"I say we wait," Nick chimed in. "Sooner or later they're going to move us and then we'll have other opportunities. And the longer we wait the stronger we'll be. It's just a matter of opportunity."

"So what do we do till then?" Jerry asked.

"Anybody for Twenty Questions?" Steve said miserably.

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When Nick's eyes snapped open at the sudden noise, all he could see through the small window was blackness. Thick night, probably well after midnight. He craned his neck but could see nothing.

The door slid shut behind their visitor and Nick could hear the click of heels on the tile floor.

"Good evening, gentlemen," a warm soprano greeted them.

"Dr. Gimmel," Steve said cordially.

"I'd like to ask you all some questions," Gimmel said.

"Quentin, Stephen L. Lieutenant. 53409-17196."

Gimmel laughed lightly. "They're not that kind of questions," she said. "Actually, I was going to ask whether you all felt well enough for solid food yet."

No one answered, but Jerry's stomach grumbled loudly.

"I'll take that as a yes," Gimmel said. "Ladies, if you would."

A swish of fabric and a clicking of heels, and two women appeared around Nick's bedside wearing standard military BDU. Both women carried holstered sidearms. They were both real lookers, the kind that Nick would have sought out in a bar or club while on leave, slim and willowy. The redhead to his left began unbuckling the straps around his wrists and even gave him a little smile as she leaned across him to free his far wrist. Her freckled face looked familiar as well. Her pert breasts crushed against Nick's chest as she leaned across him. Nick allowed himself to enjoy the feeling for a moment before whipping his free hand out of the restraints and around her back. Seizing her chin, he pulled back hard and was rewarded with a loud and sickening crack as her neck snapped. She slumped to the floor.

Damned shame. She'd been cute.

The other soldier, a tall blonde with an ample chest, stepped back, reaching for her sidearm. Nick pulled his other arm free and tore at the chest restraint with renewed energy.

"Stop!" Gimmel screamed.

There was the wet-sounding smack of bare feet on tile. Jerry was loose and out of the bed, kneeling beside the soldier he'd dropped to fumble for her sidearm. Nick, free from the chest restraint, sat up and grabbed a thick handful of the blonde soldier's luxuriant hair, jerking her forward into the biomonitor beside his bed. Her nose broke with a loud wet crack and she slumped to the floor. Nick went to work on the ankle restraints as he saw Steve free himself and raise a captured pistol.

Nick looked past where Charlie was dropping a gorgeous Asian girl with a savage headbutt, to Sylvia Gimmel. She stood rock-steady in the midst of the boiling chaos, her eyes full of disappointment and something that looked disturbingly like greed.

Steve opened up with the pistol. It was a dart-thrower, obviously loaded with the neuroinhibitors they'd dropped the platoon with. The first dart took a short, plump brunette with curls in the base of the shoulder and she immediately stiffened in a huge involuntary spasm, going to the floor in a hard heap.

Nick freed himself and took to the floor only seconds ahead of Don. Nick snagged two of the pistols and tossed one to his buddy. Both men knelt to partial cover behind the tables and established a kill zone converging on the door as Steve took a dead aim on Dr. Gimmel.

"Our orders were to kill you, Doctor," he said levelly. "If we die here, that's fine. Just as long as we carry out our mission. I suggest you make your peace."

"Lieutenant," Gimmel remarked coyly. "You're an absolute treasure."

Steve fired. The dart took Gimmel squarely, just above the sternum.

She didn't even flinch.

"Don't you think I would have immunized myself against my own toxin?" she laughed.

Catching the mistake, Steve jumped back just as the soldiers that had pretended to fall to the pistol-darts rose up and made their move. A knot of them caught hold of Steve and carried him to the floor in a heap. The other men engaged hand-to-hand but in their weakened state they didn't last long. Gimmel's soldiers were careful to use soft-style martial arts to subdue and detain with a minimum of injury.

Soon they were restrained in irons at the wrists and ankles, lined up against one wall while Gimmel looked them over from a safe distance. The men had managed to kill four of the soldiers, but the rest glared with woozy hatred through blackened and swollen eyes at the government troopers against the wall.

"Treasures all," Gimmel commented gaily. "My dear gentlemen, how would you like to work for me?"

"Go to hell," Steve grunted.

"I didn't think you'd accept straight off," Gimmel said. "Besides, it's never wise to accept a first offer. But I think we'll be more than able to change your minds."

At a gesture, the soldiers raised their dart-pistols and fired.

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Nick managed to blink his eyes and the white fuzz of light resolved briefly into the form of a woman with dark hair wearing a white jacket. He made a strangled sound.

"Good, you're awake," a slightly-accented voice bid him. British. Intel said that there were several limeys on Gimmel's payroll, most prominent among them was Dr. Rachel Patterson-Smith, possibly the most gifted behavioral neurophysicist in the world. "I've been waiting for you to come 'round. How are you feeling?"

"Callahan, Nicholas T. Master Sergeant. 88741-23863," he croaked.

"As expected, Callahan, Nicholas T.," she said offhandedly. "My name's Rachel."

She stood and checked a bank of monitors next to the chair where Nick was restrained. He couldn't see much of anything else besides a blank wall. He couldn't turn his head - it was restrained in something. His mouth tasted like old boot leather.

"I'm just going to give you a little something," Rachel said, fitting a pneumodermic gun against Nick's pectoral. "To make you a better listener. It won't hurt you, I promise."

There was a hiss and a little pinch as the drug was injected. Nick closed his eyes. He'd read in some of the field reports about the hell that tortured prisoners went through. He bid his sanity a fond adieu - he'd always been so proud of his self-control and how together he was - and buckled himself into the strongest place in his mind, hoping that the storm which was coming could be weathered.

"You shouldn't be so tense," Rachel continued. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you here. I'm only going to show you a few things and then let you make up your own mind. Does that sound so bad?"

"Callahan, Nicholas T. Master Sergeant. 88741-23863."

"You're very brave," Rachel said. "But then, I suppose you'd have to be, in your line of work. This must be frightening you terribly, but you refuse to let it show. Tell me, Callahan, Nicholas T., where do you put the fear? Where does it go inside you?"

"Callahan, Nicholas T. Master Sergeant. 88741-23863."

"The government trained you well. In fact, you come with the highest recommendations. Dr. Gimmel was extremely impressed with your training and your courage in particular. You see, you're not our enemy. The way we view it, you and your platoon are only a case of misplaced loyalties. We just want you to know your options before you commit to a decision as important as deciding which flag you intend to lay down your life for. That's all. Nothing that's going to hurt you."

She fiddled with a few knobs on her console and took a close look at the biomonitor screen. "My, you are nervous. Do you honestly think that I'm going to torture you here?"

"Callahan, Nicholas T. Master Sergeant. 88741-23863."

"Don't think of it as torture, love," Rachel said, touching a series of buttons on her console. "Think of it as my showing you a whole new world. And I guarantee you'll like it better than the one you're in."

The world exploded in noise and color.

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He awoke to a light tapping on his face and a familiar voice calling him back from the fuzzy blackness to where he'd retreated. Shredded memories of pictures and sounds danced behind his eyelids, too fleeting to be captured and analyzed.

"C'mon, man, wake up. Come on."

He opened his eyes slowly and drew a deep shuddering breath. His partner was kneeling on the cold floor beside him, shaking his shoulders gently. His whole body hurt, as if he'd been beaten.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Not sure," his partner said. "How you feel?"

"I hurt."

"It passes. Come on, sit up. They left us some food."

The two men ate ravenously, scooping up the warm food paste with their hands like savages and stuffing the food into their mouths. When the food was gone they sank back against the wall, breathing heavily and feeling a little better.

"I can't remember my name," he said.

"Can't help you there," his partner answered. "I can't remember yours or mine."

"They must have pumped us full of some funky shit."

"No doubt."

A deep mellowness had settled over them and drowsiness was descending. The quick panting breaths slowed into the deep, regular breathing of sleep. The two soldiers never heard the door open, never felt the hands lifting them and dragging them across the floor onto gurneys, never noticed their transport back to Dr. Patterson-Smith's laboratory.

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He awoke again, but this time there was yielding softness against his back and head. He was in a bed.

Sitting up, he looked around. His friends were asleep, looking pale and sweaty as they lay absolutely still in their drugged slumber. Trays of food were set out on hospital tables beside each bed. As hungry as he was, he didn't eat. He still remembered the drugged food from last time.

A small noise drew his attention. His commander was coming around.

He stumbled to his feet, weak and unsteady as a newborn fawn. Using the bedside rails as handholds, he made his staggering way to his commander's bedside and gave him a shake.

"Lieutenant. Wake up."

The lieutenant's eyelids fluttered and his dilated eyes took a moment to focus. "Where are we?"

"Not sure. Looks kinda like a recovery room. We're off the biomonitors, though."

"We could have implants by now," the lieutenant said. "What the hell is going on?"

"Couldn't tell you if I wanted to," he said. "Dr. Patterson-Smith dopes us up so much I can't even remember where they take me, much less what happens when I'm in there. But she's right. Other than aches and pains, I certainly don't feel like I've been tortured."

"That's what puzzles me. We've dropped more of Gimmel's house guards than she can technically afford to lose. But they're still taking the time to dress our wounds and monitor us. Something's up here."

"I dunno. Maybe Gimmel's just concerned about our well-being."

The lieutenant blinked. "You're kidding, right?"

"I dunno. Maybe. I mean, we don't know her. The G-ment just said to kill her. Maybe she really does care whether or not we're all right. Who knows, maybe all the other teams who made the try for her are around here somewhere. Dr. Patterson-Smith, at least, doesn't seem the sort to wipe out entire platoons of soldiers."

"Maybe she would if that platoon was shooting at her."

"Don't get me wrong - Gimmel's still the target. And I'll kill her myself, given the chance. All I'm saying is that we've been the ones doing all the killing and hurting around here. Maybe she's not such the bad guy as we've painted her to be."

"Roger that," the lieutenant said. "But orders are orders. Even if they're wrong."

"Every subject's duty is the king's; but every subject's soul's his own," he quoted.

"I don't get it," the lieutenant said. "You can still remember Shakespeare but damned if I can remember your name. Or mine, for that matter."

"I know. And we know they're not using a memory blank - those hit the language center first so the victim loses the ability to communicate. It must be a real selective process."

"Dr. Patterson-Smith's specialty. I wonder what she's got in store."

"Bet I can find out," he said.

"Oh yeah? How?"

He smiled. "I'm gonna ask her, the next time I see her."

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Dr. Patterson-Smith sat back from the monitor, still chuckling. Dr. Sylvia Gimmel wiped her eyes over tinkling laughter. Only Mary Krelle was not laughing, but the taciturn geneticist did wear a wry smile.

"Your treatment never ceases to amaze me, Rachel."

Rachel snorted fresh laughter. "He's going to ask me."

"Be careful with that one," Dr. Krelle warned. "The others, they weren't nearly as finely trained as these. And we all know that the government trains the mind as well as the body. They won't go as easily as the others did. I guarantee it."

"What do you suggest, Mary?" Dr. Gimmel asked.

"I say let me administer the virus first."

Patterson-Smith shook her head. "That's not wise. It's taken me this long to take the edge off their aggression. Such a move might drive them right back to violence."

"Or it might break them down further, give us more of a *tabula rasa* to work with," Dr. Gimmel said. "Rachel, I think Mary's idea might have some merit."

Rachel sighed. "If you think it's best, Sylvia."

"I'd like to try it."

"Perhaps if we just picked one out," Mary Krelle suggested.

"Absolutely not," Rachel said sternly. "I won't bend on this, Mary. Those men have trained as a unit for years and years. They've been through situations so intense that you and I could never comprehend. Breaking them up will urge the remaining members to become completely predatory in order to find their missing brother. Trust me on this. It's got to be all of them at once, or none at all."

Mary tapped her pursed lips in thought. "Yes. You're right, of course. Thank you."

Rachel tore a page from her notepad. "Give me one more session with them to prepare them a little more. They'll be ready for the virus first thing tomorrow morning," she said, handing over the page of neatly copied notes. "These are the file numbers of the psychological and behavioral profiles I've assembled for each of them. They should give you some basis on where to start when they're put with the DNA sampling."

"Thank you," Mary said, looking more animated immediately. "I'll get right on it."

* * * * *

Rachel Patterson-Smith was a little annoyed at having to rush through the painstaking process of constructing the ERMs for the five captured soldiers. It was hard enough to manage with the slew of medical enhancements the government had made to its elite troops, which made them hyper-resistant to any sort of mind-altering drugs which might be used in psychotropic torture or information extraction. She'd been reduced to using synthesized plant extracts to simply open the mind a little wider and to remove any blocks placed through fear or anger. Then she let her own subliminal procedures do the rest. It wasn't a matter of tearing things down and rebuilding, as was the case in brainwashing, but rather a detailed analysis of the psychoemotional makeup of the patient and a subtle tweaking and twisting of what already existed in order to get the desired results.

Her case in point was currently cocooned in her sensorium chamber, in a light trance and surrounded by the pulsing, flashing subliminal routine which would finish implanting the Emotional Response Matrix, the all-important ERM which would determine the responses of her patient from this moment on. The human mind was remarkable in its ability to find a way around its own problems, so the trick with any kind of behavioral modification at all was to make the mind think that there was absolutely nothing wrong with itself.

Master Sergeant Nicholas T. Callahan was completely absorbed in the ERM programming she was subjecting him to, his dilated eyes wide and darting as his mind soaked up the subliminal suggestions like a dry sponge. Rachel Patterson-Smith had taken extra care in the construction of his ERM. Maybe it was because of the potential she sensed in the rangy, wiry NCO, or his wry sense of humor which had even the taciturn Mary Krelle chuckling over the security monitor footage.

Or maybe it was because she kinda liked him...

* * * * *

The five men were lying naked on their gurneys, restrained just in case the neuroinhibitor wore off unexpectedly. They'd already accounted for the deaths of in excess of twenty household troops. Four for each soldier. These were truly exceptional killers.

Mary Krelle moved among the men, checking vitals on the implanted biomonitors and by hand. Gesturing to an aide, the men quickly received immunosuppressive injections from a pneumodermic gun and waited for a moment for the drug to take effect. When Dr. Krelle was satisfied that the men's immune systems were suppressed, she drew back the cover on a cryo-container and drew out an ampule of amber fluid. Fitting it into another pneumodermic, she injected Don Sullivan. Another ampule went to inject Charlie Cavanaugh, a third for Jerry Martin, and then the last two for Nick Callahan and Steve Quentin.

"They're all infected," Mary Krelle informed her aides. "Make sure they get the immunosuppressives every eight hours, without fail. Their bodies will need a lot of energy over the next forty-eight hours, so keep those nutrient bags full, understand me?"

Behind the protective screen, Rachel Patterson-Smith rubbed her forehead apprehensively. A friendly hand massaged her shoulder.

"Relax," Sylvia Gimmel said. "You did fine."

"It was such a rush," Rachel pouted. "I keep thinking I must have made a mistake."

"You didn't," Sylvia reassured her. "Your work is always wonderful."

"The ERMs are in place and we can start flash-training them whenever you're ready," Rachel said to Mary as the geneticist re-entered from the clean room. Krelle stripped off her sterile gloves and mask and pitched them into the incinerator.

"Good," Mary said. "I'd like them to start the flash-training as soon as they're in REM sleep. I'd like as much of the training in place when they wake up as possible."

"I agree," Rachel said. "They're going to be in a great deal of shock once they figure out what's happening. The more they have to fall back on the easier it will be for them to assimilate."

"See to it," Sylvia said, standing. "I leave this in your capable hands. I'll be back to check on our new recruits tomorrow evening."

* * * * *

Cocooned in softness. Floating. For a man who'd spent his entire adult life with both his feet on the ground, it was a very disconcerting feeling. He struggled against his immobility but his entire body was wrapped in a soft embrace. Claustrophobia surfaced and panic hurled itself against the carefully constructed barriers. Wildness began to infect his futile struggle.

A calm voice broke through the blackness. "Relax. You're in no danger."

"Let me out."

"We can't. You might hurt yourself."

"I can't breathe."

"Yes you can. Just settle down."

Slowly the iron control born on battlefields around the globe asserted itself and he counseled his form to stillness. Panic still chewed at the edges of his brain, but he was able to fight it off with effort.

"Where am I?" he croaked.

"You're the guests of Dr. Sylvia Gimmel."

"Guests. Prisoners."

"Not so. You and all your companions can leave any time you wish."

"Then let me go."

"Not until you're healthy. You're very weak right now, your system has taken a tremendous shock. We have to keep you for a few more hours until your strength has returned. We don't want you to hurt yourself."

The control broke. He thrashed wildly against his confinement.

"Let me out! Let me the fuck out of this thing!"

He struggled and struggled until he thought his heart would burst, but the accursed softness wouldn't yield. How he hated softness. How much more he wanted something hard and concrete, something he could wrap his hands around and choke the life from.

"Let... me... OUT!" The last word was a high-pitched shriek, totally unaccustomed to his throat.

No response. All his struggles, all his training, for nothing. He was powerless. All he could do was submit to what was inevitable. With a huge heaving sigh, something happened that hadn't happened to him since he was a tiny boy.

He began to shake with huge, wracking sobs. Tears streaked his face and his chin dimpled as he bawled his helplessness. A thin, wobbling wail escaped his engorged lips that soon degenerated into pitiful whimpers.

Behind her monitor, Rachel Patterson-Smith smiled broadly.

* * * * *

Time passed. When they were finally released, it was into a large furnished room. They were barely strong enough to stand, but that did not preclude extreme caution on the part of the guards who escorted them from the room full of giant cocoons into the new quarters.

The place was bright from a skylight in the vaulted ceiling, and very breezy and airy. The furnishings were very simple; each of them had a bed, a small armoire and chest of drawers, a tiny sink and a toilet. There was a table with five comfortable-looking chairs at one end near a fortified window and a long shelf of books and vids with a player set in the wall beneath it.

The five soldiers were far too ragged to do much more than collapse on the beds in a heap, exhausted from the twenty-meter walk from one room to another. The voice in the cocoons had been right. It was probably for the best that they'd been confined earlier.

They did manage to struggle defiantly to their feet when Sylvia Gimmel entered the room in the center of a ring of guards. She slapped an official-looking document onto the tabletop and stepped back. The lieutenant picked it up and perused it, then handed it around.

"Why should we care what happened to those people?" the lieutenant demanded.

Gimmel looked amused. "Because they're you."

"What?"

"You heard me. The names on that report are yours. You've been recorded missing in action, presumed dead by your own government. They're not coming for you. No extraction, no nothing."

"These aren't our names," the lieutenant said, taking the paper back from the last man in the circuit.

"They aren't anymore," Gimmel said cryptically. "I'm here to offer you gentlemen a proposition."

"Enough," the lieutenant said. "We took an oath. We won't betray our country."

"I'm not asking you to," Gimmel interrupted. "Ask yourselves - have you been harmed here? Have my people been anything other than courteous and solicitous, even though you have persistently attempted to cause them harm? Have they?"

The lieutenant looked down at the paper, and the names on it. Missing in action, presumed dead. Lieutenant Stephen L. Quentin. Master Sergeant Nicholas T. Callahan. Staff Sergeant Gerald J. Martin. Staff Sergeant Donald H. Sullivan. Staff Sergeant Charles D. Cavanaugh. The names were very familiar.

"I have a proposition. You don't have to answer right away."

"Go on," the lieutenant - Steve - said evenly.

"I want you to stay on here for a little while, to help train my troops. I promise that nothing you do here will compromise your oaths of service to your country - I realize that you're men of honor. I won't ask you to divulge any tactics or secret information. Just simple combat training. Once the training period -which you shall set - is expired, you will all be free to go. Of course, should you wish to stay among us, you would be very welcome."

The lieutenant gazed over the faces of his men. "And your troops, they won't be offended by being trained by a group of men?"

Gimmel's look was unreadable. "Not at all."

"We'll talk about it," the lieutenant said.

"Fair enough," Gimmel said. She left with nothing more said.

* * * * *

"I don't like it," he said again. "It's all too cut and dried. We're being let off too easy."

"Damn right," the big man from the other team said. "We killed a whole lot of these people. And we're supposed to believe we'll be welcomed with open arms?"

"I dunno," the big man's partner said. "It's not like our own army's going to come looking for us."

"Does anybody else feel funny?" the lieutenant asked, rubbing his temples.

"Funny how?"

"I get these little twinges," the lieutenant said. "Like I'm seeing something move out of the corner of my eye. Shit. I better sit down."

The lieutenant, who liked to pace when he was thinking, threaded between the beds and pulled out a chair. His men were gazing at him in shock and disbelief. The lieutenant regarded them curiously.

"What the hell is it?"

The men looked away. He fixed them with a level stare. "Dammit, what the hell is wrong?"

"The way you walked," the big man said.

"What the hell are you talking about, soldier?"

"Lieutenant, look at yourself," the wiry fair skinned one said.

The lieutenant looked down at himself distractedly. What the hell is wrong with the way he looked? He looked the same as he always had. Dark hair and a broad frame covered generously with ropy muscle. And there it was, sitting demurely, legs crossed at the knee and the toe pointed, hands folded properly around his knee. One foot swinging idly in space.

"Oh my God."

He'd walked with a definite sway in his hips, weight over the balls of his feet. One hand at his side, just brushing his hips, the other elevated slightly and not swinging.

"What the hell have they done to me?"

The wiry fair one, the Master Sergeant, got up and ran to the lieutenant's side. He ran up and down, hands by sides with short, hobbled steps. The lieutenant gazed at him in shock.

"What has happened?" the lieutenant said, choking over the lump in his throat. Before he knew what was happening, the wiry fair one had his arms around his commanding officer and was stroking his hair while he cried. It was comforting, it seemed the most natural thing in the world - and that scared the hell out of everyone. The rest of the men were clustered around them in a second, talking in a babble.

"... running like a bitch..."

"... see how he walked?"

"... can't believe I'm fucking crying..."

"... shh, it's gonna be all right..."

"... just relax, honey..."

"... take it easy, lieutenant..."

"... did you just call him *honey*?"

The lieutenant gathered himself up and got control of the situation, bringing his men to silence by standing.

"Enough," the lieutenant said. "We're acting like a bunch of green recruits here."

"Roger that," the wiry fair Master Sergeant echoed. "Let's get some discipline here."

"Fact," the master sergeant's partner said. "We've all been acting funny over the last few days."

"Fact," he continued, "we were all so blitzed that they could have done anything they wanted to us. Hell, we can't even remember our own names when they're written down on a piece of paper."

"That's not true," the big man said. "I think I can remember my name."

"Oh yeah?" his partner said. "What is it?"

"Sullivan," he announced after a moment's reflection. "Dawn Sullivan."

"That's right," the master sergeant said. "I remember now. You were Sparrow Two. The second team on the south side of the estate. It was Dawn and... and... and his partner's name was... Charlotte. Charlotte Cavanaugh."

"Goddamn," Charlotte said. "I remember now. Sparrow One. You'd just finished setting up the perimeter sensors and were switching out on the gun when we got popped. I was making a report to the lieutenant. Lieutenant Quentin. Something Quentin."

"Oh my God," the lieutenant groaned. "It's Stephanie. Stephanie Quentin."

"Right!" Charlotte crowed.

"And Sparrow One was Jeri Martin and Nicole Cavanaugh," the lieutenant continued in a groan, and sunk back into his chair, his face buried in his hands.

"What's wrong, Steph?" Charlotte asked.

Nicole sat next to his commanding officer and pulled the crumpled MIA report out of his hands. He smoothed it out on the tabletop and spun it to face his companions.

"Those aren't our names," he said. "At least, they weren't."

"What are you talking about?" Dawn said.

"Your name wasn't Dawn. It was Don. Donald Sullivan. And the lieutenant's name was Stephen. I was Nick and my partner was Jerry. Charlotte is actually Charles."

"That can't be right," Jeri said confusedly. "My name's Jeri. As far as I can remember, it's always been Jeri, ever since I was a little girl."

Everyone's head sprang up in alarm. "What did you say?" Nicole demanded.

Jeri's face fell. "Oh my God."

"Now I know why all the house troops have looked so goddamn familiar," Nicole said miserably. "It's because we were in Advanced Training with all of 'em. Don't you get it? That's what happened to the other teams that came to take out Gimmel. They're not dead."

"They're women," Stephanie concluded. "Gimmel turned them into women."

* * * * *

Food arrived shortly afterwards but the men didn't touch it, afraid of being on the receiving end of another batch of drugs. They were laboring to call each other by their masculine names, but it was getting harder and harder to remember. There were new, obviously fabricated memories in place of all of them, depicting childhoods that never happened. With a little thought and concentration, these memories could be seen through and discounted, but it was such a feat to disbelieve them that it was far easier to just accept them. Nick vividly remembered being in parochial school, wearing a plaid skirt and knee socks and with a head full of curls. But he also remembered distinctly that he'd gotten in trouble from *Brother* Francis for dumping Alka-Seltzer in the baptismal font. There wouldn't have been monks at an all-girl school. Dr. Patterson-Smith was good, but she couldn't get everything. There was no changing that Dawn had won Golden Gloves in college. Steve was adamant about the first *girl* he fucked being Amanda Wilson his sophomore year in high school, not Adam Wilson in the back of his father's Buick.

"So what happens now, Steph - dammit, I mean Steve?"

"I guess we wait," the lieutenant said. "I mean, it's clear that somehow we've been programmed with women's mannerisms. My guess is that they've already started the physical changes, too, while we were zonked."

"Can we fight it?" Nick asked.

"I doubt it. I'd lay money they're using the R78 carrier virus that Gimmel developed. There isn't a vaccine or counteragent anywhere to fight it. Looks like we get used to having tits, boys."

"So we just go along."

"Situations like this, you hang on to what you can. It's like a house fire. You can't save everything, so you start grabbing the things that are most important, the things that can't be replaced," Dawn said. "Like us. We've been a team for eight years, through an entire war. I don't want to lose that."

"And revenge," Steve said evenly. "I want that bitch Gimmel's heart for a snack."

"Agreed, then," Nick said. "We stay a team, tits or no tits. And we're going to get Gimmel."

"Roger that," Jerry echoed. "And all the rest we can leave behind."

"Then can I make a request?" Charlie asked. "Can we please ditch this boy-name shit? Trying to remember to call everybody by their original names is giving me a headache."

* * * * *

They woke up very sick the first morning after, sweating and shaking. Nicole tried to calm himself as he heard Lieutenant Quentin retching in the small commode by his bed.

Nicole sat up shakily and kicked his legs over the side of the bed. The feet didn't touch the floor. He gasped in shock. Standing unsteadily, he stumbled to the mirror on the wardrobe by his bed and took stock of himself.

His once rock-hard body was gaunt and emaciated. His ribs poked through his skin like bed-slats and his ruddy complexion was evenly pale and covered with a sheen of foul-smelling sweat. He ran a finger through the accumulated perspiration. It was greasy and sticky to the touch.

"We're shedding body mass," he announced.

"Tell me about it," Stephanie managed as he heaved into the toilet again.

Nicole figured that he'd lost somewhere between three and four inches in height and nearly sixty pounds of body mass. His legs shook with the effort of holding himself upright. Where there had formerly been thick slabs of veined muscle along his thighs, there was now only a slight roundness.

"Sweet Jesus," he breathed.

"Ride it out, Nicki," Jeri consoled him, wobbling on his skinny legs to where his partner stood transfixed before the mirror. "It's gonna happen. There's nothing we can do."

Nicole's shoulders heaved in a trembling sigh, and then the crying began again. Since the cocoon, it was altogether too easy to cry, and what was worse, it felt natural. Jeri's slender arms folded around Nicole's shoulders and drew him close, Jeri's smooth forehead against his cheek. Nicole was accustomed to the scratchy growth of beard on his own cheek first thing in the morning, but this morning there was only softness. He ran a hand over his cheek. The stubble from the day before was still there, but as soft as down. And the skin underneath was very soft, like the brush of silk against his fingers.

"Eyes on the prize," Nicole reminded himself.

"Gimmel will pay for this," Jeri agreed.

With an effort, Nicole got a hold of himself and blotted his eyes roughly with the heel of his hand. "All right, look lively," he said briskly. "We may be sick as dogs, but we're still soldiers. Finish doing what you gotta do and then get cleaned up. Daily briefing at 0730."

The discipline of years and years was a comfort. The ailing men seemed to gather themselves visibly, wiping mouths free of discharge and making a weak way to the communal shower stall. Steph applied his hand to the palm plate and the transparent wall slid up into the ceiling. The soldiers stepped wearily into the stall in a company front and began stripping off as they were used to.

The shock was a tangible thing. "Holy Mary Mother of God," Charlotte breathed.

The usual shower-room banter would have been in the poorest of taste at that moment. All the men, once comfortably endowed, sported genitals which would have looked more proper on the average four-year-old boy. The penises were pathetically meager and pointed downwards and the scrotal sacs were empty and beginning to elongate, stretching downwards towards the anus to disappear between each man's legs.

Nicole again fought back tears. The lack of control regarding his situation was hard to deal with.

"Okay, dammit, get it together. We know what's happening. We had to know this was coming sooner or later. So get the fuck over it and let's get cleaned up. Daylight's wasting," he said sternly to the line of whimpering half-men. The flood of tears assuaged, they stepped under blissfully hot jets of water and began to slough off the viscous filth on their skin which had once been the muscles beneath.

"Great," Dawn complained, looking down at his scrubbing cloth. "Bitch doesn't waste any time."

He revealed his cloth to his companions. It was covered with short, bristly hair. There were long hairless swathes on Dawn's chest and shoulder. "All my hair's coming off."

"Knew it would happen," Jeri reaffirmed. "Just roll with it."

"This sure as fuck wasn't in my job description," Steph grumped as he scooped a handful of wiry hair from his leg and threw it down on the tiles in disgust. It made a wet *smack* when it hit.

"At least you all smell better," Charlotte joked, reaching for the soap. The soap they'd provided had a distinctly feminine scent - of course - and their skins began tingling strangely under the lather. They rinsed hurriedly, fearful of what would happen next. The lather sloughed away to reveal hairless, pink flesh. Nicole ran his hand across his shoulder and down his arm questioningly. The skin was softer and more supple than he could have ever imagined his skin being. It was a cross between velvet and silk and the caressing touch left a shimmering trail of tingles behind it.

"Whoa," he commented. "You guys feeling this?"

A chorus of distracted "uh-huhs" answered him. All the men were running their hands across their bodies in astonishment, luxuriating in the feel of their newer, softer skin.

"It's like somebody upped the gain on all my senses," Charlotte mused, rubbing her lower back and ass slowly. "I wonder what happened?"

"I wouldn't know the biochemistry behind it, but my guess is we have girl skin now," Jeri said. "I shudder to think what the shampoo is going to be like."

"I bet I can guess," Dawn said with a sense of doom, reaching for the tiny bottle of shampoo provided for each of them. He coated his hand with a generous dollop and smeared it into his close-cropped military haircut. He drew his hands away from his scalp as if they'd been shocked.

"Damn, that tickles like hell," he commented.

Dawn's hair grew visibly, thickening in ropy strands until it was a soapy mop swirled atop his head. Dawn sighed heavily. "First chick skin, now chick hair. It never stops."

He bent over and rinsed the soap from his longer hair. As the suds rinsed away, the old color of the hair rinsed away with them, leaving behind a damp tousle of ash-blond locks. The shampoo had even managed to add the same color to his eyebrows.

Dawn drew a thick lock down in front of his eyes. "Shit," he swore. "Well, if I'm gonna be a blonde, I'm going to be a natural blonde." He coated his fingertips with the shampoo and scrubbed them in the downy fluff which remained between his legs. Automatically, he reached for the companion bottle of conditioner which had been provided. He worked the gel into his hair as if he'd done it his whole life, waiting for it to soak in before applying a final rinse.

All the men did the same and found that the shampoo altered the hair's length according to the amount of time left in the hair. So they came out with lengths all the way from Steph's jaw-length hair to Nicole's, which brushed the tops of her shoulders.

They grabbed the provided towels and wrapped up, stepping back into the main room. The flimsy hospital clothes, which had been laid in malodorous piles on the floor, were removed and a clean set of scrubs sat on the foot of every bed. The men fell to the individual sinks to brush teeth and attempt to do something with their newfound mops.

Nicole gazed at himself in complete wonder. He scooped his still-damp strawberry-blonde hair into a loose horsetail and fastened it with a rubber band placed conscientiously by the sink by whoever had laid out their new clothes. Even his receding hairline had been stopped, replaced with a shiny, mink-soft curtain of luminous hair.

"Aw, for Christ's sake," Jeri said in anguish. Nicole spun around to see him holding up the "hospital scrubs." They were actually short shirtwaist dresses, like the kind worn by beauticians in salons. Beneath them were a pair of tights, some short flat women's shoes in a matching color and a pair of very feminine-looking panties. Jeri slumped on the bed in disgust. "They're not going to let us have any dignity, are they?"

"Nope," Steph said, pulling the panties over one leg, then the other. "So get over it. At least you're not going through this alone. We all have to go through it. Now quit acting like this shit is all some big surprise. Hell, tomorrow morning we're probably going to be issued bras and makeup."

"You're right," Jeri said. "Best get busy doing this, then."

Nicole pulled the panties up his hairless legs and pulled them high over his hips. It was amazing to him that the filmy little scrap would cover anything, but it made only a little bulge in front where it covered his shriveled equipment. With a feeling of dread he felt the thong back slide home between the cheeks of his hairless, rounded bum. They couldn't have issued granny panties for their first day. Nope, it was all g-strings for these soldiers.

The tights were a struggle to get on, especially since the crotch wanted to reside somewhere between mid-thigh. Nicole finally wrestled them into place and pulled on the loose-fitting short dress. All the buttons were backwards, but that was easy enough to get around. The shoes were comfortable enough, but they didn't seem to cover enough of his feet.

They gathered around the central table. There were five separate packages set before each chair. The men opened them without preamble. Each package contained several pamphlets detailing some of the finer points of feminine hygiene, a small satchel of skin-care products, a package of cigarettes and a disposable heat-node lighter.

Steph was looking at the cigarette package strangely. "I've never smoked in my life," he said. "But for some reason I really want one of these right now."

In response, the vidscreen set into the wall of the communal area flickered and came on, resolving into the face of Dr. Patterson-Smith. She greeted them with a warm smile. "Good morning," she said brightly.

"When you're assembled around the table, it automatically opens a two-way channel to Dr. Gimmel and myself. Otherwise, you'll be left alone. You have my word. I see you've all opened your starter packages."

"Starter packages?" Stephanie asked.

"Correct," Rachel said. "As you know, behaviour is learned through application of two contradictory stimuli, negative and positive reinforcement. While you were recuperating, we chemically addicted the five of you to a nicotine derivative developed in our labs. It's very addictive and the withdrawal pangs are quite rigorous. It's purely a precaution. When you do as you're told, you'll receive your ration of tobacco. If you don't, then the ration for your entire platoon will be withheld."

"And if we make it through the withdrawal?" Nicole asked defiantly.

"It's doubtful, even for men such as yourselves," Rachel explained. "But if you should, then we would just re-addict you while you were sleeping. Don't worry. You won't have to become two-pack-a-day smokers just to ease the cravings. Just three or four a day should keep you comfortable."

"And here I thought that you were the friendly one," Dawn spat.

"I am," Rachel said with a smile. "You should have heard some of Dr. Krelle's ideas."

"So what are we expected to do now?" Stephanie asked.

"There are several things on your docket today," she continued. "You have the morning for your own affairs, which, I don't doubt, involve planning your escape. After lunch you'll report to the Motion Laboratory for the first section of your motive training. Then, in the evening, you'll be required to view several vids covering hygiene and some other basics you'll need to know. We will place you in a subconscious trance to make sure the information is absorbed completely. Then dinner, and lights-out."

"Sounds like a light day," Charlotte opined.

"It is," Rachel said. "You're all still very weak and going through a lot of changes. We don't want to overtax your systems. Which is why it's paramount that you eat all the meals you're provided. They will not be drugged, I promise. If you don't eat properly you'll experience severe medical conditions which will hamper your upcoming escape attempts."

"You promise the food won't be doped up?"

"Aside from vitamin supplements, I promise," Rachel confirmed.

"Okay," Steph said. "In which case, you have our word that we won't attempt to escape until the transformation is confirmed over by you. Agreed?"

Rachel nodded. "Sounds reasonable. Agreed."

"Then bring on the grub," Steph said. "We skipped dinner and everybody's starving."

"It's on its way," Rachel said, and the monitor flicked off.

* * * * *

The men spent the first morning reviewing the literature they'd been given, learning much more than they ever thought they'd need to know about the service and care of the female body. In true fashion, they tested the limits of their endurance by going as long as they could without resorting to the cigarettes provided in the "starter packages." Jeri, long since the hardiest of them, could only make it about two hours before collapsing in a fit of trembling, covered with

sweat. He applied a shaking light to the end of the white cigarette and drew deeply. The trembling had subsided by his second inhale.

"That was scary as hell," Jeri said.

Stephanie, who had long been the most vicious opponent of smoking because of its adverse affects on physical performance, blew a long jet of bluish smoke towards the ceiling. He regarded the smoldering tube in his fingers for a moment. "Y'know, these things don't taste half bad," he commented.

"They stink a little on the other end," Dawn said, "but they taste okay."

"Looks like they have us on a tight leash," Nicole offered. "I don't know if I could last through an hour of that fit, much less the length of time it would take to ride it out. You'd have to tie me down."

"Roger that," Jeri confirmed.

"So we roll with it," Steph said. "We're going to have to adjust to a lot of things here, people. If we don't roll with it we're going to snap and lose it. And every man of us - every *girl* of us - is necessary if we're going to survive this business and carry out our mission."

"My main concern is that Rachel is going to use some of that hypno-conditioning to imprint a loyalty for Gimmel into us," Charlotte said. "I don't think that's something we could fight."

"The hard part's done already," Nicole said. The other men looked at him confusedly. "Think about it. Ordinarily, in a situation like this, we'd've torn this place down brick by brick. They've bled all the aggression out of us. Instead of doing what we'd normally do, we've been bawling like babies because we don't have any control over our situation."

"Nicki's right," Dawn said.

"I figure, in this case, that the path of least resistance might be the correct one," Steph said. "We become model prisoners, perfect little soldier ladies for Dr. Gimmel. She's on edge about us. Hell, she should be - we killed a bunch of her best troops. We have to get her to relax. And the more we brown-nose, the more recognizance we're going to be granted."

"So we're all supposed to get into this woman stuff?" Charlotte asked.

"You're my platoon," Steph said. "And I've never accepted half-assed out of any of you."

* * * * *

Lunch arrived a little later, more of the pasty gruel they'd been served before and huge bottles of water. The men, dehydrated and famished, fell to with a will before a harsh bark from their lieutenant froze them.

"Ten-hut!"

They stood stock-still, eyes front, as Stephanie paced to her space at the table. "Were you all raised in a barn?" he asked. "I want to see you eating like proper little ladies, not like animals! Now at ease, and sit."

The men sat around the table, courteously waiting for their superior officer to sit first. They daintily spread the provided napkins in their laps and began eating with the plastic spoons, tiny bites suited more to a formal dinner than to their first real meal in days.

Once the plates were all cleaned, several attendants entered through the door and cleared the kit away, replacing each man's tray with another, smaller tray containing three unremarkable bottles marked "A," "B" and "C." One of the attendants presented a card to Steph before leaving.

Steph skimmed the card's instructions. "Medications," he announced. "The instructions say that bottle "A" is an ointment to be applied to the hands, bottle "B" is eyedrops, and bottle "C" is to be gargled with."

"Should we guinea-pig 'em first, lieutenant?" Dawn asked.

"Hell with it," Steph said. "We don't want to get our ration suspended, so we all gotta take 'em eventually. I say let's all dive into this together, see what happens."

They all opened their bottle "A" and spread the thick cream inside over their hands. An itching tingle began instantly around the cuticles of their fingernails which didn't abate until all the men's nails had grown to about three-quarters of an inch beyond their fingertips.

Steph tapped his long nails against the tabletop. They had no give. "Damn," he commented. "Hard."

Nicole bit down viciously on one of his new nails and rubbed his jaw in pain. "Unbreakable," he said.

"This is going to take some getting used to," Jeri chuckled.

"Okay, then, bottle "B." Eyedrops," Steph commanded. The men had a little trouble maneuvering the tops from the tiny bottles with their long nails, but eventually persevered. Leaning back, they all applied the drops to their eyes and sat back up, blinking tearfully.

"Ow! Shit!" Dawn said, rubbing her eyes. All the men clutched at their eyes in sudden pain, crying with the surprise of it. Nicole was the first to recover, looking around and blinking painfully.

Steph looked up. His eyes looked much larger now and the fine wrinkles around the eyes were gone. And the irises, formerly a muted hazel, were now a rich, vibrant violet set off by the long, cheek-brushing eyelashes which feathered his lids.

"Unbelievable," Jeri commented. His eyes were now a deep, doe-brown, so dark as to make it impossible to see the pupils. And they were as wide as a schoolgirl's, permanently.

Nicole blinked painfully, feeling his eyelashes brush against the tops of his cheeks. He rose and went to the mirror, only to be greeted by a smooth face dominated by a huge pair of emerald-green eyes. And the perpetual bags beneath his eyes were gone, as well, leaving only smooth, unblemished skin.

They all sat back down, looking at each other in amazement. Stephanie, their commander, was now a violet-eyed man with thick, lustrous raven's-wing hair and pale skin. Dawn, once ruddy and brown-haired, now had a deep, even tan complexion, wheat-blonde hair and huge,

guileless ice-blue eyes. Charlotte, nearly bald and brown-eyed, now sported a short mop of curly platinum blonde hair and gazed in wonder at her squadmates through liquid hazel eyes set in a poplar-wood complexion. Jeri, once the fairest among them, now had wide doe-brown eyes which dominated his slender face and an unruly shock of dark brown curls which set off the deep, walnut tan of her skin. And Nicole, formerly the darkest of them with black hair and brown eyes, had a luminous strawberry blonde curtain of soft hair, big green eyes, and a spray of freckles across her pale nose.

"God, I don't even want to know what's in the last bottle," Steph said coldly, fumbling with the cap to his bottle "C." The long nails made it much harder than it should have been. "Well, bottoms up."

The platoon raised the bottles in a mock toast and tossed them back, gargling the salty liquid for a long beat before leaning back forward to spit the contents back into the empty vials.

"I wonder what that... oh, for the love of God," Steph said in a sweet little-girl soprano. His long-nailed hand rose to his throat to feel for the Adam's apple which was no longer there.

"Jesus," Dawn said in a husky, breathy mezzo. "I sound like a 900 number."

"It could be worse," Charlotte said in a peppy, cheerleader's soprano. "You could sound like me."

"It's not that bad," Nicole said in his new, hoarse contralto.

"Of course it's not," Jeri said in a nasal, sexy-sounding mezzo. "You sound like Kathleen Turner. You'd be bitching your head off if you wound up sounding like him." He pointed at Charlotte.

"Hey!" the lieutenant barked, sounding like a girl of about six. "You know better than that!"

Jeri looked crestfallen. "Sorry," he said. "I meant, if you wound up sounding like *her*." Shamefaced, Jeri dropped to the floor and gave her commanding officer twenty push-ups.

* * * * *

The Motion Laboratory was a health-nut's dream, packed with every manner of workout machine the former men ever remembered seeing. They were greeted by Dr. Krelle and a knot of armed guards.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," she said.

Steph cleared his - *her* - throat. "We prefer to be addressed as women, or ladies now," she announced in her little-girl purr. "If you don't mind. We have to get used to this sometime."

Krelle smiled brightly. "Excellent idea, Lieutenant. I agree completely. Good afternoon, ladies."

The "ladies" remained at attention, barking, "Good afternoon, ma'am." in perfect unison.

"At ease," Stephanie commanded. They fell to a polished, perfect parade rest.

"What's the drill?" Steph asked Dr. Krelle.

"From now on, you and your m-- *ladies* are to report here promptly every afternoon at 1500 for conditioning and exercise. We'll do that later, however. Right now, we have some tests we need to run."

"Fall out," Steph commanded. The "ladies" relaxed and formed a line before a large, capsule-like affair suspended over a level treadmill.

"This is a motive trainer," Dr. Krelle explained. "We developed it some years ago to help paralysis victims regain their mobility. But it adapts adequately to our purposes as well. First, please."

Stephanie started forward, but Nicole restrained her. "Excuse me, sir - I mean *ma'am* - but the commanding officer should never be first into an unknown situation." She stepped forward.

Two technicians sat Nicole down on short bench and began fitting her with what looked ominously like ski boots, thick armored contraptions that covered her from the knee down. Once they were all solidly fastened in place, they led her to the treadmill and fitted her with an induction helmet which trailed wires and leads up and into a complicated looking computer.

"The computer is an alpha-wave imprinter," Krelle explained. "It monitors brainwave activity on the subconscious level and can make corrections if necessary. We're going to readjust your bodies for the new centers of gravity and balance points you'll have."

The part of Nicole's face allowed to show beneath the induction rig looked apprehensive. "These boot things are uncomfortable as hell," she said.

"They're supposed to be," Krelle said. "But it won't last long."

The two technicians fitted pneumodermic syringes into apertures near mid-calf on the huge boots. There was a twin set of hisses and Nicole lurched forward to lean on the handrails.

"The weakness will pass soon. Now, if you'd start walking forward," Krelle said, positioning herself behind the control station of the induction computer. Nicole started walking on the treadmill with trembling, unsteady steps which gradually gained strength. Krelle pushed the speed higher, pausing to let Nicole adjust to the new stride size and velocity, then pushed it up again and again until Nicole was nearly at her limits. Then, with a loud series of beeps and buzzes, the induction computer finished its work and the machine cycled down. Nicole stood, panting, as the techs removed the induction rig and administered two more injections. Then they ushered the next victim, Jeri, into the module.

Nicole was much more steady in the boots as she was led to a bench and allowed to sit. She towelled herself off gratefully and lit a cigarette. Stephanie watched her interestedly. Nicole naturally held the cigarette between the very tips of her long-nailed fingers and held her hand up, near her face. She wrapped her lips around the filter in an exquisitely feminine way and set the jets of smoke upwards through a girlish moué. It was insidious, through the flash-training and the induction sessions how Rachel and Krelle were slowly, item by item, transforming them all into beautiful and graceful females. Steph prayed to a God she thought had long since forgotten her that they'd be able to keep a hold of what made them themselves. She didn't want to die like this, transformed into some bimbo for the amusement of a rebel doctor.

Eyes on the prize, she reminded herself.

They went through the cycle for each of them separately and sent them off to quick PT in the gym wearing the boots after a short smoke break. The once-men exercised to their fullest limits, desperate to keep their strength and tone despite captivity and illness. It was, since the induction session, much easier to keep balance except for a marked tendency to lean too far backwards.

Krelle interrupted their PT in about an hour and had her technicians remove the boots. The former men gazed in horror as the boots came away from their lower legs. Their feet were now small and dainty, small-toed and high-arched. The ankles were slender and the bones of the shin seemed to have elongated.

Nicole tried to stand and had difficulty. Her heels remained about an inch above the floor as she struggled for balance.

"What's wrong? I can't seem to stand properly."

"Another improvement we made while you were in the boots," Krelle announced. "The injections you received softened your bones. The boots redistributed the softened bone mass into a new configuration and the final injections set the bones in their new distribution."

"Meaning?" Dawn chirped.

"Meaning," Dr. Krelle said with a smile, "that you'll all probably be much more comfortable wearing these." She held up a stylish, open-toed sandal with a three-inch heel.

* * * * *

The motive training was insidious and completely effective. The five soldiers, now wearing heels of no less than three, sometimes four, inches, were moving back along the hall from the Motion Lab with the easy grace and sexy gaits of runway models. Their rounded hindquarters traced seductive figure-eights through the air and their hands were carried well away from their bodies, cutting the air almost like fins.

They returned to their quarters about 1800, hungry and demoralized. The cravings were on them in earnest and they all settled down in front of the vidscreen for a smoke and a period of recuperation before they discovered what the good doctors unveiled what was next.

Nicole drug deeply off the cigarette she'd lit, letting the nicotine try and release the tense knot her chest had become. The flash-training and the motive induction had her now-long model's legs crossed demurely at the knee and her back straight as she sat, where any time before in her life she'd have flopped gratefully on the low sofa and put her heels on the coffee table.

Steph looked through the small stack of vids which the doctors had provided, reading the titles off as she leafed through them.

"Okay, girls," she announced in her new little-girl chirp. "What's gonna be first? We have 'Cleaning and Hygiene,' 'Social Interaction,' and lastly, 'Fashion, Cosmetics and Color.' Looks like a long night."

Jeri blew a raspberry. "Didn't they give us a copy of 'Getting the Hell Out of Here?'"

Stephanie gave her a wry look. "That's the one we're going to give them. But not now. Call it."

Dawn blew a thick jet of smoke towards the ceiling. "I'm for 'Cleaning and Hygiene' first," she said flatly. "We hardly even know the basics of the new equipment. I don't want to fight my

way out of here only to fall out to some infection or disease that I could have prevented with a little forewarning."

"Roger that," Steph said, pulling the laserdisc from its package and sliding it into the player. She took her place in a comfortable recliner and dimmed the lights with a word to the climate-control system.

There were a brief series of flashes, almost too fast to interpret, and the men-turned-women were shocked into an absorptive trance, a place just beneath consciousness but still above sleep where suggestions and information were rapidly and unquestioningly taken in. The military called this procedure "flash training," in reference to the series of flashes which induced the learning trance.

The women sat rooted, smoldering cigarettes forgotten in their long-nailed fingers, staring at the rapid-fire barrage of information displayed on the vidscreen. Subsonics and hypnopatterns played on the sound system to assist in the mnemonics of the training. The women were just conscious enough to take final drags from their cigarettes and stub them out in the ashtrays but they couldn't form words or coherent thoughts - their entire concentration was focused on the information they were absorbing.

In fifteen minutes, the disc had exhausted its lesson and gave the "wake-up call." The women jerked and stirred as if waking suddenly from a light nap and began looking around, getting their bearings.

"Good to know," Charlotte piped up, breaking the silence.

"Anybody twitching?" Nicole asked automatically. One of the potential problems of flash-training was a tendency towards the autonomic nervous system, which controlled the heart and lungs without conscious thought, to try and respond to the "wake-up" signal from the lesson and cause respiratory or cardiac arrest. The chances were slim, but in their weakened state they weren't going to take any chances.

"Nope," Charlotte confirmed. "But there is this."

She pointed to her eyelids. The feather-soft lashes betrayed an intense spasm in the eyelids. Nicole's mouth formed a concerned scowl as she turned to her lieutenant. "Looks like they're imprinting us as they go, boss," she said darkly. "Char's eyes only twitch when they run counter-impulses through the flash."

Counter-impulses were suggestions embedded in the flash-mix which ran counter to the receiving mind's own basic nature. These impulses were extraordinarily difficult to detect since they seemed to the trainee as their own idea and perfectly sound of reasoning. Early experiments had given suicide impulses successfully through a flash. There was no way to tell what Dr. Gimmel had programmed them with.

"Let's just hope that it's just a man's brain being told how to care for a woman's body," Stephanie said. "And I'm pretty sure there was a suggestion to watch the next one in the series, too - does anybody else feel that?"

Nods all around. There was no question in anyone's mind that they'd watch the entire series of vids that evening before they ate.

"How do you want to handle this, Lieutenant?" Jeri asked.

Steph thought a moment. "The information is necessary for survival," she said at length. "This is all shit we need to know, right? Has everybody got the energy to pull off a Protocol Thirty?"

The assembled women thought a moment, then made a general noise of assent. They resumed their seats.

"Hope everybody's ready," Steph said, brandishing the 'Social Interaction' vid-disc. "'Cause here we go."

She slid the disc into the slot and took her seat. The lights dimmed and the flash-signal came. The women all went rigid, eyes squeezed shut, exhaling and inhaling shallowly as they executed Protocol Thirty. It was a potential way to thwart flash-conditioning while still absorbing the flash information. It was only taught to military operatives who were in danger of revealing sensitive information as an anti-torture technique. The conscious mind entered the trance through extreme concentration and was given the opportunity to intercept and interpret the information before it was absorbed into memory.

'Social Interaction' was a set of information designed to assist the new women in becoming more comfortable with their new roles in society. Attention was paid to manners and decorum, etiquette and conversation. It urged the women to develop a sense of personal style and gave some pointers there which would be followed up on in the final vid of the evening. It imparted a sense of fashion and began the underpinnings of a feminine pride in appearance and a woman's appreciation of her own beauty. It even gave the basics of dancing.

The information was harmless enough, but it did attempt several times to convince them to begin automatically deferring to authority figures. It touched a bit on the sexual dynamic as well. A good start towards a fanatic loyalty to Gimmel. The men-*cum*-women were able to resist that without problem.

They awoke breathing heavily, exhausted from their task of not falling under the flash-training's sway and blindly absorbing and obeying whatever commands were given them. Nicole brought the lights up as the rest of the platoon caught their collective breath.

"Easy, girls, easy," the sergeant said soothingly. "Everybody all right?"

"Yeah," Jeri gasped. "Just get on with it. Let's get it the fuck over with."

"Roger that," Charlotte agreed.

"Okay," Nicole said, ejecting the 'Social Interaction' disc and swapping it for the 'Fashion, Cosmetics and Color' disc. "There's likely to be some pretty funky shit on this one."

She inserted the disc and took her seat quickly, beginning her eyes-clenched shallow-breathed descent as the flashing started on the screen. Fast as machine-gun fire, the tape filled their heads with the characteristics of different fabrics and colors, the names and uses of a thousand different garments all the way from the Victorian era to the modern day. It gave in-depth discussion of personal coloration and which colors should be avoided. It imparted the basics of the application of cosmetics and how to match them with clothing and accessories. It spent a great deal of time discussing the various accessories and jewelry to compliment an individual look.

Subconsciously, the tape bolstered the beginnings of feminine pride planted by the previous disc and raised them to much more heightened levels. The men-women fought against that,

but whoever designed the flash-mix programmed it to build on the natural attractiveness of the female, something their male minds could scarcely ignore. Their attempts to resist the formation of their own vanity were little more than damage control. Of course they wanted to look good. They certainly didn't want to be ugly.

A large portion of the flash was also given over to the science of the sexual dynamic and the various methods of attracting men and how to send sexual signals. But these were so scattered and dissolute in the mix that the men never even figured out that they should have been trying to screen it out. By the time the "wake-up" came, they were all well aware of how best to dress and look to seduce a man and exactly what kinds of seductive and alluring clothing and colors would look best on them. They also had a good idea of how to make one another look good.

They breathed easier, now that the flash-training was over for the evening. Dinner arrived and the ladies fell to with avarice - this was the first time they'd gotten something other than the nutrient paste gruel they'd received since they regained consciousness. Dinner was a tossed green salad with fresh tomatoes, a grilled chicken breast, new potatoes sautéed in garlic butter, green peas and some kind of fruit juice. Dinner was removed and another bottle marked "A" was placed before each of them shortly after they'd lit their after-dinner cigarettes and were talking lightly about past missions they'd been on together.

"Says here that it's a body lotion to be applied after the evening shower," Stephanie announced, reading the enclosed card. "Sounds innocent enough."

"Or it's gonna give us tits," Jeri grumped.

"We're gonna get 'em sooner or later, no matter what," Dawn said. "Hell, I'd just as soon have 'em now so I can start getting used to 'em. It's taken me all day to get used to this new center of gravity and whatever the hell they did to our feet."

"The card also says that we're to be sure and shave and wash our hair in the evening shower as well."

"Shave?" Charlotte asked, running a hand across her jaw inquisitively.

Nicole laughed. "No, *shave*," she corrected, pointing to her armpit, then her leg.

Jeri's voice was a conspirational whisper. "They're going to issue razors?"

"Negative," Stephanie said. "There are wet-dry electric shavers in the shower stall. The card also tells us that we'll be visited shortly before lights-out by dental workers who want to check our teeth."

"Fair enough," Nicole said. "Mine could use a cleaning."

The shower was a duplicate of the morning, a sloughing off of the gooey, fetid sweat which oozed their excess body mass from their pores over the course of the day. At least their muscle tone was staying constant, now showing as a healthy layer of smooth muscle where that morning they'd looked like bony scarecrows. Their areolae were expanding, now about the size of a half-dollar, and the nipples were larger as well, the size of a pencil eraser where before they'd been only tiny pellets. Diminutive, preadolescent breast buds were visible on Nicole and Dawn.

The shampoo and conditioner worked as they had that morning, causing their hair to lengthen again and giving it a shine, fullness and body like a television commercial. The conditioner made the hair as soft as the finest mink or chinchilla. All the women had hair which brushed the middles of their shoulderblades in damp strands. After a quick shave of the peach fuzz on their legs and armpits (Nicole went as far as to give her bikini line a quick trim as well - the flash training had gotten in pretty deep), they toweled off and paired off to apply the issued lotion.

It tingled and burned as soon as it made contact with the skin, but not uncomfortably. It absorbed into the skin instantly and transformed the skin instantly into the cleanest, smoothest, softest substance imaginable. The women, with their newfound feminine vanity, stood for a long moment just caressing themselves and one another, reveling in the silk-softness of the skin and the unbelievable rabbit-fur consistency of their hair.

Fresh parcels were laid out on the beds when they got to the main room and the previous day's clothes were taken away. Each package was marked by the woman's name and each contained a different set of sleepwear - a beige satin camisole and tap-pants set for Stephanie, an emerald-green baby-doll nightie for Nicole, an oversized football jersey for Jeri, a graceful satin gown and robe in a rich burgundy for Dawn and a luxurious set of flannel PJ's for Charlotte with a floral applique. They all performed their nightly ablutions (their equipment had shrunk and rearranged to the point where they all had to sit to urinate now, and the urethra was retreating down the length of the rapidly-forming vulva, now coming out somewhere between where the testicles used to sit), donned their nightclothes and climbed exhaustedly into the beds. The doctors and dentists came in shortly afterwards, pushing trays of equipment. They introduced themselves to the developing women cordially, explained their procedures, and began to scrub up. The soporific fields over the beds cut in with a low hum and the soldiers were asleep in moments.

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They arose at 0530 to piped-in reveille with myriad aches and pains all over their bodies. Staggering to the mirror beside her bunk, Master Sergeant Nicole Theresa Cavanaugh, née Nicholas Terence Cavanaugh, took a long look at her new face. The facial features were softer and her nose was now a long, elegant ski-jump affair with a slight Jodie Foster dimple at the end. She noticed that the doctors of the previous night had taken the liberty of piercing her ears. She now sported three silver loops in her left ear and two in her right, the lowest of which dangled small geometrics of silver wire.

She opened her mouth. The teeth, once clean but ragged, were now perfectly even and white as chalk. They'd taken out the small chips from a lifetime of drinking beer out of the bottle and bar-fights and even corrected the slight rotation in his bottom incisors. She had the smile of a *Cosmo* cover model and, if the developing bumps on her now-slender chest were any indication, she'd soon have the body to match. She sighed heavily and it sounded sexy rather than tired.

The others were stirring as well, their lengthening hair in wild tangles from the night's sleep. Nicole sat on the commode next to her bunk, feeling the heavy flow start which gave the same relief, male or female, and fished on her nightstand for the pack of cigarettes she'd have to have with her now for the rest of her life. The smokes had been replaced during the night with a longer, slimmer variety which was preferred by many of the girls they'd previously dated. Feeling put-upon, she tore through the cellophane inexpertly with her new half-inch

fingernails and pulled one free of the pack, lighting it and pulling the smoke deep into her lungs before expelling it in a luminous blue jet towards the ceiling.

"What's on tap for today, Sarge?" Jeri asked, yawning.

Nicole picked up the docket which had been left by her bedside while she slept. "Breakfast at 0630, then we have to report to something called the Sizing Lab by 0800. Then we fall in for manicures at 1030 hours and then we're supposed to be issued uniform and clothing at 1100, right before lunchtime."

Stephanie scratched at her belly, a very male action made quite feminine by the rasping sounds of her long fingernails on the soft, soft skin of her flat belly. "Sounds light."

"Don't you believe it," Nicole corrected. "Yesterday was supposed to be light."

"Worried, Sergeant?"

"Scared shitless, Steph," Nicole clarified. "We're never going to be able to resist flash-training on any kind of scale with Protocol Thirty. We need to figure out a better way or we're all going to be zombies by the time this is over."

"Roger that," Jeri said. "I still have the jitters from last night, and that wasn't even an hour."

"Lemme think about it," Steph said, wiping herself and standing from the toilet. She shed her camisole and tap-pants of the night before, tossing them on the bed casually. Her hair floated out in a luminous wave as she tossed her hair over her shoulder, calling, "Fall in for the showers."

* * * * *

They assembled in the main room and dug into the clothes they'd been provided after their shower. All the men-turned-women seemed to have stopped shedding body mass and their bodies were lithe, hard-muscled versions of pubescent girls. All the soldiers had little-girl breast nubs on their chests which did little more than make them look as if they had well-developed pectorals at that point. Their bodies were lean and soft, without a spare ounce of fat and wide expanses of even, soft skin. The day's uniform was a stretchy catsuit with calf-high boots with three-inch heels and a zipper front, a wide vinyl belt which drew in tight over their tiny waistlines and a cottony leotard-like underthing with strong underwire cups which didn't begin to be filled. All the women were healthy-looking and fresh-faced from the shower and their hair absolutely glowed as it fell in luminous waves down to just above the small of every woman's back.

The armed guards arrived at 0745 hours to escort them to whatever the hell the Sizing Lab was. Dr. Krelle and Rachel were both in attendance.

"You look beautiful this morning, ladies," Rachel said airily.

"Thank you, ma'am," Stephanie said from rigid attention. "Permission to make a request, ma'am."

Rachel frowned. "You needn't be so formal with me, Stephanie. Speak your mind."

Steph fell into a practiced parade rest. "Our hair is getting too long," she said flatly. "It's getting to be a pain. We either need haircuts or some training in how to restrain it. I understand you're

trying to feminize us as much as possible, but we *are* still a military unit. Would that be possible?"

"Of course," Rachel said. "I'll see that it's added to your afternoon docket."

Steph snapped back to attention. "Ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

Rachel sighed. It wasn't going exactly as she'd hoped. She should have taken more pains to break them of their military habits first off, but it was simply for their military prowess that they were being converted instead of executed outright. Gimmel's instructions had been explicit - not to interfere with any aspect of their military training or discipline. Now the soldiers were using it to keep themselves distant from the women in charge of their development. It would do no good for the Order of Minerva to have as its spearhead a group of burly, aggressive men with tits. They had to be women, down to their souls. Rachel tapped her lips in thought as they proceeded through Gimmel's estate towards the Sizing Lab.

* * * * *

In the Sizing Lab, they were instructed to undress to the waist. As they shucked the top halves of the catsuits and let them hang at their sides, shivering in the bitter cold of the lab, attendants stuffed the now-abundant hair of the women into baggy caps. The another of the technicians stepped forward, holding what looked like an armored life-vest of interlocking plastic plates.

Nicole stepped forward without question, arms extended. The cold lab was making her little-girl nipples stand at a rigid attention and bringing her even, creamy flesh out in gooseflesh. The attendant attached the vest around Nicole's shoulders and chest, fitting her as if they were football shoulderpads. The attendant punched a series of buttons on the back and Nicole gasped as the suit lining compressed to fit like a second skin. The attendant took some readings and made notes on a clipboard computer.

Other attendants were moving in amongst the other women and fitting them with the vests as well. Then the inevitable round of pneumodermic injections. The attendants looked across to Dr. Krelle expectantly.

Dr. Krelle consulted a sheet of notes. "Are we ready?" she asked.

The attendants signaled an affirmative by plugging a lead to a hand-held computer into each of the women's "shoulder-pads" with a chorus of electronic beeps.

Dr. Krelle consulted her notes. "Stephanie Lauren Quentin," she read.

"Ma'am," Steph said, saluting.

"B," Krelle said. The attendant pressed a series of buttons. Steph stifled a yelp and doubled over, clutching her tight midriff and moaning. The others attempted to reach her but were restrained from some sort of impulse through the shoulder harnesses.

"Nicole Theresa Callahan," Krelle read, not looking up from the clipboard. "C."

It was Nicki's turn to double over in pain. It felt as if liquid razor blades were being rubbed into the skin of her chest, neck and shoulders. Blinking back startled tears, Nicole fought to stay at attention, biting her lip hard and staring fury at Dr. Krelle. The mission was to kill Gimmel. Any collateral hits would be considered perks. Nicole had a definite perk in mind.

Krelle continued down the list. "Dawn Margaret Sullivan, B," she read. "Jeri Kay Martin, D. And finally Charlotte Christine Cavanaugh, C."

All the women were left in agony as the attendants pulled the leads from the computers free of the harnesses and began packing up. All would have been well if one of the humorless attendants hadn't thought to bend and look into Dawn's eyes, asking, "Do you need something for the pain?"

Dawn roared in her sexy voice, lashing out and snapping the lab tech's neck. With the tension broken, the pained half-women sprang on their tormentors. It was over in seconds - ten lab techs lay dead or dying and their blood splattered the sterile walls of the Sizing Lab. The armed guards were back in a heartbeat, leveling the neuroinhibitor pistols and covering an average of three guns to each soldier. Krelle's fury was almost palpable.

"This is inexcusable," she snapped. "Dr. Patterson-Smith had convinced us all to give you the benefit of the doubt in this exercise, ladies. You have proven her wrong. As such, you will be punished. We'd thought to shepherd something like normal development in you. You've lost that right. Now I think it's time you learn how much fun it will be to look like Playmates of the Month."

She moved among them, attaching the computer leads and stabbing a series of buttons in rapid sequence, making each woman in sequence double over in pain anew. After she'd finished with Nicole, the final victim, she jerked the leads free of the harness and dropped the hand-held onto the floor among the bodies of the lab technicians.

"You will all report to Briefing Room Three immediately for punitive training," she snapped. "And your tobacco ration will be withheld for twelve hours. Any further outbursts such as this will result in increased times in both punitive training and ration withholding."

Dawn stepped forward, bulling past the excruciating pain. "Pardon, ma'am. I was the one who started it, ma'am. It should fall on my shoulders, ma'am."

"Don't worry, my dear," Krelle hissed, turning on her heel. "It will."

* * * * *

The guards returned shortly before it was time for PT. They were all in their bunks in the main room, feeling as if they'd all gone ten rounds with the World Heavyweight Champion. The withdrawal cravings were nearly intolerable and the moans of the women as they tossed in their beds filtered through the drumming in Nicole's ears.

"On your feet, bitch," one of the soldiers cursed, kicking Nicole in the thigh. She stirred, unaccustomed to the weight of the armored shoulderpads which were dragging her down. The guard nudged her in the ribs with the butt of her rifle while another one stuck the now-familiar cylinder of a cigarette into her mouth.

As further punishment, they'd supplied the trashiest, most generic cigarettes they could find. The smoke tasted like the smell of sodden garbage, but Nicole gulped it down gratefully nonetheless.

"Stand up, cunt," the soldier barked, nudging Nicole again. The élite soldier was on her feet instantly, into the guard's face before she could change focal ranges or reorient her weapon. The neuroinhibitor dart, fired in panic, thudded into the mattress where Nicole had

been sitting. They were eye-to-eye and Nicole's long-nailed hand was in position right over the guard's jugular.

"Guess why I'm here, whore," Nicole hissed. "For killing a whole shitload of bitches like you. Never forget that, even if Rachel vacuums out our skulls and makes us into robot cocksuckers. We got that way because what we do - *all* we do - is kill second-rate hack soldiers like you."

Steph's bark carried the weight of battlefield command. "Sergeant, back it up."

Nicole dropped her hand and took a step away, getting another cigarette to replace the one she'd dropped. The soldier she'd shown down stared wide-eyed at her, obviously fighting back fear. The patrol commander stepped forward, hands raised.

"At ease," she said. "Lieutenant, do you want to discipline that soldier or shall I?"

"You do it," Steph said irritably. "I can't be bothered with that kind of amateurish shit."

"Corporal Raines, stand down," the patrol commander said.

"Raines?" Nicole asked. "Not Clyde Raines."

"Claudia," the soldier clarified.

Nicole snorted. "Right. We were in basic together."

Claudia looked confused. "We were?"

"Yeah. Nick Callahan."

"Nick? Really? You've changed a lot."

Nicki laughed aloud. "Yeah. So have you. Have fun in the brig. Try not to play with yourself too much."

Claudia looked over her shoulder playfully, tossing a wave of honey-blonde hair aside to look flirtatiously at Nicole as the watch captain applied the handcuffs. "Wait'll you're Complete, sweetie," she said quietly. "You won't be able to keep your hands off yourself."

Raines was led away. Stephanie looked to the patrol leader for directions.

"You're all expected in PT in one hour," the patrol leader said.

"And the 'punitive training?'" Dawn asked sullenly.

"Done," the patrol leader replied. "Long since done."

* * * * *

The PT session was made a little harder by the harnesses they were wearing - all the upper-body work caused painful pinching and stretching on their chests. They persevered nonetheless - all of them had been expected to perform in worse situations. Their new bodies seemed less tolerant to external pain from the soft, supple skin that now covered them. The long hair which hung from their heads was a pain in the ass when they tried to work - even tied back, the long horse-tails which the neophyte women sported whipped around to cover their eyes and mouths.

PT wound down in a few hours and the sweaty soldiers toweled off and reported to a small side-room where they were met by several lab-coated technicians who eyed them with wary caution after the morning's episode. Using small, precise cutting lasers, they shaped and filed the nearly-unbreakable nails which tipped each woman's fingers. The soldiers talked shop very obviously while the beauticians worked, discussing in great detail the methodology of killing while the young women technicians sweated and cast doubtful glances at the wrist restraints on their charges.

Stephanie led them out a half-hour later, looking at the professionally-done French manicure she'd received. All the women wore their nails square-cut and glossy, with lovely white tips which gave their thin hands a very feminine grace. Now that the lengths were more under control, tasks such as removing the rubber bands from their silken hair and adjusting the straps and closures on the skintight catsuits they wore much easier. The women had adapted quickly to long nails, but there were many instances where the loss of use of their fingertips became problematic.

They returned to their quarters to find them completely renovated. Instead of the sere military style of before, each woman's cot had been replaced by an antique four-poster or canopy bed trimmed out with lacy feminine appointments. Someone had even been so brash as to add a stuffed animal next to the lace-trimmed satin pillows. The walls were now draped with lacy curtains and understated art centering mainly on floral subjects, and vases of fresh flowers were everywhere.

A burgeoning delight grew in each woman which alarmed their sensibilities greatly. Steph ran her long-nailed, elegant fingers through an arrangement of day-lilies lovingly while all her senses screamed in protest.

"This ain't good," she said in her little-girl soprano.

Charlotte was busily adjusting the lacy coverlet on her bed. "Punitive training."

"We're all a bunch of girly girls, feels like," Dawn said. "I think it's gonna get worse before it gets better."

"So we roll with it," Nicole said. "It's fightable... I think part of the punishment is the conscious knowledge that it's happening. If we dive in and roll with it, the punishment kinda loses some of its teeth, y'know? At least they didn't transmogrify us into a bunch of giggling cheerleaders."

"Give 'em time," Steph grunted. "But you're right. We roll with it."

They sat down and figured out the extent of the punishment over cigarettes and coffee. Nicole was now preferring to be called Nikki, spelled with two k's and Jeri was now compelled to go by Jeri Kay. They now giggled girlishly at anything funny or embarrassing instead of their usual explosive laughter and they all had urges focusing on appearance which were very difficult to ignore, especially given the arrival of two new flash-training discs, 'Cosmetic Application' and 'Advanced Hairstyling.'

Dinner arrived, another quite lavish meal of poached fish with the best Caesar salad any of them could ever remember eating before. Wine was included with the meal, and each of the women sipped the full-bodied white from a tall, fluted glass which looked absolutely regal in their long-nailed hands.

They were in the seats soon thereafter, looking forward expectantly to the flash-training discs. The cigarette ration now consisted of extra-long, pencil-thin white "lady" cigarettes which took forever to smoke down. But the punitive training made it difficult to imagine smoking anything else they were offered - the long, slender smokes just looked too good in their hands or dangling from their pouty lips.

Stephanie felt a sinking feeling as she inserted the first disc, trying desperately to maintain a Protocol Thirty even though she was nearly bouncing with excitement. At best all the women managed a partial, keeping their wits a little but maintaining very little control. After the second disc, all the women were experts on hairstyling and makeup and with a very keen sense of fashion and color.

Just before the nighttime shower, an armed guard arrived in the quarters with a team of technicians and Dr. Krelle. The doctor was smiling tightly and gestured to Nikki to step forward.

"Time to remove the restraining harnesses," she said. "From there you'll proceed to the showers and get ready for lights-out. We'll be moving in some monitoring equipment while you're cleaning up. Your reveille will be at 0800 tomorrow, but you'll probably feel like lying in. There's nothing for you tomorrow except physical training at 1500 hours. After that you'll report to Dr. Gimmel for commissioning. You'll have three days to acclimatize to your new quarters and assume your duties."

The techs circulated around, removing the restrictive harnesses. All the women's chests and shoulders were creased with red grooves and their chests were sore and tender. The areolae were quite big around and the nipples large and distended. Nikki rubbed her budding breasts tenderly, trying to restore circulation. Dr. Krelle handed her an unmarked bottle.

"Apply this to your chest in the shower," she said. "It'll relieve the tenderness."

Nikki took the bottle and went back to her bedside, throwing off the day's clothes and stepping into the shower stall. She was soon joined by Steph, Dawn, Jeri Kay and Charlotte. The women stepped under the steaming jets and dropped the privacy screen as the techs behind them began moving in large boxes of equipment.

Nikki wasted no time in applying the soothing lotion. As soon as the cream touched her sensitive skin, it began to tingle as if thousands of ants were crawling across her chest. Looking down in shock, a long valley of flesh formed on her sternum. Her breast buds swelled as she watched, bulging obscenely. A quick glance up showed that the same thing was happening to her entire platoon. They stood silent and shocked as large, perfectly formed breasts sprang out of the smooth, unblemished flesh of their chests, swelling and swelling until they filled the women's dainty hands and began to overflow.

"Good God," Jeri Kay breathed.

They continued to grow until the smallest of them topped out at what looked, to their flash-trained minds, a very full C cup. There was no sag or stretch to the breasts at all - all of them carried weighty globes with large nipples and sensitive, bumpy areolae on their slender chests.

Nikki cradled her D-cup breasts in both hands. The skin was exquisitely sensitive and the nipples sent an incredible shivering sensation through her spine when she ran her palms over them. Stephanie had a generous pair of D-cups as well which she stared at

unbelievably. Charlotte had come in smallest, with a full pair of C's with upturned nipples which overflowed her slender hands. Jeri Kay had a lovely pair of almost perfectly spherical D's and Dawn, who had thrown the first punch in the altercation with the technicians in the Sizing Lab, looked down in speechless shock at the massive DD's which perched proudly on her narrow chest.

The redistribution of body fat also had added a pronounced roundness to their hips and behinds, giving all of them a pronounced hourglass figure. Their stances, carriage, and now their shapes had been carefully trained over the past forty-eight hours to make them sexy as hell. They stared at one another in disbelief.

"My God," Nikki said to her career-long partner, Jeri Kay. "You're beautiful."

"So are you," Jeri Kay said back, blushing slightly.

"It was always a dream of mine to be in a shower with four gorgeous, big-chested women," Charlotte said with a girlish giggle. "Guess I should've been more careful what I wished for."

They collapsed into a fit of giggling. As they continued to wash off the sweat of the day's exertions (now not greasy at all - they had no more excess body mass to shed through their pores), they couldn't refrain from touching themselves and one another, running delicate, feminine hands across flat bellies and firm breasts. The sensations the touches evoked were overpoweringly delicious.

"It's weird," Stephanie said as Dawn caressed her new breasts. "I feel like I should have a hard-on, but there's nothing there."

Dawn tried to peer over the shelf of her mammoth breasts at her crotch. "Me too," she said.

Steph knelt and parted the lips of what used to be Dawn's scrotum. Inner lips had developed and the aperture of her urethra was now closer to her anus than it was to the apex of the long gash which now ran from her pubic bone back towards her ass. The downturned tip of what had been the tip of her penis was now only a pea-sized bud, peeking out from under a thin flap of flesh which resembled a hood.

"You do have a hard-on," Steph commented, suppressing a giggle. "Your clit's hard."

"My *what*?" Dawn squeaked.

Steph stood. "Your clit. Here, look at mine. We all have them."

Dawn knelt, running her fingers across Steph's crotch. When the long-nailed fingertips brushed across the tip of Stephanie's 'clitoris,' the raven-haired lieutenant stiffened as if she'd received an electric shock.

"You okay, lieutenant?" Dawn said nervously, jerking her hand away. Steph caught her slender wrist in an iron grip and pushed it back to its place.

"Don't stop," Steph half-gasped, half-whimpered.

Dawn got a lascivious grin and resumed her ministrations. Steph had to grab the showerhead suddenly to keep her balance. A long, whimpering moan escaped her pouty lips.

Before they knew what was happening, Jeri Kay was suckling one of the lieutenant's breasts and Charlotte the other. Nikki, even though her mind was screaming in protest, knelt behind

Dawn and began to gently caress her rounded ass and the flowering mound of what used to be her ball-sac. Dawn moaned deliciously and fastened her panting mouth on Steph's crotch. Her cheeks pulsated gently as her tongue went to work. Steph's moans escalated into chirping screams.

None of them seemed to be able to stop. It was if the bodies were controlling them, not the other way around as it had always been. Stephanie collapsed against the wall, panting and screaming as she climaxed violently, repeating "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!"

She pushed Dawn's mouth away suddenly. "Too sensitive," she said. "Please stop."

The orgy didn't end until every woman had experienced the full, cup-brimming-over feeling of female orgasm at least once. They all acted very differently when in the throes of their own passion - Stephanie went rigid as a plank and shuddered, biting back screams. Dawn gave her passion full voice, crying out loudly while thrashing her head with its lustrous mane of hair back and forth. Jeri Kay was more internalized, signaling her climax with only sharp intakes of breath and a delicious little wiggle in her hips and ass. Charlotte was a moaner and she had a pronounced tendency to grab painful hold of whatever was giving her pleasure. Nikki curled up tightly, shivering and whimpering like a little girl.

They exhausted the last of the special shampoo and conditioner and all the women exited the shower stalls gleaming with the unnamable aura of satisfied women, with glistening damp hair which tickled the tops of their rounded, firm asses.

The main room had been outfitted with some medical equipment beside each of the beds which none of the women could really identify - they were like biomonitors but had a different set of readouts. For the first time since the transformation, no clothes were laid out for them on the foot of the bed. They opened the armoires beside the beds and began digging through the clothing packed inside.

"I don't know why, but I really feel like wearing something sexy," Charlotte commented, holding a lacy teddy up to her body to check the color against her complexion.

"All of us do," Jeri Kay said. "Punitive training, remember?"

"They've really done it to us now," Charlotte said. "I don't think I can get through the night unless I fool around with somebody again. They've made us horny as hell."

"Looks like we all have great careers as prostitutes ahead of us," Steph spat, pulling a lacy white baby-doll nightie over her head.

"Negative," Nikki said. "We're soldiers, no matter how horny. We used to say that as long as we had a good right hand we could handle any barracks in the world, right? Well, it applies. Everybody roger that? Everybody sleeps in their own beds tonight. Period. If anybody needs it, then they use their hand, just like boot camp."

"Yes, ma'am," they chorused as Steph, the commanding officer, nodded assent. They crawled into bed wearing their sexiest underwear and the lights weren't out for five minutes before there were muted whimpers and cries rising from every bed.

It went on for some time before Nikki spoke up. "Does anybody else feel funny?"

"Yeah," Jeri Kay said. "Like an itch, only inside."

Steph palmed the switch for the overhead lights. The biomonitors began pinging madly. The doors swept open and Drs. Krelle and Patterson-Smith came in behind a large knot of armed guards. Krelle checked the biomonitors quickly.

"How are you feeling?" Rachel asked Steph.

"I hurt a little," she replied. "My stomach."

"That's normal," Rachel said, handing Steph a small paper tube, like the ice-pops they'd eaten during summers as kids. "Here, drink this and you'll feel a little better."

Steph looked over the unremarkable container and ripped off one corner. The fluid inside was salty and warm, but it eased tensions inside her she hadn't been aware she had. Her stomach settled almost immediately as Steph stuck her finger into the package to gather up the residue and licked it clean.

"Thanks," Jeri Kay said, tossing the package aside. "I feel better."

Nikki's eyes were wide with something akin to fear. "What was that stuff?" she asked warily.

"I think you know," Dr. Krelle said with a smirk.

"It was human semen," Rachel said. "You've been psychologically addicted to it since the punitive training this morning. You'll all feel fine for a month or two, but then you'll get increasingly more and more uncomfortable until you get a fix. Of course, you can easily have it more often if you wish."

"Damn," Dawn said sadly.

Steph laid back on her bed. "So what are the monitors pinging for? Is this addiction a physical reaction as well, like the cigarettes?"

"No," Krelle said. "Nothing like that."

"Then why the biomonitors? What was the alarm?"

"It means you're Complete," Rachel explained.

Krelle pushed aside the crotch of Stephanie's teddy and began a light examination as Steph asked, "Complete? What does that mean?"

Krelle smiled. "It means this," she said, slipping a slender finger between Steph's nether lips. The finger began to penetrate an opening near the lieutenant's clitoris and she gasped.

"The transformation is finished," Krelle said. "You're now fully functional women, both biologically and psychologically. The predominant hormone in your blood is now estrogen. You'll experience menstruation, ovulation, pregnancy and menopause just like natural women. We've regressed the relative ages of your body to around seventeen or eighteen, just beginning your sexual maturity."

"No more changes will happen to you," Rachel continued, "except for the natural changes which occur with biological hormone shifts. You'll have mood swings and irritability before you menstruate, which will be amplified during pregnancy. You'll experience post-partem depression after childbirth and you'll have hot flashes once you reach menopause. As a result of the punitive training, you'll also be very fixated on your appearances, especially when it

pertains to attracting the opposite sex. We elevated your sex drives to about the level of a seventeen-year-old male and we've psychologically addicted you to both the taste of human semen and to your own orgasms. You'll all be very horny young women from now on."

Krelle finished the last of her examinations. "You all have intact hymens - technically, you're virginal. But, if Rachel's training has anything to say about it, that won't last very long. Don't be surprised to find yourself experiencing urges completely contrary to your character due to the punitive training. You'll all feel a very powerful drive to seduce and have sex with men. You'll feel a drive to please and submit. That's to be expected. But your fixation on your appearances may take strange forms. You may feel a desire to pose for a men's magazine or to take a sideline job as a stripper or escort. Your desire to look attractive for men will be quite powerful."

"What if we're not attracted to men?" Charlotte attempted futilely.

"Irrelevant," Krelle said. "You'll do it anyway."

"Attraction will come in time," Rachel said, gentleness apparent in her tone. "You shouldn't worry too much. Attraction to men was instilled in you from the first imprinting of your Emotional Response Matrices at the very beginning of the procedure."

"Congratulations, ladies," Krelle said, moving toward the door in a knot of armed guards. "You're part of the sisterhood now. You'll come to enjoy yourselves. Everyone else has."

Rachel retreated to the door as well. "As a celebratory gesture, I got you some presents from the village a few miles away," she said. "I hope you enjoy them."

The guards filed out and five young men were ushered in. They were all handsome and well-built, looking like collegiate types. The soldier-women recoiled at first, but they could feel the training which had been unconsciously instilled in them gnawing at their resolve. Eyes began to wander across young bodies, measuring the relative broadnesses of shoulders, the chiseled features and the bulges in trousers.

"Fuck this," Nikki said, rising. "Roll with it."

She sidled up to a tall Hispanic youth with a seductive smile. She took his arm in her long-nailed hands.

"Hi, my name's Nicole," she purred, caressing his bicep as she led him to the chairs around the table. "But everybody calls me Nikki. What's your name?"

"Tom," the youth said, smiling warmly. Nikki realized that she shouldn't be so aware that the young man had such a nice smile, but she accepted it as fact and kept on going. The height, breadth and scope of him, even the *smell* of him was starting to drive her crazy. A damp heaviness was beginning in her middle and she felt the strange sensation of her labia flowering open between her legs as they engorged with blood in preparation.

"Tom," she repeated, licking her lips sexily. "What a pretty name. Tell me, Tom, what do you do for a living?"

Behind her, the others were selecting their partners and beginning small talk as well.

* * * * *

They would have never known if the men brought up from the village were good lovers or not - everything was so completely new and undiscovered that the slightest touch was transcendent to the women. It was like someone had increased the gain on all their senses to the *n*th power and everything they experienced just went to feed the damp heat in their middles. After a long period of teasing the maddening emptiness inside them had become too much to bear. They'd laid back almost as one, legs spread wide as the young men plunged deeply into their bodies. Even the pain of deflowering had taken a sensuous and lascivious turn - it hurt, but it only fueled more desire. Luckily, the neophyte women didn't have time enough to analyze the nature of the emotions and desires running through them at the time. It was frightening enough in retrospect.

Nikki lit her third trembling cigarette, scratching idly at some flakes of dried semen on her chin as she took a deep, cleansing drag. Over the course of the last four hours she'd made love in every way she'd imagined, with multiple partners often simultaneously. The room absolutely reeked of the combined smell of their pungent sexual secretions.

"Well, that's gonna be the worst of it," Steph said from her bed, tapping the ash from a long, skinny cigarette into a bedside ashtray. "Everything else is gonna be easy after this."

"So you say," Dawn grumped. "You're not starting your period." The chesty blonde had started cramping about a half-hour ago and her full lips were fixed in a permanent pout.

"That was terrifying," Charlotte said in a small voice. "I couldn't control myself."

"None of us could," Jeri Kay affirmed. "The hardest part was the fact that I'm programmed to *like* not being in control. The more I submitted the hornier I got."

"So we're a bunch of sluts," Nikki said offhandedly. "We either roll with it or we die."

"Roger that," Dawn said.

"And no matter whether or not I'm compelled to be a clotheshorse or a cocksucker, one thing hasn't changed at all," Nikki continued. "I'm gonna put a fucking bullet into Gimmel's head and then I'm going to string Krelle up for the goddamn crows to eat. Then I can go back to a life of blowjobs and buying shoes and be pretty much satisfied."

"No doubt about it," Jeri Kay said. "They killed us here. My own mother wouldn't recognize me like this. We'll be forever trying to get our identities re-established with the G-ment."

"I'm not joining Gimmel's outfit, that's for damn sure," Charlotte declared.

"Not an option," Steph said flatly.

"So we have to have a plan," Dawn said. "What is it?"

"We're slated to receive commissions from Gimmel herself tomorrow," Steph said. "That'll be the best chance for it. The whole armed forces will be there, I'm sure."

"Suicide bomb?" Charlotte asked.

"We couldn't find enough explosive to make it. No, it's gotta be a Butch and Sundance scenario."

Nikki laughed. "Gotta admit, it's how I've always wanted to go out."

"Me, too," Jeri Kay giggled.

"Then it's decided," Steph said. "Tomorrow at the commissioning ceremony, we kill everybody."

"Sounds fun," Charlotte said brightly. "Question is, what are we gonna wear?"

* * * * *

It was a harder question than they'd expected. They'd all stripped off their sodden leotards from PT and showered, doing their hair before the mirrors beside the beds and painting their faces in their softest, most feminine makeup to contrast with the severity of their chosen uniform.

Nikki stood before her bed in a pair of black thong panties and a low-cut black lace bra that pushed her substantial breasts together into an impressive expanse of freckled cleavage. Her strawberry-blonde hair was in an elegant upsweep with soft curling tendrils escaping to frame her face and pale swan's neck. Something inside was assuring her how sexy she looked as she fastened the tight, high collar of the black bodysuit with silver pinstripes on the seams. She sat and pulled on a pair of vinyl-look thigh-high boots with a blocky, three-inch heel. A tailored double-breasted uniform jacket with silver braid and rank insignia and a wide leather belt which cinched her tiny waistline was next. A slim dispatch case flopped against her generous derrière in the back and a slim uniform sabre tapped her wide, womanly thigh.

She turned to the side, checking the figure she cut in the mirror. She was breathtakingly gorgeous, that was no lie. Large-breasted and slim, lithe and muscular with long, elegant limbs and a regal face. A thick crown of the softest red hair imaginable worn up, with feathery tendrils framing the softness of her cheeks and shoulders and the long slender elegance of her pale swan's neck. She tugged at imaginary wrinkles in her uniform coat and turned to face her comrades, similarly attired. A now-familiar tightness and warmth began in her crotch as she ran her eyes appraisingly over her beautiful comrades.

"We ready?" she asked.

She was answered by a chorus of hard-eyed nods. Stephanie, wearing the only jacket with officers' insignia, stepped forward and gave the order to fall in. Palming open the door with the newly-installed palm lock, she led her soldiers past the armed guards and began a measured stride down the passage, the heels of their collected boots clicking loudly in perfect unison. The armed escort fell in behind.

The long auditorium overlooked a scenic pond and overcast skies. At least a hundred and fifty female troopers, in uniforms identical to those Stephanie's platoon was wearing, stood at attention on either side of a long aisle. Drs. Gimmel, Krelle and Patterson-Smith waited at the end of the aisle on a raised platform, attended by a knot of liveried attendants.

The platoon of elite assassins strode unhurriedly to the foot of the platform and snapped a smart salute to the target. Gimmel returned it with a pleased look.

"At ease," she commanded.

The platoon fell into a loose parade rest.

"Welcome, ladies," Gimmel continued. "We've been looking forward to your arrival among us."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"We would like to offer you commission as officers in the house forces," Gimmel said. "Your skills and courage will be an asset to us all, and the training you can impart to us will insure our security for a long time to come." She held out a folded, official-looking document to Stephanie.

"Thank you, ma'am. I have a prepared statement."

"Please," Gimmel said, her smile even more pleased.

"Over the course of the last days, my companions and I have undergone changes which would boggle the minds of most people. We have seen our bodies changed before our eyes, felt our minds and emotions reworked to fit our new identities. We have even lost the names under which we were born," Stephanie said calmly. "But we, as soldiers, have been trained to seek out the positive aspects of any and all situations, no matter how bleak. Over the same course of time in which we were all changed, we have gradually come to look at this transformation as a gift of sorts."

Gimmel positively beamed.

"It was made plain to us that our skills as soldiers were the reason for the bestowal of this gift," Stephanie continued. "But we cannot be sure that our skills as soldiers, no matter how good they appear on paper, can ever make us worthy of the gift we now have. So we'd like to offer a testimonial to our abilities, an assurance that we are as skilled and good at our jobs as you've assumed we are."

Gimmel didn't even have time to look confused or shocked before Steph raised the zip-gun she'd constructed from empty bottles and the spring from the toilet-paper roll and put a razor-sharp piece of mirror glass into the doctor's throat. Before the shock could even sink in to the rest of the gathering, Dawn, Charlotte and Jeri Kay had grabbed weapons from the nearest guards, killing the guards in the process, and Nikki had leapt onto the dais and had her hands fastened around Dr. Krelle's slender throat.

The assembly erupted into chaos as Nikki tore out Krelle's throat with her ultra-hard, stylish fingernails.

* * * * *

Nikki dragged a foot through the inch-thick layer of empty casings which lined the floor. Behind her, Charlotte and Jeri Kay were sorting through the bodies of the troopers they'd killed, collecting weapons and communications devices. Steph, at the point defense they'd set up, yawned widely and readjusted her position over her captured submachine gun.

They were holed up in an access corridor, a bottleneck which only allowed the hundred-and-ten or so remaining household troops to approach about six at a time. As long as nothing untoward happened as a result of Rachel's flash-training, they could hold out indefinitely. They had access to water through plumbing ducts and they'd long since been trained to operate for extended periods without food. As long as the household forces didn't bring in heavy weapons, the platoon stood a good chance of survival. Not that survival was even necessary for them anymore - their mission was accomplished.

Another forward observer was creeping down the hall to try and gauge the platoon's position. Steph stopped her with a single bullet.

"You're wasting your resources," Nikki called down the hall. "You're not going to sneak up on us. We have the maintenance ducts and windows covered. Our backs are against a solid wall and you can only come up against us from one direction."

"You'll get hungry enough in time," the leader of the opposition called in a melodious alto.

"Who am I talking to?" Nikki demanded.

"This is Major Jennifer Nicholson," she replied.

"Formerly Jim Nicholson of the 179th, right?" Nikki asked.

"What of it?"

"We were in jump school together, don't you remember? Nick Callahan, Delta platoon?"

"Bullshit."

"Is it any harder to believe I'm a woman now than it is for me to believe who you are? C'mon, girl, what did Gimmel tell you about us?"

"They said you were foreign muscle who'd recently joined the Order of Minerva," Jennifer replied. "From the European Confederations or something. They told us you'd defected to our side."

"They lied. We were captured, same as you, and changed. We've been in a high-security med facility on the south side of the compound, growing breasts for the cause," Nikki said.

"If you're really Nick Callahan, then who was our jump instructor's wife?" Jennifer said.

"His right hand," Nikki shot back. "Captain Mike Everly was unmarried."

"Hey, fuck you, Callahan!" a voice called.

"Captain Everly?" Jeri Kay asked.

"It's Michelle now," the gentle, matronly soprano replied. "Who are you?"

"Jeri Kay Martin," Jeri Kay replied. "Used to be Jerry Martin of the 79th Heavy Infantry."

"The sniper?"

"Yep," she replied. "And Charlie Cavanaugh's here with me, too. 'Course, we call her Charlotte now."

"Who's in command back there?" Jennifer called.

"Stephanie Quentin," Steph replied.

"As in 'used to be Steve Quentin?' With 103rd Intel?" another voice called, a bubbly mexxo. "Stephanie, it's me. Erin Moore, from SigInt Division."

"Aaron?" Steph said. "Long time no see, pal."

"I'm coming in," Jennifer announced. "Unarmed. Stand down, willya?"

"Come ahead," Steph said. "Just don't do anything we'll all regret."

A very easy-on-the-eyes woman in dress blacks came walking slowly down the carnage-filled hallway, long-nailed hands raised well above her head full of honey-blonde curls. She picked her way through the debris and corpses in her high-heeled boots and stepped into the fitful light of the only fluorescent light still working. She was beautiful and girlish, but Nikki could plainly see the set of the eyes and jaw which denoted her old comrade-in-arms, Jim Nicholson.

Nikki shed her submachine gun and stepped around the makeshift barrier. Jennifer looked in her face, long and hard, searching for recognition. Then she smiled and wrapped her old comrade into a crushing hug which flattened their breasts between them.

"Nick, it *is* you!" she cried.

"Nikki, now," Nikki corrected, separating them to arms' length with a smile. "You look fantastic."

"So do you," Jennifer said. "Jesus. You're off the cover of *Fantasy Girls*. You must've broken some serious rules. Krelle only gave the really *big* tits to the girls who broke her rules."

"We offed some med-techs. Who else is here?" Nikki asked.

"From jump school with us? Let's see. There's Michelle, who got nabbed when I did, and Carla Foster, who used to be Carl. James Locke is Jamie now, and Cole Washington is Colette. Benny Taylor is now Bonnie Taylor and our pilot, Sammy Northrop, is, understandably, Samantha. She's in the infirmary from tangling with you earlier, though."

"Sorry about that," Nikki said.

"It happens," Jennifer said. "Look, I'm here to negotiate. Nobody else wants to die here today. And now that we know you're friends, we don't see any point in dragging this out."

"Good," Nikki said. "This is Lieutenant Steph Quentin, my CO."

Steph saluted over the muzzle of her weapon. "Conditions?"

"No conditions," Jennifer said. "We all just want to get the hell out of here. Gimmel's dead and there's nothing for us here. There are several troop boats in the marina below the village. I think we'll all fit on them. Just walk out of there. We're not going to do a damn thing to you."

"Look, Jennifer -" Steph began.

"Jenny," she corrected.

"Jenny," Steph continued. "I'd really like to believe you. I'd really like for this to be over. But we did kill a whole honking lot of you over the last week. How can you guarantee no hard feelings?"

"I can't," Jenny said. "You'll just have to trust me."

"I don't trust anybody," Steph said.

"What do you propose?"

"You guys disarm where we can see you," Steph decreed. "And then we come out. Armed. Then we negotiate from there. Agreed?"

Jenny smiled. "Agreed."

She called over her shoulder. "Everybody get that?"

One by one, all hundred-plus remaining troops stepped to the mouth of the hallway and shucked free of weapons, including the paralytic dart-throwers. They stepped into the hall to stand behind Jenny until there was barely enough room to stand.

"We didn't mean to kill so many," Jeri Kay explained when she saw the somewhat-familiar face of her old friend Michelle Everly. "We didn't know."

"Hey, we didn't know it was you either," Michelle said. "Else we wouldn't have been so trigger-happy."

"So this all begs the question," Jeri Kay said, "what the hell do we do now?"

"Jenny's the ranking officer," Steph said. "If we're truced here, then she should call the shots."

"Thanks," Jenny said, rising to the occasion. "Okay, first things first. We need to ransack this place for clothing, food and supplies. We'll establish the planning post in the main hall. I want Michelle and Erin there, plus Nikki and Steph. Everybody else break into teams of five and start foraging."

"I suggest they go armed, ma'am," Steph said respectfully. "Two of the five should scout for any of Gimmel's techs or scientists and put them down. I don't think we can trust them to defect and there's no way we can possibly support prisoners."

Jenny looked relieved. "As ranking officer, I'm giving myself the temporary ranking of Colonel and promoting Stephanie Quentin to Major as my Executive Officer. Major Erin Moore will be third, and the rest will have to sort itself out. Anybody have any objections?"

There was a sea of heads wagging no.

"That means to speak freely," Jenny said. "And can this 'ma'am' shit."

"Roger that," Major Stephanie Quentin said. "Now get going. Somebody get me a map of the island, a weather report, and for the love of Christ, somebody get me a goddamn cigarette."

* * * * *

It was late night by the time the logistics were out of the way and the real question was raised. Jennifer stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and leaned across the map of the island, fixing Nikki and Steph with a stern, measuring gaze.

"This all works out fine and good," she said, gesturing to the detailed set of plans for taking the village, stealing supplies and fuel and taking the boats. "But once we have the boats, where the hell are we going to go? Back to the G-ment? You actually think they'll believe us when we say what happened here?"

Nikki tapped the footlocker full of documents and digital video they'd found which detailed every step of Gimmel's process. "They'll have to. We got the *bona fides*."

Jennifer tossed her hair over one shoulder, looking down at her exquisite body. "Whether or not I'll get my original citizenship number back isn't the problem," she said, running a fingernail across the top of one firm breast sexily. "It's not like I can go back to my wife and kids."

"All our families think we're dead," Steph said. "I think it might be better if we keep it that way. Besides, just because we're babes doesn't mean we're not a sizeable body of the finest soldiers the G-ment ever produced. I think we'll have a fair shot at getting our old jobs back."

"I dunno about that," Nikki said. "None of us can go longer than three hours without a cigarette or longer than about ten days without having to suck a cock. That kinda limits us in a soldier way."

"That can be gotten around," Jenny said. "It was flash-trained in, it can be flash-trained out again."

"I guess the real question is, do we *want* to go back," Steph said, touching flame to the end of a long white cigarette and blowing out a cloud of blue. "The G-ment did kind of hang us all out to dry. They never mounted rescue missions, they just sent more men in to kill Gimmel. They told our families we were dead and didn't even try to find us."

"The G-ment never does," Jenny said. "It doesn't surprise me. Where else do we go? The European Confeds? The Consortium? We'd probably be really valuable to the Australasian Conglomerate, sucking cock for their Board of Directors. The Government is the only real place we'd have any kind of freedom at all. Women are treated pretty shabbily everywhere else."

"There's always the Indian Free State," Nikki suggested.

"We'd never get through the blockade," Steph countered. "Besides, they have more people than they can feed as it is."

Nikki looked thoughtful as she lit a cigarette.

"You have that look in your eyes again, Sergeant," Steph said. "You got an idea?"

"It's a crazy one," Nikki warned.

"Spill it," Jenny said.

"We were made this way for a reason, right? The furtherance of Gimmel's dream. This was really the only place where women who looked like us would have been treated like something other than whores or property. It was like Gimmel's insurance policy."

"Right," Jenny confirmed.

"We've fought through two wars and underwent this for the service of our Government," Nikki continued. "And all we can hope for when we get back is a token job and a big battery of medical tests."

"Unless?" Steph said.

"Unless we go in and make some changes."

Steph sat back suddenly, looking at her senior NCO with wide eyes. "You can't mean..."

"It was in the Declaration, Steph," Nikki said. "'Whenever the Government becomes abhorrent of these ends, it is the duty of the people to alter or abolish it.' Not our privilege, our *duty*. I didn't think much about it when my sister was forced into Population Control to breed for two years before she could go to college. I didn't think a thing about her being turned down for

military service. But that's all I have to look forward to, now. Unless I go in there and tell everybody that I'm not gonna take it anymore."

"You're talking about mutiny," Jenny breathed.

"Not mutiny," Steph said, a gleam in her eye. "Revolution."

* * * * *

They managed to set up a kind of system after a while in order to set in motion the huge amount of planning Nikki's strategy required. A small room off of the main hall became the smoke-filled headquarters, where at any given time a dozen shapely and beautiful women, dressed in skimpy but comfortable clothes, bent over a conference table spread with maps and troop assessments. Just outside a group of cots held those women who could go no longer without rest, a long row of gorgeous, slumbering creatures motionless in lacy and silky nightgowns. A larger room was maintained for drilling and training, overseen by the recently-promoted Charlotte and Jeri Kay, who labored day and night to bring all the collected troops to the level of lethality and training as their platoon. A smaller room held the SigInt and Psych troopers who were hard at work assembling a flash-training program to remove the worst of Rachel Patterson-Smith's "slut training" as it came to be called. And, in something Nikki was calling the "In the Meantime" room, a continual orgy ran for those women who could no longer resist the subliminal commands driving them to sexuality.

It went on like this for several weeks, settling into a grueling but comfortable routine. On day twelve, the Psych and SigInt people brought out their deprogramming disc and the entire regiment rotated through the training center to have their extreme sexual hungers removed.

Nikki and Steph were with Jenny in the last group rotated through. Erin, Stephanie's old SigInt buddy, was running the deprogramming session.

"We were able to remove the day-to-day problems, like the psychological addiction to orgasm," she said with the air of someone who'd given the same speech countless times. "But Patterson-Smith was good. There's no way we could get out all her programming without a full programming center and about a month."

"What does that mean for us?" Nikki said huskily. She'd pushed the limits of her time without sex and was exhibiting the signs of being quite horny. She ran her eyes lustily over Erin's supple body.

"It means that you'll be able to function perfectly well without intruding sexual impulses," Erin explained. "You won't become spontaneously excited or suffer withdrawal if you go without. You won't be obsessed with appearance or seduction of men and we'll eradicate the more 'girly' impulses. But if you get sexually stimulated naturally, then you'll be as insatiable as you are right now."

"Meaning?" Jenny asked.

"Meaning if somebody gets you going naturally, then you're gonna go," Erin said with a smirk.

"So as long as we don't get ourselves turned on, we'll be fine."

"I'll ask you the same thing I've asked everyone else," Erin said. "We also have a way to remove the feminizing training imprinted over the entire process. You'd go back to exactly who you

were before the ERM was imprinted, but with a woman's body. Aggressiveness and mindset will be restored and attraction to men will be eradicated. Do you want it?"

"How many others picked that?" Jenny asked.

Erin looked down. "None," she said. "Nobody wanted to be a freakshow."

"We're pretty much stuck with these bodies," Steph said. "We might as well fit into them."

"What about the tobacco addiction?" Nikki asked. She was stroking one breast idly.

"Nothing we can do about that," Erin said. "That's a physical addiction."

"Keep the ERM," Steph said.

"Roger that," Nikki said, taking a firmer hold of her senses. "But hurry up. I'm getting worked up here. I'm gonna jump somebody soon if I don't do something."

"Here," Jenny said placatingly. She dropped a hand into Nikki's lap and the redhead's legs spread instinctually. Erin continued the lecture as Nikki lay her head back on a pillow of soft hair and moaned while her commanding officer gave her a hand job through her workout shorts. The other women continued as if nothing was happening. They'd had to put up with many, many occurrences like this one. Just the last night, Stephanie had been laying down intel for antipersonnel emplacements in the capitol on a tactical map while bending over the table with Nikki's tongue and fingers bringing her much-needed relief. All three women had pushed far past the limits Rachel had imposed for sexual hunger in order to work and as a result had become very close over the last weeks. Steph repressed a shiver at the amount of knowledge she had about the likes and wants of her commanding officer and senior NCO.

Steph added her expert ministrations to Nikki's large breasts with both hands while locking her lips to the Master Sergeant's and sucking her tongue and bottom lip. Erin finished her intro lecture and knelt between the redhead's legs, applying kisses and pressure around the knowledgeable dance of Jenny's red-nailed hands. With a series of girlish chirps and then a delightful shuddering whimper, Nikki got her satisfaction and was able to return full concentration to the task at hand.

She left a lingering, tender kiss on Steph's lips and gave her a glittering smile. "Thanks," she whispered.

"My pleasure," the dark-haired Major replied with a similar smile. "Y'know, Nikki, I'm almost gonna miss this when we're deprogrammed."

"Me, too," Jenny said.

"Doesn't have to end," Nikki said, running a loving hand through Jenny's thick, honey-blonde curls. "We can just do it when we want to now. It'll be better for it."

Jenny looked shyly away. "You want to?"

"Want to what?" Nikki said.

"Keep doing it."

Nikki was taken a little aback. "You mean, after?"

Jenny's long lashes brushed her cheeks as she glanced coyly away. "Yeah."

Nikki suppressed a nervous giggle. "Yeah. I would."

Steph took Jenny's hand in hers. "Me, too. I didn't want to say anything."

"Chain of command, I know, I know," Jenny said. "But we're kind of a special case here. Regulations usually are pretty adamant about not having carnal knowledge of one's troops. But in our case it was kind of a necessity. So there wasn't much military canon to cover what to do when a commanding officer..." She trailed off, embarrassed.

"When a commanding officer what?" Nikki said gently.

"...falls in love with two women in her own command."

Steph was the first to kiss her, Nikki soon after. They linked hands and sat together as a smiling Erin inserted the disc into the player and started the session.

* * * * *

After the deprogramming, the planning moved into high gear. Jeri Kay and Charlotte finished the training of the troops and temporary promotions were established and squads were formed. It was strange how the original platoon had split and how new partnerships were formed. It was obvious that Charlotte and Jeri Kay, recently promoted to Master Sergeants, were very much in love and began sharing quarters exclusively. Stephanie, Jenny and Top Sergeant Nicole (who didn't feel the overwhelming need to go by Nikki anymore, but still did for ease's sake) lived together, and now Master Sergeant Dawn was applying for a quartering permit to move in with Lieutenant Misty Woodard, formerly Marty Woodard, one of the best combat medics in the whole Government force. Pairing up was happening widespread, but somehow was not affecting military discipline at all. Lieutenants lived with privates and there was no problem with following orders or hurt feelings. The occasional squabble was worked out off-duty between the contestants and nothing ever needed to come before the Colonel (or worse, the senior NCO - officers gave the orders, but the NCOs ran the army and their punishments were much, much more visceral and unpleasant).

After the eighth week orders were distributed and the armories were emptied. Two supply trucks were filled with food, bedding, medical supplies and weapons, a third with fuel, and a fourth and fifth with all the valuables they'd stripped from Gimmel's estate for use as a war-chest. Another truck held all the lovely clothes they'd been issued over their transformations to assist in feminization. All of Gimmel's notes and research rested in a pair of armored lockboxes in the Colonel's footlocker. No sense in coming home with the mission unaccomplished, and there was perhaps some leverage there if they used it right. They rigged the rest of the mansion compound with explosives and they sent Sylvia Gimmel's life's work and philosophy crawling skyward on an expanding cloud of dense black smoke.

Stephanie dropped back into the command vehicle and keyed open her headset mike.

"Roll out," she said.

* * * * *

The single little fishing town on the island wasn't a big problem - the two hundred élite soldiers had the police disarmed and the populace well under control three hours after they'd established a rallying point just south of the port. They used the war-chest to purchase

provisions and loaded onto the two troop boats anchored in Gimmel's private marina. Two fast-attack cutters were sent out ahead and a small pleasure yacht was converted into a hasty medical vessel to trail behind. They set out at first light and were well underway by noon.

Stephanie Quentin looked out over the calm waters which stretched to the horizon in all directions and ran a hand through her now shoulder-length straight black hair. The removal of the programming had re-established a sense of wonder in her new body and she and her two lovers were busily exploring one another anew, rediscovering all the things which Patterson-Smith's programming had made them take for granted.

By that afternoon they were well into the vastness of the ocean and were making an intercept course for the Government cruiser *Meritorious* and its small fleet of pickets and tenders. The two troop boats took up post just off the coast of a tiny little uninhabited island while the original platoon, still considered the best of the best among the female troops, transferred onto the pleasure-yacht-cum-medical-vessel.

Dawn adjusted the puny straps of the string bikini she'd found, giving her over-generous breasts a seductive jiggle. The scraps of brightly-colored waterproof fabric barely covered her huge chest or pleasantly rounded behind and she fluffed out her waist-length hair to flow in the sea breeze.

Nikki shoved a pair of cheap sunglasses up her aquiline nose and continued smearing her lissome body with suntan oil, wearing only a white maillot which barely covered her. Jeri Kay posed seductively in the wheelhouse while Charlotte vogued sexily on the aft-deck in a tiny little neoprene sports bikini. They were like a layout from a men's fantasy magazine and they got the desired reaction from the Government sailors who warped in on a rescue craft from the *Meritorious* in response to the women's distress call.

The commanding officer of the rescue vessel snapped a smart salute from the ship's cramped foredeck.

"We picked up your distress call, ladies," he said. "What is your problem?"

Jeri Kay responded with a giggle so vapid that it caused the other members of her platoon to squelch the impulse to look at her in total shock.

"We were only going out for a little while," she simpered. "But we drifted out too far and now we don't have enough gas to get us back. Can we get some fuel from you?"

The officer smiled. "Of course," he said smoothly, adding a hopeful smile. "Permission to come aboard?"

The women took on sexy smiles which set the officer's pulse jumping. "Of course," Steph purred.

The men of the *Meritorious* were easily handled by the élite soldiers, captured bloodlessly and quietly. They slept under the effects of the heavy sedatives in the infirmary below while Dawn, Charlotte, Jeri Kay, Nikki and Stephanie squeezed their firm, sexy bodies into the men's uniforms. Nothing they could do could make them look like anything other than bombshell women, unfortunately, but at least they looked like G-ment sailors. Surrendering the medical vessel to a squad from one of the troop vessels, Charlotte adjusted the ill-fitting uniform cap

she'd stolen atop her mounded hair and pushed off, guiding the *Meritorious'* rescue vessel through the gently swelling waves back towards its flagship.

The *Meritorious* was a grand vessel, a 600-meter stealth-capable surface cruiser meant to conduct both anti-submarine and anti-carrier operations. She was fast and agile and had the best radar suite in the fleet for eyes. She perched in the midst of her tenders and picket ships like a sleek bird of prey, the missile boxes behind her superstructure prowling the waves automatically, tracking the small rescue craft as it made a slow approach.

"RV-102, this is *Meritorious*," the flagship squawked. "Report situation."

Jeri Kay made her voice sound as masculine as she could. "Some pleasure cruisers ran out of fuel," she reported in a low register. "We topped 'em off and sent them on their way."

"Roger," the flagship responded. "You're clear for approach into the number three docking slip."

Jeri Kay cut the radio and gave Charlotte a long, level glance. "You sure you can do this, honey?" she asked wryly as her lover grasped the controls tightly.

"I spent three months on seaborne duty," Charlotte said nervously. "I've seen this done. But I don't know about doing it myself. I'm not much of a sailor."

"You're the best one we got," Steph said. "Just take it easy and roll with it, soldier."

Charlotte smiled. "Roger that, skipper."

The rescue craft slid through the *Meritorious'* churning wake and began a slow approach to the open docking slip. Charlotte trimmed the vessel and nudged the throttle forward as the prow of the boat cut through the turbulent water behind the flagship towards the docking port. Behind her, Steph and company were adjusting the body armor under the ill-fitting naval uniforms and readying weapons.

"Lock and load," the shapely major commanded. She gave a lingering good-luck kiss to her lover and senior NCO and they took up posts on the pitching deck as Charlotte guided the boat into the gaping hole in the side of the warship. A maintenance elevator was crawling down the side of the docking hole with a small crew to secure the rescue craft. Jeri Kay's hand seized the mooring cable just as the elevator locked into position with a crash. Stephanie and Dawn raised the neuroinhibitor rifles to their smooth cheeks and put darts into the four maintenance techs as the docking port door clashed closed behind them.

Charlotte cut the engine as they tied the vessel to the dock. They departed the vessel in a knot, fanning out on the elevator and checking the lethal weapons which were slung over their shoulders before Dawn slapped the toggles to the elevator lift and the platform began its slow crawl upwards towards the deck.

The *Meritorious* had prided herself on never being boarded through three wars, six police actions and thirty years' commission. A point of pride, perhaps, but not an excuse for shoddy training. For a decorated ship-of-the-line, the hundred sailors and marines didn't put up much resistance to being taken over by five beautiful women with guns. By the time Stephanie was remarking on how comfortable the captain's chair was, the two cutters from their tiny fleet were disabling the *Meritorious'* picket ships and joining the new fleet.

The former captain of the *Meritorious*, Rear Admiral James White, was brought before Stephanie and Jenny by an armed guard about an hour later. He faced her defiantly.

"I don't know who you are, ma'am, but you've made an armed insurrection against a vessel of the American Government. This can be considered an act of war," he said.

"It is," Steph said coolly. "It just hasn't been declared just yet."

"Who the hell are you people?"

Jenny stood and faced him, impressive and beautiful in her dress black uniform. "We're the way it's all going to be, from here on out," she said. "You're just a drop in the bucket. But we're not here to discuss politics. We're here to discuss the disposition of you and your men."

"Go ahead."

"Our mission relies on secrecy for a while longer," Jenny said. "We can either keep you hostage here on the *Meritorious* or we can pack you and your crew onto a tender ship and let you fend for yourselves. We'd appreciate the loan of some men we can consult about the operation and upkeep of this ship, though, since we'd like to return her to you in the same kind of condition we received her."

The admiral was taken aback. "Return her?"

"Roger that," Steph said. "We're not out to kill or do any damage. We're all Government soldiers here, same mud and same blood. We were careful to use non-lethal means to secure your crew and none of them will be harmed unless they attempt an escape or a retaliation. And once we're ashore, we'll return this ship to you in the best condition we can."

"You're Government troops?" White gasped. "But..."

"We're women," Steph interrupted. "There aren't supposed to be any women in the armed forces. But the ease with which we took this vessel should let you know that we're soldiers. Trust me, sir. We haven't always looked like this."

"Take a seat, admiral," Jenny said, gesturing. "This could take a while. Cigarette?"

* * * * *

The admiral took as much of the story in stride as he could, checking through Gimmel's data to confirm that the force of exquisitely attractive women were indeed who they said they were. He agreed to stay aboard the *Meritorious* and to oversee the operation and navigation of the vessel in return for the safe and humane treatment of his crew. Jenny was only too happy to agree.

Nikki sat in the C-and-C with a cup of coffee, staring out over the waves. She wore her dress blacks undone, the collar loose around her pale swan's neck so the salty air could caress her skin. On the deck below her, the female troops were clustered around the railings, talking and smoking cigarettes.

How could it have come this far? Nikki mused, sipping her coffee. Only a few months ago she'd been a burly, hairy man and a trained killer. Now she was a character from one of her own sexual fantasies, a tall redhead with green eyes and long legs and big breasts, built for sex and attractiveness. She had trouble reconciling her abilities as a soldier with the swimsuit-calendar body she saw in the mirror every morning. Patterson-Smith's training made it harder

still - it was hard to feel like a killing machine when she could feel the thong of her red lacy panties snuggling into the crack of her ass and the way her sparkling green eyes couldn't seem to help giving appraising looks at the builds of the occasional sailor. She knew she felt love - strong, romantic love - towards Steph and Jenny both, but the want still hid beneath the surface. Erin's words were still very clear in her mind, as well - becoming aroused in the least would mean a relapse into the wild, uncontrollable desire which had ruled them all previous to deprogramming. Nikki had found herself thinking of roadkill and very old nuns quite a bit lately.

"Penny for your thoughts, gorgeous," a warm voice said from behind her. Nikki smiled at the sound of Jenny's voice and leaned back to pillow her head against her lover's small, compact breasts.

"Trying to figure out what to do next," Nikki replied. "After this. If I'm still alive, then I have to start a life as a woman. I can't help thinking that this revolution is just a way to put off trying to learn how to become a woman for real."

Jenny kissed her hair. "You think too much."

"Yeah, I know," Nikki replied.

"Why don't we just worry about one thing at a time?"

"I wish I could," Nikki said. "I'm just not wired up like that, unfortunately."

"So what about it?" Jenny said, sitting behind her lover. "What do you want to do?"

"I dunno," Nikki mumbled into her cup. "It was all so cut-and-dried when I was a man. I had a career and that was all I needed or was expected to have. But now, I have you and Steph in my life, and this revolution is going to mean we're all going to have to get involved in governing. And it just hit me, not long ago, that I can have a baby of my own. I think I might want to do that sometime."

"I've thought about that too," Jenny said.

"And then, I know that I'm in love with you and Steph, but there's all these leftovers from Rachel's work. I sit and think about how much I love the way you touch me and the way Steph kisses me and how wonderful it feels to wake up beside you both every morning, but then I'll see a sailor with a particularly nice ass or handsome face and all I can think about is spreading my legs for him and letting him fuck me silly. It's very confusing and I don't like feeling so slutty."

"You shouldn't worry so much," Jenny said. "It happens to us all."

"I just hate that there's nothing I can do about it."

"Sure there is!" Jenny giggled. "You can go down there, grab that sailor and fuck him unconscious."

"That still feels like letting Gimmel win," Nikki said. "I fought her so hard for so long and she almost broke us all. But I held on, and it's hard to give in. Sometimes I think that I'd stop eating just because Gimmel or Krelle said I should keep doing it."

Jenny held her tight and stroked her hair. "I love you for that, you know?" she said. "I used to hold out for a woman, before I was changed, because I could never find one strong enough. I

never thought there was such a thing as a woman who was courageous and strong enough to keep up with me. Now I've found you and you fill that hole, just like Steph fills the hole inside me that needs someone who's my intellectual foil. She and I have the most wonderful arguments, and she never gives in or lets me win. Reminds me I'm not the smartest kid on the block."

"And you make me feel needed," Nikki responded. "Necessary. I've always had to feel like I was part of something bigger than me, ever since I was little. You make me feel like part of something much bigger."

"What about Steph?" Jenny prodded. "What do you love about her?"

Nikki grinned. "That little thing she does with her tongue."

Jenny laughed, but she knew exactly what Nikki was talking about.

* * * * *

It was impossible to discipline the troops for the accidents that started happening. None of them were very aware of the myriad of things that would serve to make them amorous and the tidal wave of desire which followed left the majority of the *Meritorious'* sailors very happy. A group of sailors, working belowdecks, had turned on a disc player with the music of Luke Trevyek, a singer who'd made the scene while the women were still under Gimmel's treatment. Something about his voice and the words he sang just struck Nikki, Jeri Kay and a young soldier named Laura Metcalf (formerly Larry Metcalf of the 109th Paratroopers) as sexy and they were all very sore the next day from taking on a group of nine very large sailors. And that was not the only occurrence. Steph and Jenny labored to keep the divisions between the women and their prisoners very wide and very chilly, but it was not possible on an isolated vessel in the middle of nowhere.

"I don't know what the hell to do about this," Jenny said, head in hands. "If we don't get it stopped, we're going to start having to deal with unwanted pregnancy and the like before we make landfall."

Steph scratched her head. "Think we should talk to the admiral?"

"No good," Jenny said, coloring slightly.

"Why not?"

"Because," Jenny said quietly. "I apparently have a thing for men with silver hair."

Steph sighed. If the admiral was aware of the women's weakness, which was likely, then he would have Jenny on her back across the map table with a minimum of effort. Hell, if the man brought lilies, which Steph found were the most romantic flowers, he could probably have them both.

"We could try to chemically castrate them or something," she attempted.

"Violates our terms with the admiral," Jenny said. "No, this one's a real stumper."

"Sometimes the hardest problems are best solved with the easiest solutions," Steph said. "After all, we have a way to flash-train everybody on the ship, right? So we just remove the sailors' drive."

"It's not that easy," Jenny said, rubbing the back of her neck. "Flash-training isn't reprogramming. It's more of a very strong suggestion. There's no way we could remove something as ingrained as sexuality."

"Damn," Steph said.

"There has to be a way," Jenny grumbled.

Steph laughed. "Of course there is."

"Do tell."

"We're relying too much on technology to solve the problem. I mean, the armies of old didn't have flash-training or behavioral conditioning. But they managed to maintain discipline."

Jenny smiled. "You think you could find me a list of the five nastiest, most disgusting jobs on this ship?"

* * * * *

It didn't take but a few days of sentencing the indiscreet to slop out the ship's bilges or clean the ship's sanitation disposal system to get the little problem stopped. Erin and her psych girls were working overtime on a better tear-down of Patterson-Smith's training, but it was difficult, since all of the women did enjoy sex -- it was very hard to dissuade a mind from doing something it basically wanted to do.

But they did manage to get into Government-controlled waters and set a course for the venerable Norfolk shipyards, cutting through the waters at top speed to make their landing. From Norfolk, the distance to the capitol was negligible, especially for a modern fighting force.

A day and a half out of Norfolk, Jenny and Steph called all their troops into the *Meritorious'* cavernous assembly room for the briefing. They wore their combat uniforms - skintight heatweave bodysuits covered over with jackets and short pants of black ballistic cloth. Their thick, soft-as-down hair was French-braided tightly behind their heads and they wore black slouch caps and tac headsets. Their pretty faces were smeared with black camo paint and their combat harnesses hung heavy with assorted weapons.

Jenny stepped in front of the map and the assembly came to a quiet attention.

"As you were," she commanded. "We're at 16 hours to landfall, ladies, and it's time we let you in on what's going to happen once we're back home."

Behind her, a tactical map of the eastern coast sprang up in the holographic tank. A blinking red blip marked the position of the *Meritorious* and her tenders.

"You received your team assignments prior to this briefing. Alpha Team is my command and Bravo will be under Major Quentin. At 1230 hours, Bravo Team will transfer to the two picket cutters and take position four miles off the point of the *Meritorious*. Alpha will remain here with me."

"Our job is to take out the harbor defenses," Steph said. "It has to be quick and quiet."

"After the emplacements are down, Bravo team will go aquatic and stay beneath the surface in stealth," Jenny continued. "The resultant airstrikes will probably total those ships. I don't want anybody on them when that happens."

"SOP for harbor defense is to enact a harbor freeze and send helos and flitters to search for survivors and prisoners," Steph said. "When those aircraft are in your vicinity, take them. Use non-lethal wherever possible. Once the helos are secured, take them back to the search and rescue facility, here - " she pointed to a building on the map "- and take out the sea radar here, here and here."

"Once we receive the go signal from the helo insertion, Alpha team will scramble in the *Meritorious'* helicopter complement and be inbound. Our ETA will be roughly twenty minutes, depending on shore weather conditions. You have exactly *that* long to disable the harbor Surface-to-Air emplacements here, here, here and here."

"Top Sergeant Nikki Callahan will lead Strike Team Delta, Master Sergeant Dawn Sullivan has Strike Echo, Master Sergeant Charlotte Cavanaugh has Strike Foxtrot and Master Sergeant Jeri Kay Martin will be leading Strike Golf. Ladies, I want those fuckers down before Alpha Team even crests the horizon," Steph said, consulting a clipboard computer. "I never want a missile to even go active."

"Roger that," Dawn said coldly.

"Alpha Team will make their landing here and secure the Transportation Facility," Jenny said. "From there we appropriate four AH-88B *Aztec* fast-attack stealth choppers and two AH-102 *Seneca* gunships as escorts. Aimee, Natalie, Dana and Denise will pilot the troop carriers, Susan and Bonnie will take the gunships. There will be fifteen minutes for fueling, arming and preflight before the Bravo teams return to this position."

"This is key time, ladies," Steph cautioned. "It's the only point in the mission where we're all in the same place at the same time. If we're all going to buy it, we're going to buy it here. Keep your eyes open and your feet moving at all times."

"If we're not airborne within forty-five minutes of landfall, the mission will most likely fail," Jenny said. "Once we're up and running, we head south down the coast towards the capitol. Air defenses will be on full alert and the Council will most probably be mobilizing to Fort Liebman, here."

"How are we going to get past the air defense?" a redhead in one of the back rows asked.

Jenny smiled. "We're not. Except for the gunships, we're going to execute a high-speed airdrop across this whole area. The gunships will draw off any pursuit and ditch here in this river valley. Be sure and make it public when you eject."

"By the time the mop-up teams get to this area, we should control this entire six square kilometer area and will have established mobile command here," Steph said, pointing. "If the army follows SOP again, they'll send mechanized into the region to search for the downed pilots. We lure them into the region and then take their weapons and rides."

"The Council will be at Leibman in the fortified bunker underground," Jenny said. "And we should be set up with four *Schwarzkopf* IFV's and a good selection of antitank weaponry. When the Council's at the house, Liebman keeps four *Eisenhower* Main Battle Tanks in the field on patrol and the remaining 16 in reserve. Strike Delta, under Nikki, will

neutralize the four in the field while Strikes Echo, Foxtrot and Golf destroy the ones on the ground."

"Won't we have to penetrate the perimeter?" Dawn asked.

"The wire-guided munitions on the *Schwarzkopfs* ought to be enough. All we really need is a good tread hit on each one," Steph said. "When we get confirmation of the kills, Strike Golf will reconnoiter and then we'll make our insertion through the perimeter."

"Now here's the fun part," Jenny said. "Perimeter breach calls for a Fallback Protocol. All able-bodied men will take arms and fall back to this building here - " she pointed to the map " - and set up defense on the entrance to the underground bunker. They leave only a token guard here at Environmental Control."

"Strikes Echo, Foxtrot and Golf will take Environmental Control and start pumping in Senotrex gas through the ventilation systems," Steph said.

"No good, boss," Jeri Kay spoke up. "The bunker environment is sealed. There's no vent to the outside air."

"Roger that," Jenny said. "But we're not out to gas the bunker. Just the troops guarding the elevator. We'll truss up the sleepers and detain them here at Command and Control. Task Forces Hotel and India will break off and bring the air defenses back on line and activate the minefields in the surrounding woods. Task Force Juliet will go with Command Team Kilo into C-and-C while all four Strike Forces will establish perimeter guard and seal off the entrance to the bunker."

"They'll be trapped there and we'll be well defended," Steph said. "We don't want to kill the Council, after all. We need them. We just want to force them into a position where they have to listen."

"And with Fort Liebman's comsat uplink, we can broadcast everything they say to the whole continent, if not the world," Erin said. "Popular support won't hurt us either in this."

"Roger that," Jenny said. "Individual assignments and intel briefings are being downloaded to your personal combat computers. I suggest everybody study up and get some rest. We all have one hell of a long night ahead of us. Dismissed."

* * * * *

Nikki took a long pull on her cigarette - her last for a while before she had to go on the patch for the duration of the mission - and let the smoke out in a long, blue-white plume. She leaned against the railing, gazing out over the long trail of silver that was the moon's reflection on the water. Her body had continued to feminize, losing some of its angular hardness and settling into the soft curves of full womanhood. She had to chuckle at the funny ways her training had surfaced during the long preparations for the mission. She'd taken nearly an hour to apply her camo greasepaint just so and to apply a matte finish to her glossy manicure to make sure no telltale gleams against them gave away her position. And even though she was attired in heatweave and body armor, she was very away of the silk and lace thong panties, bra and camisole she wore beneath it. Her hair was in a meticulous French braid but she couldn't help allowing soft little tendrils to escape the braid and frame her soft, girlish face.

She heard the tread of high-heeled boots on the deckplates and turned her head a little to see Stephanie approaching. Tossing her cigarette into the foaming waves beneath her, Nikki turned and extended a hand to her lover. Steph took it and joined her wordlessly at the rail.

Finally the silence broke. "Before, when we worked together, I worried about you," Steph said, her voice a tiny little vulnerable whisper. "I never wanted one of my men to get killed."

"I'll be careful," Nikki said, feeling tears gather to burn in the corners of her eyes.

"You always are," Steph said. "But I've never had this to deal with before. I've never... *loved* someone like you before. I've never loved anyone at all before. I think I'll die if you get yourself killed out there."

"No, you won't," Nikki said. "You and Jenny will miss me, but you'll heal. I promise."

"Just come back to me, all right?"

"I'll do my best," Nikki said. "If I could make you a guarantee, I would. But all I can do is promise you I'll do my best. I hope that is enough."

"It'll have to be," Steph said, pillowing her head on Nikki's soft shoulder.

They were still in the same position when the sun rose.

* * * * *

Nikki looked over her squad carefully on the quarterdeck of the little attack pinnacle which preceded the cruiser *Meritorious*. The little *Valiant* was a sleek dagger cutting through the water, armed with two high-volume rocket batteries and some air defense cannons and not much else. The squad of five which comprised Strike Force Delta were hand-picked by the original platoon as the deadliest and fastest of the new trainees. Any one of the gorgeous women would be worth four regulars, but the sheer number of men they would be fighting over the next hours would sorely tax those numbers.

Slouched lazily across the prow of the motor launch was Renée Wallace, formerly a demolitions and insurgency expert named Randy Wallace of the 188th Assault Engineers. The short-haired blonde had a tight, compact frame with apple-sized breasts and long legs. Her ice-blue eyes searched the horizon impassively.

Beside her stretched Taylor Tsang, formerly Tyler Tsang of the 64th Combat Medical battalion. The lovely Chinese girl played idly with a long, silken tendril of her glossy, blue-black hair and tried not to act nervous. She shouldn't have bothered - the medic was always the most protected member of the squad.

Nikki's assigned Executive Officer, Michelle Halifax, paced unhurriedly beside her, smoking a slender cigarette. The lissome black woman was pale-complected and regal, with wide, slitted eyes and muscled like a panther. Her mass of midnight curls was confined in a long queue behind her. She'd been one of the best assault men in the army, a decorated member of the infamous 99th "Stormers" infantry known for their speed and accuracy in combat. Nikki was very glad of her presence.

Josie Madding sat next to Nikki, sleeping lightly before the call up. Aside from the chesty bombshell body and innocent, little-girl face, Josie hadn't changed much from when Nikki had known her before as the grenadier in the 16th Heavy Infantry. "Josie" now stood for Josephine

the way "Joey" had for Joseph, but Nikki liked knowing she could count on the wise-ass grenadier with the centerfold body. Elimination of unknowns was a definite plus in the operation.

Alanna Lucas was the last member, the SigInt spook and computer nerd. The long-nosed, librarian-esque face and the stylish, lightweight glasses were misleading, however - the little redhead with the rosebud lips and full breasts was also one of the better infantrymen Nikki had known when she was still Alan Lucas with the 73rd Mechanized.

All in all, a good squad. Nikki was pleased with how things had turned out. But she still gnawed her lower lip in apprehension because she hadn't fought with these people before and neither had the beloved members of her platoon. Charlotte, Dawn and Jeri Kay were the best in the world, but even they wouldn't last long if they couldn't count on their people. There was a whole lot riding on team cohesion for all that these women had only been training as a platoon for a few weeks.

Steph's concerned voice crackled in Nikki's headset. "Strike Delta, Strike Echo, get your gills on."

"Saddle up," Nikki commanded, lifting her aquasuit. She fit the shoulder-mounted dynamic gill over her upper body, releasing the tension halter all the way to slip it over her ample breasts. The suit went airtight with the touch of a button and the mask pulled tight across her jaw and forehead. The gill was breathing normally in the upper air as she checked the deep-water light and the stealth package on the little water-jet. She sat stiffly - the suit didn't allow her to turn her head much - and pulled on her fins. A final check of the underwater weapons slung across her shapely torso and Nikki was ready. She ran a check of her platoon - no mistakes, a very good sign - and took her place on the rail.

Steph's voice crackled in the earpiece again. "Strike Delta, status."

"Good to go," Nikki responded.

"Strike Echo, good to go," Dawn reported from the portside fantail.

"Strike Foxtrot, good to go," Charlotte piped in from the starboard position of the *Indomitable*, the other picket ship set out to disable the harbor defenses, some eight miles away across the water.

"Strike Golf, good to go," Jeri Kay, Nikki's long-time partner, reported from the other position of the *Indomitable*.

"Hey, Martin," Nikki called on the battlefield frequency. "Watch that cute ass of yours out there."

"Roger that," Jeri Kay replied. "Watch yourself too, Red."

"Bravo team is gilled and good to go," Steph said. "We'll be in firing position on the harbor emplacements in six minutes. Time to get wet, girls. Good luck."

"Welcome to the show," Charlotte said grimly as she jumped into the water.

* * * * *

The water was hellishly cold even through the insulated heatweave. Nikki pointed her head downwards once she was beneath the foam of the boat's wake and engaged the thrusters over

her shoulderblades. She was very aware of the natural pull and buoyancy of her new breasts as she shot downwards through the murky waters of the northern Atlantic. She reached the draglines about twenty seconds later and moored herself to the bottom of the boat. Just at the limits of her attenuated vision she could see the remaining members of her team reach the mooring cables and make themselves fast.

Nikki keyed over to the command frequency. "Strike Delta, this is Delta leader. Sound off."

"Delta squadron made fast and secured," Renee reported in her breathy contralto.

"Good," Nikki said. "Josie, get ready with the anti-air."

"Roger that, boss," Josie sang back. She clicked on her deep-water light and quickly unslung and assembled the Trident underwater antiaircraft missile and launcher from her pack. She was set up, the weapon was powered and tracking, and her lights were off in fifty-six seconds. Nikki couldn't repress a proud smile.

Above them, the surface of the water became a churning maelstrom from the backwash of the missile pods onboard the picket ships. The scream of the high-explosive rockets overhead could be heard even thirty meters below the surface. Nikki counted the seconds on her heads-up chronometer. Thirty seconds. Twenty. Ten. Five. The harbor defenses were dust.

"Targets eliminated," Bravo command reported. "The harbor defenses are neutralized."

"Bogeys inbound, bearing three-four-niner," air defense reported. "ETA two minutes."

"Time to dunk," Steph commanded. "Get moving. Now."

Nikki looked up as bodies began splashing into the water around the imposing oblong hull of the picket ship's hull. They engaged their thrusters and shot downwards, hauling their equipment behind them in watertight containers. They made the pass-off to the tethered soldiers beneath and set about mooring themselves to the boat in order to go stealthy and turn off everything but the passive breathing units on the dynamic gills they wore which filtered breathable air from the seawater around them.

A deep vibration rocked the water and the *Valiant* jumped, jerking the tethers hard. A fireball rose skyward as the first of the antiship missiles impacted and the F-40 *Dragons* shrieked by overhead.

"The *Valiant* is a kill," Steph reported. "I say again, the *Valiant* is dead."

"Roger that," Alpha team reported from the *Meritorious*. "Confirmed. Both the *Valiant* and the *Indomitable* are killed. All troopers are in the water and unharmed."

Nikki breathed easier. That had been the tricky part. The airstrike made three more passes, peppering the burning boats with antiship ordnance and reducing them to smoldering ashes on the surface before peeling off and heading for home, the carrier *Victory* far to the north. The search teams should be inbound in a few moments.

"Unhook," Steph commanded. "The *Valiant* is sinking. Don't let it drag you down."

Nikki slipped her tether. "Strike Delta, fan out. Josie, take out the gunship escort. Alanna, you're her reloader. Michelle, Taylor, you're with me. Better put your bottle rockets on."

Nikki unlimbered the jump engine she'd been carrying and attached it to the reinforced pylon between the thrusters on Taylor Tsang's gill. Taylor applied a similar one to Michelle's gill while the tall black woman attached a third engine to Nikki's suit.

"Be advised, Strike Delta, that your search-and-rescue team is inbound bearing oh-oh-four. ETA three minutes," the *Meritorious* reported.

"Stand ready," Nikki ordered. "Fan out. We go one-two-three as soon as Joey greases that gunship."

"Roger that," Michelle said with a feral gleam in her eye which could be detected even through the polarized faceplate of her underwater gear.

Nikki took the time to loosen her trench knife in its sheath and check the ammo and condition of her dart-thrower. The weapons, built on the tried and true MP-5 chassis, were easy as hell to waterproof with very little loss of muzzle velocity. They'd have to shoot from tight quarters to insure that the darts would penetrate the thick ballistic cloth of a naval flight-suit, but Nikki didn't mind. They only had two clips apiece of the neuroinhibitor darts. Once those were gone, then the killing would have to start.

The three minutes crawled by as only time spent waiting tensely can pass before the familiar five-bladed *whupp-whupp-whupp* of the *Pelican* amphibious helicopter began to churn the waves above them.

"Josie," Nikki said. "You're on."

"Roger," Josie shot back. "I count one *Python* gunship." She was frantically adjusting the fine-tuning on her anti-aircraft launcher while Alanna treaded water behind her with another missile ready in case of a miss. Josie pressed her faceplate into the targeting hood and began to align the weapon.

"Target acquired," she reported. "Get clear."

Alanna kicked out of the way as the water behind Josie Madding erupted into a chaos of boiling bubbles. The bombshell grenadier shot backwards through the water several meters from the recoil as the missile rose to the surface on a column of bubbles and froth.

"Bird is away," Josie said, still peering through the targeting hood. Alanna, behind her, was stuffing the second round into the watertight breech with an impressive speed. "Tracking."

A bright-as-day explosion flowered above the water and steaming debris began to hit the water all around.

"That's a kill," Josie said.

"Go," Nikki said, thumbing the control to the jump pod. The little engine kicked on with a cavernous sound and a cloud of bubbles. The gill jerked hard under Nikki's arms and breasts as it took her towards the surface at a rate which made her ears pop painfully. Then she was out of the water and travelling upwards at a frightening clip. The *Pelican* was about ten meters off the surface and the pilot was looking at her with a very confused look as she grabbed the lip of the troop compartment. She slung the dart-thrower inside and let loose with a three-round that stitched the door gunners across the chest and dropped them. The team of four divers reacted quickly, unslinging their weapons and drawing a bead on Nikki's exposed upper body. Michelle rocketed out of the water behind them and dropped two of them with a

sustained burst from the dart-thrower and pulled herself into the vehicle while Nikki finished off the other two divers.

Michelle paralyzed the copilot with a single dart and smashed the cockpit transceiver with the butt of her submachine gun. Nikki was struggling into the wildly slewing vehicle while Michelle grappled with the astonished pilot. The tall black woman dragged the pilot out of the restraints and slammed him on the floor just as Taylor Tsang boarded and slid into the pilot's chair and gained control. Once the helicopter quit roiling around wildly, Nikki was able to climb aboard and put a dart into the pilot. Tsang took the chopper to the deck and idled it once the pontoons were in the water. Eight hundred meters away, the other chopper, under Dawn's control, settled to the pitching water as well.

"This is Delta Leader to Bravo Command," Nikki said. "We have control of the birds. Get aboard quick. Estimate five minutes. Hurry it up."

Nikki pulled off the cumbersome gill and shook out her matted red hair. "Josie, get reloaded and keep your eyes out for more gunships," she commanded. The bombshell brunette nodded and slid into the door-gunner's position and began fiddling with the anti-aircraft launcher once again.

Taylor had finished checking out the captured search/rescue team. She inflated an emergency Zodiac raft and was loading the unconscious men into it with Renee's help.

Nikki scanned the horizon worriedly as she looked over Michelle Halifax' shoulder across the surface. All around the helicopters, heads began to crest the surface of the calm waters and start their swim towards the assigned craft. The first aboard was a slender, petite brunette with dancing green eyes and chubby cheeks who slipped past Nikki into the pilot's position.

"Aimee Hallaway, Sergeant. I'm your pilot," she said breathlessly, throwing back the hood of the gill. Nikki patted her shoulder as the little brunette strapped herself in and checked over the aircraft.

"Michelle, you take copilot and Renée, take the other door-gun emplacement," Nikki barked as she helped the slender medic push the Zodiac full of paralyzed soldiers into the water. Then she began helping the load-on.

Fifteen women and their equipment were packed into the *Pelican* by the time Aimee cycled up the engines and pulled the ungainly bird back into the air, setting a northerly bearing back towards the search and rescue facility. Aimee keyed open the backup transceiver and set it a tenth of a point below normal so that her peppy feminine voice would be disguised by the static.

"This is SR-102 Bravo flight," she reported. "We're taking fire! Gunship is down, repeat, gunship is down! Enemy in the water!"

"Roger, Bravo," the base replied. "You and Alpha get the hell out of there. We're sending in mop-up now. Repeat, Alpha and Bravo flights get the hell out of there."

"Returning to base," Aimee said, giving a congratulatory thumbs-up to Nikki as she set the helicopter in motion. Nikki returned her anxious gaze back to the horizon. Hopefully the Navy hadn't called a bluff and wasn't attacking the *Meritorious* right that second. The cruiser should be under full steam towards the harbor mouth if everything was going according to plan.

The two captured helicopters sped over the waves past the wreckage of the *Indomitable*. Two more *Pelican* rescue birds were visible on the horizon as well, stuffed with the rest of Bravo Team and Strikes Foxtrot and Golf. Nikki breathed a sigh of relief. At least Jeri Kay made it to the extraction.

"Strike Delta, get ready for ground assault," Nikki snapped. She turned to Janet Irriman, the ranking officer of Bravo Team on her helicopter. "Best get your people ready to hold the aircraft, Lieutenant."

"Roger that," Irriman confirmed. "Harriet, Lucy, get ready to take over the door guns."

The pace of the encounter was rising and the soldiers were exhibiting signs of antsiness. "ETA to landing field three minutes," Aimee reported a little breathlessly.

"Calm it down," Nikki commanded. "Get your game faces on."

It served to still the soldiers a little, but the signs of nervousness were still apparent, even on the seasoned veterans. For all the campaigns she'd seen, all the vicious engagements she'd survived, she still felt the almost carnal rush which preceded any action. Her nipples poked prominently through the heatweave bodysuit.

She shucked her gill and refastened the ballistic armor jacket snugly, seating her headset and slouch cap with the attached IR goggles over her sweat-slick hair. As the *Pelican* headed towards its landing slip, the piercing green eyes fastened on the sea radar station that was her objective. She keyed open the battlefield frequency and activated the encryption gear.

"Delta Leader to Echo Leader," she said. "Status, Dawn."

"Green light," Dawn replied. "You?"

"Good to go," Nikki responded. "We'll set down ahead of you and disable the guard shack. I'll send Renée to start wiring the dishes once we have a tenable position."

"Give us thirty seconds and we'll be on top of you," Dawn said. "Good luck out there, Red."

"Thanks. Watch your ass."

The *Pelican* settled onto her pontoons on the press-formed tarmac and Nikki led Strike Force Delta across the field in a crouching run. They covered the hundred or so meters between their landing pad and the sea radar station in a matter of seconds.

Nikki kicked open the door to the guard shack and stitched the lazy-looking guardsman across the chest with a neuroinhibitor dart as Michelle and Alanna dove through the portal to either side of her. Behind the redheaded top sergeant, Renée, Taylor and Josie struck out for the radar array with satchel charges.

"Move! Move!" Nikki barked, waving her people on. The room was secured and the two other guards paralyzed by the time Dawn's team came through the door. The two Strike Forces moved from room to room disabling the guards and the technicians. It only took about six minutes.

"Delta team, report," Nikki commanded over the headset.

"One more to go, boss," Renée said breathlessly.

"The shack is secure," Nikki told her. "Move it. I want detonation in two minutes."

"Roger that. I'm sending Taylor and Josie to minimum safe distance now."

Dawn keyed open the public frequency. "Foxtrot Leader, this is Echo Leader. Status."

Charlotte's voice sounded a little strained. "We're a little behind. We ran into resistance on the tarmac. Lost two soldiers. We need another five minutes."

"Sit tight," Dawn said. "Report resistance?"

"Just a troop carrier on the southern airfield. We didn't surprise 'em enough."

"This is Echo Leader to Alpha Command," Dawn said. "Sit-rep. We have radar blind in estimate five minutes. Report position, please."

The voice of the *Meritorious* was staticky with ECM jamming and encryption. "We're loaded into the choppers now. A little air resistance, but nothing this tin can can't handle," the communications officer reported.

"Be advised we need to-the-minute intel on your position. We have a lot of SAMs to clear out."

"Roger that, Echo Leader."

"I'm done," Renée said. "Give me thirty seconds to get clear."

Nikki thumbed back the safety cover on the detonator. Once she got the signal from Renée, she jammed her long-nailed thumb onto the button and the long array of radar dishes erupted in bright, smoky fireballs. All the readouts in the room dissolved into static.

"North side radar is down," she said. "I say again, north side radar is down. Strikes Delta and Echo are moving out now to deal with the SAM emplacements."

"Good luck," the *Meritorious* said.

Nikki and her people weren't fifty meters out the door before they heard from Jeri Kay. "South side radar is down. I say again, south side radar is down. The way is clear."

The *Meritorious'* commo officer sounded relieved. "Alpha Team is underway. ETA twenty minutes."

"Let's get a move on, girls," Dawn urged.

The first of the SAM emplacements was atop a small ridge overlooking the harbor approach. The resistance was non-existent, mostly ensigns and green beginners who didn't even have time to be surprised before the darts were in them. Josie dispatched the emplacement with a shoulder-fired anti-bunker missile which sent the launcher skyward as a cloud of expanding, luminescent gas.

The barked reports crowded the frequencies. Nikki's was the first emplacement to go down and Jeri Kay's soon after. Charlotte and Dawn reported kills nearly simultaneously. The Alpha Team flight was still ten minutes out. Nikki smiled broadly. *Still the best*, she thought proudly.

"Ladies, we have come to the running portion of the evening," Nikki said. "The LZ and Transportation Facility is two and a half clicks away, bearing two-five-niner. We have ten minutes, the ground is wet, there's dense foliage and we're all in heels."

Taylor Tsang cut her a sarcastic look. "Hooh-rah," she said flatly. "This is why I joined the army."

* * * * *

Strike Force Delta made the perimeter fence just as the three helicopters from the *Meritorious* carrying Alpha Team were loosing the first salvo of missiles against the guard shack. Armed troopers were pouring out of the buildings and scrambling for position. Taking one look at the field-armor they were wearing, Nikki slipped the inhibitor dart clip out of her weapon and slapped home a magazine of live rounds and jacked back the firing pin.

"Renée, on your left! He's got an anti-air launcher!" Nikki barked, pointing. The petite blonde opened up with her recently-reloaded weapon and caught the man across the backs of the thighs, dropping him. Michelle finished him with a well-placed mercy shot to the back of the neck.

Nikki jumped the fence quickly, shoving her petite body over the top of the razor wire with no apparent effort. She fell into a defensive crouch and rolled, avoiding spotty fire from the disorganized troops. Her bright green eyes picked out another soldier with an antiaircraft launcher over one shoulder drawing a bead on one of the Alpha choppers. Nikki dropped him with instincts bordering on the precognitive, squeezing a three-round burst into the crouching soldier which killed the man instantly.

The soldiers were coming to realize they were being assaulted from two sides and split their focus, pinning Strike Delta against the fence under the cover of some firefighting vehicles. Nikki pulled back behind a foam tanker roughly, avoiding the sparks from the ricocheting rounds which had tried to kill her and barked into her headset.

"Dawn, where the hell are you? We're pinned down!"

"Inbound," Dawn replied. "ETA two minutes."

"Dammit! They're going to have us flanked in two minutes!" Nikki spat, rolling to her stomach and returning fire between the vehicle's tires. Taylor was crouched over Michelle behind the second tanker, working frantically to stop the bleeding from where the tall black woman had taken a round in the shoulder. Nikki swore again. The field was wide open ahead of them and they couldn't lay down enough suppressive fire to keep the oncoming troops from fanning out. She offered her soul to the Infinite on very easy terms as she wormed her way underneath the vehicle.

She wormed a "thumper," the slang term for the AP-90 Disposable Grenade Launcher, from her harness and tried to jockey for a shot which wouldn't expose too much of her to the enemy. A knot of six troopers broke off and made a dash for a flanking position. Nikki gritted her teeth and opened fire with the thumper, which went off in a cloud of propellant with a hollow *whoomp!* She didn't stick around long enough to see if her projectile was on the money but scrabbled backwards on hands and knees, ducking the mass of return fire which sparked on the pavement in front of her. The ballistic jacket turned the few ricochets but they still stung like hell, especially the one which hit her left breast. Maybe Steph or Jenny would kiss that and make it better later - *No!* she thought angrily. *This is no time to get horny!* She shot backwards out from under the tanker just as the tires flattened on the exposed side and the vehicle thumped down to the pavement to rest on the hubs. Nikki took a split second to catch

her breath and then reloaded her weapon and began to duck-walk towards the front of the vehicle to add what support she could to Josie.

"Good shot, boss," the grenadier smiled. "You iced four of 'em."

"Wasn't even aiming," Nikki panted. "I was more worried about getting out in one piece."

"Ballsy," Josie laughed. "Stupid, but ballsy."

"And here I thought I didn't have those anymore," Nikki said.

"They're spreading out," Josie said fatalistically. "There's no way to stop it."

"Nope," Nikki said breathlessly.

"Been nice serving with you, Nikki," Josie said. A single tear glistened among the camo paint on her cheek. Nikki swallowed hard and nodded, taking a fresh grip on her weapon.

"Always wanted to go out in a Butch and Sundance scenario," the redhead sighed.

"Here's your chance."

"On three," Nikki said, getting her legs underneath her.

Josie nodded and set her jaw. Too bad no one else would ever realize how indescribably beautiful she looked at that particular moment. Nikki blinked the defiant picture from her mind and swallowed hard.

"Three," she said.

"Two."

"One," she barked, standing and trying to get off one or two shots before she died. But no fire came. She scanned the area wildly, searching for a target, but there was none offered.

Jeri Kay stood from behind one of the enemy positions, waving with her smoking gun.

"Thought you could use some help," she said brightly.

Nikki's single chuckle had a touch of the hysterical in it. "Next time I say let's go someplace like Bolivia," she said, wiping away a tear of relief, "let's go someplace like Bolivia."

* * * * *

The *Meritorious'* helicopters made one more pass to let off the last of its meager ordnance before setting down and disgorging Alpha team onto the tarmac. All the other aircraft were totaled except for the six choppers that the invaders intended to steal and the landing field was littered with dead bodies. Nikki, as ranking NCO, began barking orders as soon as the members of Alpha Team had both feet on the ground.

"All right, ladies, listen up! I want all the flight crews hopping and preflighting those birds, now! Everyone else get with the Alpha Team and start packing parachutes. Air defense, I want a perimeter guarding the *Pelicans'* approach established in thirty seconds! Move!"

Nikki grabbed a parachute from the stack behind the *Meritorious'* choppers and began fitting it over her battle harness as Dawn, Charlotte and Jeri Kay came to get their own. The four of them stopped for only a moment, smiling secret smiles. It was almost like old times. Nikki

gave Jeri Kay's hand a heartfelt squeeze while Dawn gave a similar affectionate gesture to her old field partner. Then Jeri Kay and Charlotte were deep into a passionate kiss and Dawn was moving purposefully towards her own lover, Misty Woodard, the combat medic for Jeri Kay's Strike Force Golf. Nikki instantly regretted that her own partners weren't sequestered in the command tent, checking the latest intel.

Nikki checked her chronometer - ten minutes until the *Pelicans* were down and safe. She took the opportunity to sit and clean her weapons - God alone knew when she'd get the chance to do it again - and to strip off the nic-patch and have a quick smoke. She puffed dense clouds of blue smoke as she field-stripped the MP-5 conversion and gave it a thorough cleaning. She grabbed another thumper from stores and made sure she was well stocked with ammunition and concussion grenades. Her hole-gun, a 10mm caseless pistol, hadn't even been fired.

Nikki tossed away her cigarette and applied a fresh patch on her upper arm as she heard the five-blade vibration approaching. The *Pelicans* were inbound.

She slapped the firing pin into the chamber of her weapon and closed the watertight seal. "Saddle up, Strike Delta," she commanded over the headset. "Our birds are inbound. Keep your eyes open."

The seaborne helicopters, holding the rest of Bravo Team, landed and disgorged their troops. Bravo had suited up for the air-drop while they refueled at the rescue station, so for them it was a simple transfer instead of the bedlam of resupply the rest of them had gone through.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," Steph said over the public net. "Mount up, ladies. We're sitting ducks."

They found their assignments quickly and filed in, wearing 'chutes and field pack. Several of the regulars who weren't in the Strike Forces were in full ceramite field armor and were carrying over-under assault rifles. Nikki hoped the loss of speed wouldn't hinder the mission too badly, but it wasn't her call.

Nikki, as top sergeant and jumpmaster for the *Iroquois* transport she and Strike Delta were riding, was the last one in, ushering each woman into the transport with a gentle hand on the shoulder and a short encouragement. She grabbed the railing and was about to lever herself into the cramped interior when a soft hand stopped her.

She turned to face Steph. The Major looked radiant if sweaty and tired. Her lips met Nikki's in the briefest of kisses, and then was gone. Nikki loaded onto the chopper with an ear-to-ear gratified smile as she watched her lover and CO trot across the field to her transport. Then all was lost in the churning dust and the whine of the turbines.

* * * * *

The in-air briefing was short and to the point - their satellite intel had gunships and fighters inbound to their positions in only a few minutes and there had already been a few near misses from SAM sites below. Jenny's voice came over the public net as the screaming jetcopters cut a path through the cool autumn air.

"All squads, get ready for drop," Jenny commanded. "And if you're the religious type, you might want to add a prayer or two for our two gunship crews who have to be bait."

"You've all had it easy up until now," the Colonel continued. "We've been moving too fast for anybody to mount any kind of counterassault against us. But we're about to airdrop and then dig in, and the real fighting is going to start. This is the real ground-pounder shit here, ladies, this is what you trained for. Keep your heads, remember your training and kill anything that doesn't have tits. Good luck down there."

Nikki stood. "Rig for drop! We go in ten minutes!"

The women stood and hooked to the runner line, checking over their equipment one last time - during the drop was no time to find out something didn't work. The pilots left their positions and hooked up as well while the AI flew the aircraft.

"Once you're down, find your partner - nobody goes anywhere alone in those woods, roger me? Find your partner immediately and then proceed to your designated rendezvous point with all speed. We don't have time to waste down there, ladies. Try to leave any fighting for the Strike Forces to mop up. It's more important that you reach your rendezvous."

The jump door in the back of the helicopter yawned open, filling the troop compartment with a howling wind. Nikki paused with her hand over the green-light button and gave voice to long-standing tradition as she watched the treetops shriek by beneath them.

"Ladies, you're about to jump out of a perfectly good helicopter!" she hollered. "How does that make you feel?" She stabbed the green-light button as the women cried loudly, charging the door and leaping into the howling wind.

* * * * *

Nikki didn't think to remember until the ground was speeding towards her that she'd never made a high-speed airdrop into a hostile LZ in three-inch heels before. The lingering bruises on her nicely-padded derrière would be a testament to future practice for days to come. But she thrashed her way to her feet and out of the risers which threatened to pin her arms to her sides in record time, bringing her weapon up and moving quickly, zigzagging erratically to avoid any enemy fire on her way to the trees.

Others were falling gracelessly to the turf around her in a bizarre rainshower, also realizing that airdrops in heels were probably not the best-advised procedure in this particular situation. Nikki brought her squad together as she passed them, tapping Renée, Josie, Taylor, Michelle and Alanna as she passed on her way to cover.

No one would ever have known there were several highly-trained squads of deliciously-curved female soldiers dropped into the region five minutes later. All the chutes had been dragged into the woods and concealed and now they just waited until the gunships - their sacrificial lambs in this endeavor - went up in huge fireballs in the sky and then the mechanized infantry moved in to look for them.

With their characteristic whine and scream, the two gunships howled by overhead, jinking and dodging crazily to keep the on-the-ground radars from acquiring them. But as good as the two pilots were, no one alive could outguess the combat computers on the ground and soon fiery lances streaked up from over the hills towards them at unimaginable speeds. ECM and chaff dispersed the first salvo, buying the ground teams a little more time to dig in, but the second salvo from Fort Liebman found both helicopters and they erupted into oddly beautiful, gentle

rains of burning debris. Susan Keith, the first of the two pilots, popped silk and drifted gently into the trees. No chute popped from the other explosion to mark Bonnie Taylor's descent.

"Oh, God," Taylor Tsang breathed, covering her eyes. "She was in my unit."

Nikki put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, trying to find something to say that wouldn't sound contrived or silly. She could come up with nothing.

"You okay, soldier?" she said after a moment.

"No," Taylor said. "I'm pissed as hell. I knew her. She was a friend."

"Save it up," Nikki advised. "Keep it inside, then let it out on the fuckers who deserve it."

Taylor's almond eyes were hard and tearless when she looked up. Her girlish, birdlike features were set in a blank, resolved mask. "Right."

"On your feet, ladies," Nikki said, trying not to think about all the times her drill instructor had barked that to Nick Callahan's training platoon in Basic Training. If that sonofabitch had only known.

"Delta One, this is Bluejay," the forward observer, a cute little Korean girl with bee-stung lips and an adorable smile, buzzed in. "I have four - repeat, four - inbounds bearing oh-two-five from the LZ. *Schwarzkopfs* with dismounted infantry. They're moving fast, boss. Give 'em two, three minutes tops."

"Roger that," Nikki said, then thumbed her mike over to the combat frequency.

"Bravo Team, this is Delta Leader. Look sharp, they're coming in. And remember, we need those rides, girls. Shoot the meat, not the metal," she said tightly.

Michelle Halifax, the only one of them with any mechanized infantry experience, looked askance at the Strike Force commander and raised her arched eyebrows questioningly. "You ever fight armored personnel carriers, before, Top?"

"I read a lot of books about it," Nikki confessed.

Michelle grinned mirthlessly. "Then you're in for a real treat."

The *Schwarzkopfs* moved through the trees like stampeding rhinos, knocking over anything they couldn't go around and kicking up huge clouds of dirt, smoke and leaves in their wakes. The soldiers attached to the units were double-timing it in front, in a distended wedge formation.

The sexy redhead that sprung up from the leaves in front of them was like a wet dream come alive, straight out of a skin mag centerfold. That was enough to bring the footsoldiers up short.

The MP-5 submachine gun she opened up with was enough to drop them to the deck.

* * * * *

Taylor raised red-rimmed eyes up from the corpse on the narrow deck in the crew compartment of the *Schwarzkopf* Infantry Fighting Vehicle, pulling a blanket over the beautiful face of Josie Madding. The heavy weapons expert had gone out fighting, singlehandedly pinning down a squad of infantry in a little clearing until support arrived. She'd never reported that she'd been hit seven times when she called for help, just held her position.

Nikki closed her eyes, fighting back a surge of decidedly feminine emotion. The feminine programming was starting to really affect her - affect them all, she imagined. The raw emotions of losing friends in the field was infinitely more difficult to suppress than it had been when she was a man. Nikki began to realize why women opted out of front-line military service, even when they'd had the right to enlist. It was just too hard to say goodbye so damned *fast*. Add to the raw, choking emotions her clawing desire for a cigarette and the maddening, squirming itch in the pussy and it totaled up to one seriously substandard soldier. Even in the midst of all the grief, Nikki couldn't completely edit out the delicious way Josie's tits had jiggled when she'd fired that oversized machine gun she carried.

"We roll on," she said, sniffing hard. "We have to grieve for her later. You did everything you could, Taylor. I know you did. No guilt."

Taylor sniffed as well, trying not to sob. "No guilt."

Renée Wallace, the petite demolitions expert, helped Taylor in pushing the corpse of the chesty grenadier against the covered body of their other casualty, Michelle Halifax. Her beautiful face - one Nikki would never forget - was not so beautiful anymore since the commander of the track they now sat in had opened up point-blank with a sidearm as Michelle had tried to capture the track. She'd had no way of knowing that the gas grenade she'd tossed into the crew compartment hadn't gone off. It was one of those horrible accidents that happened in war. Nikki tried to steel herself.

It was enough that they would forever miss Michelle's laugh and her dazzling smile, but they would also miss her being the only member of the squad who had the faintest idea how to drive the goddamned tracked beast. Alanna Lucas, the peppy redhead SigInt specialist in their squad was in the forward compartment, trying her best to guide the thing through the trees. The indelicate grinding sounds from the vehicle's transmission and the decidedly unladylike curses filtering from the command compartment were all the indication of the luck she was having.

Nikki levered herself up into the turret - which was obviously *not* designed with a 36D anatomy in mind, she realized painfully - and into the commander's position. Night-vision displays and gunnery data blinked to life at a keystroke as Nikki patched her tac radio headset into the vehicle's communications package.

"Bravo Team, this is Delta Leader. Track is secure. Report," she said, trying to keep the emotional quaver out of her voice.

"This is Golf Leader," Jeri Kay chimed in, her own voice a little rich with controlled emotion. "We have a few casualties -" a long pause and a sniffle "- but our track is secure."

"Echo Leader, secure," Dawn reported. "Some of my girls are helping Charlotte and the rest of Foxtrot secure their track. Shouldn't be long, boss - about two minutes."

"Roger," Nikki said. "Good to hear you girls out there."

"You too, Red," Jeri Kay said. "It's kinda rough out here, y'know?"

Nikki held her breath and tried not to cry. "Roger that. Turns out I'm a little girly for this line of work."

"Just take care of yourself, sweetheart," Dawn said. "Charlotte is in. Give her a few seconds - oh, wait. She's waving. Foxtrot has secured their track."

"Get her keyed into communications," Nikki said. "I count about seven clicks to Fort Liebman's front door. Standard procedure is going to put that live platoon of tanks out front about a klick and a half, maybe two, hull down in a standard vee formation."

"That's the party line, yeah," Charlotte piped in, finally on the radio.

"How you doing, Foxtrot Lead?" Jeri Kay asked.

Charlotte's normally peppy voice was flat. "I don't wanna talk about it right now, J.K., all right?"

"I know, honey," Nikki said. "We lost some too. I need y'all to give me about ten minutes to get into position, then do a pass-by. Plink at 'em in front, get them to start the engines so those armored exhaust plates lift. Just don't let them shoot at you. I'll sneak in behind 'em and put some of these wire-guided jobs right up their asses."

"Don't miss," Dawn said.

"Do I ever?" Nikki said. "Listen, we have about seven minutes before we're in position. I estimate that to be just enough time for a cigarette. Delta Lead, out."

* * * * *

Several kilometers away, at the harbor's Transportation Facility, Major Stephanie Quentin paced nervously, long-nailed hands clasped behind her back as she puffed expansive clouds of blue smoke into the air behind her as she walked. Outside, the nearly constant swish and thump of the anti-air emplacements broke the silence of the waterfront and the night was lit up by bright fireworks of burning wreckage that painted the interior of the command bunker with eerie, flickering shadows. Stephanie jumped and stared out the window every time a Surface-to-Air Missile found a target in the air over their heads, then continued her agitated pacing. Colonel Jenny Nicholson finally grabbed her arm and spun the buxom major to face her.

"Steph. Quit. They're fine. They're good soldiers." Jenny said firmly.

"It never used to be like this," Stephanie said. "I never used to worry like this."

"They know their jobs, honey," Jenny whispered. "They're the best I've ever seen."

"Yeah, but, I've never been in love with one of them before," Stephanie said.

"Neither have I," Jenny said. "But you making yourself sick isn't going to help Nikki out there. You have to do your job so she can do hers."

Major Erin Moore cleared her throat loudly to get attention, her pretty china-doll face a little abashed at interrupting what was obviously a very private conversation.

"What you got for me, Major?" Stephanie said, trying to brighten up.

"Radar paints twenty helos just lifting off from the capitol," Erin said. "Lotsa close air cover, too. Gotta be the Council, heading to Liebman."

"Nikki better paste those *Eisenhowers* quick before they put all their tracks in the field," Jenny said.

"Want me to get word to her?" Erin asked.

"Negative," Stephanie said, giving her lover and commanding officer's hand a fond squeeze. "Nikki knows her job. Just let us know the minute they report in. As soon as those *Ikes* are scrapped, we need to be in the air."

"Roger that, ma'am," Erin said. "Anything else?"

"Is this placed rigged to blow yet?" Jenny asked.

"Sky high, ma'am," Erin said. "Just needs you to click the button."

"Thanks," Jenny said. "That'll be all, Major."

Erin saluted crisply and left the room, proving she was an excellent officer by pointedly ignoring the passionate kiss between her superior officers behind her.

* * * * *

Nikki poked her head cautiously out of the top hatch of the *Schwarzkopf*, trying not to cough violently at the stench of burned propellant from the wire-guided antitank missiles from the boxy launcher just behind her head. The burning wreckage of the four *Ikes* in front of her lit the falling night with a strange dance of macabre shadows. She even felt remorse for the three-man crews in those tanks and wondered if her tearing eyes were just from the clouds of cordite which wreathed the top of her track. God, was there no end to this? Did all of her soldier's sensibilities go out the window when she'd made the transition from man to woman? The military was all she'd ever known. Was that taken away too, along with her testicles and her body hair?

Behind her, the three other *Schwarzies* finished off the parked tanks in the open lot behind her as the 30mm antipersonnel cannons kept resistance's heads down. Nikki barked down into the driver's compartment.

"Lanna! Get us away from the perimeter! We're sitting ducks out here!"

"If I can find reverse," Alanna growled. There was a nasty grinding sound and the track lurched backwards, making Nikki clip her chin painfully against the rim of the hatch. The tracks threw up thick clods of loamy turf before it stalled. Alanna swore loudly below and restarted the big gas turbine engine.

The *Schwarzie* rumbled to life and made a much smoother pull into reverse.

"Fuckin' A!" Alanna crowed. "I think I'm getting the hang of this!"

Nikki paused, taking a grip and looking at her difficult choice. She could let that comment do what it was supposed to do, let it appeal to her as a soldier, or she could let it lead her down into the mire of sorrow and loss which came from missing her teammate Michelle Halifax, the soldier-woman who should have been driving the vehicle.

She decided on the only course that could keep her sane and keep her fighting. She laughed.

They were ahead of schedule - amazingly enough - having disabled Fort Liebman's air defenses and armor and using conservative bursts of the 30mm cannons to keep infantry's heads down. They kept a shifting, rotating formation, keeping on the move to keep any antitank gunners in the base's perimeter from drawing a bead on them. Intel suggested that they only had about ten more minutes before the woods around them were alive with air assault infantry and air cover, five-hundred pound laser-guided munitions dropping and artillery inbound wherever they went, and sooner or later their IFV was going to go dry of gas and ammunition and they'd be out in the open, on foot.

Nikki wasn't sure, but hoped that her fervent prayers could coax a little more speed out of the helicopters which were bringing Alpha Team.

"Hey, look! I voted for that guy!" Renée called from the targeting station for the antitank missiles. Nikki traversed her own periscope for a look. On the tarmac, battle-harnessed soldiers were ushering men in very expensive suits with press secretaries and aides into the entrance to an underground bunker.

"That's our cue, ladies," Nikki said, opening her comm channel. "Delta Leader to Bravo Team. Looks like our gophers are going down the hole. Troops are moving to cover the elevator, verify."

"I see 'em," Dawn chimed in. "Shit, that's a lot of guns."

"Wait for them to get into position, then blow the front gate," Nikki said. "We'll go in and secure the landing field for Alpha Team. Charlotte, take your team and secure the Environmental Control station."

"Roger that," Charlotte said. "We actually pulled this off."

"I don't hear a fat lady singing," Nikki cautioned. "Where the fuck is Alpha Team?"

"Last report had them eight minutes out," Dawn said.

"I just wish I knew where they were," Nikki said.

"Jenny and Steph are fine, Nikki," Jeri Kay told her comfortingly. "You'll see."

Damned if she didn't almost cry again. Nikki covered her emotion by fumbling in one of her bellows pockets for a cigarette. The only decent part of the mission so far was the time in the IFV, since she could take off the damned patch and smoke to her heart's content. The dense clouds of blue smoke below testified that Alanna, Renée and Taylor were doing the same thing.

"Eight minutes. A lot can happen in eight minutes," she whispered.

"This is Echo Leader," Dawn reported. "I'm blowing the gate."

Nikki's "roger" was lost in a hollow boom in the woods to her left, closer to the main road. Using the toe of her boot, Nikki prodded Alanna in the driver's position gently between the shoulderblades.

"Let's go, honey," she said softly. "We're on the home stretch."

The *Schwarzie* lurched drunkenly in a hellish grinding of gears.

* * * * *

Bravo Team had secured the entire surface base by the time Alpha Team thundered over the horizon and onto the tarmac. The IFVs served their final purpose of the day by providing cover to Alanna and the other technical specialists who were working feverishly to get the air defenses back online. The leggy redhead, pleased to be back among her wires and circuits and out of that driver's compartment, reported two minutes to a go-live for the weapons. Intel told them that the main force of resistance - the 23rd Air Cavalry - would be on top of them in six. They'd timed it down to the wire.

Jenny and Stephanie sandwiched Nikki in a huge three-way hug as soon as their feet hit the tarmac, but the pressing business of the mission was still palpable in the air around them. Nikki broke the hug first - adamant about being a soldier until it was safe not to - and barked at a leggy blonde catwalk model of a private named Lisa Saunderson to double-time it getting the Senotrex knockout gas into the Environmental Control shed. The private gave her a sharp salute and fell to, grabbing others to expedite the order.

Girl's got command potential, Nikki catalogued automatically. Some parts of being a soldier would never leave her, she decided. She took Jenny's hand in her own and led the two senior officers across the tarmac and into a fortified position directly across from the entrance to the bunker, next to the administrative offices.

Erin was already there, bouncing like a girl on Christmas morning among all the high-tech gadgets and gizmos that filled the command area and made her life worthwhile. From the prominence of her nipples tenting out the front of her heatweave suit, Nikki suspected that the gizmos excited her on a much more than intellectual level. She popped a happy salute to Jenny and Steph as they entered.

"Task Forces India and Hotel report that minefields and air defenses are online and operational," she said. "The strike forces got a head start on the air defenses. Kelli and Brandi both say to say thanks, Nikki."

"No problem," the sergeant said, lighting a cigarette.

"Dawn, Charlotte and Jeri Kay have the gas going into the bunker area. They're requesting women from ground crews to help them carry the nappy-time soldiers out of harm's way, ma'am," Erin went on.

"Pull them off once the choppers are secure," Stephanie said.

"All due respect, ma'am," Nikki jumped in, "but can we get a message out to the Air Cav *en route*? Let 'em know that the minefields and air defenses are hot? Enough people have died today, don'tcha think?"

"Roger that," Stephanie said. "Erin, send it."

"On it," Erin said, turning back to her console. "We'll have comsat uplink in thirty seconds."

"You okay, baby doll?" Jenny asked Nikki, using her fond pet-name for the capable Top Sergeant.

"Roger that," Nikki said. "Begging the Colonel's pardon, ma'am, but right now I need to be a soldier down to my toenails, ma'am. It's the only thing keeping me together."

Jenny searched her lover's eyes and nodded gravely. "Of course. Anything else, Sergeant?"

"No, ma'am. My team's out, establishing the perimeter. Permission to send my medic in to the evac center and rejoin my troops, ma'am?" Nikki asked with a sharp salute.

Jenny returned her lover's salute. "Go on. Dismissed."

Steph looked at her lover's retreating back appraisingly. "I didn't think I could love her any more than I already did, did you?"

Jenny sighed and smiled. "Nope. Or you, either."

* * * * *

"Internal link in five seconds, ma'am," Erin reported.

Jenny straightened her dress uniform and patted her hair one last time. She'd taken most of her five minutes' lead time to wash her face and throw on some quick makeup so she'd at least look presentable. Her blue beret - symbol of Sylvia Gimmel's special forces - was at just the right tilt and she would have flown past even the tightest-assed Drill Instructor's inspection.

The screens in front of her lit up, showing a boardroom of plush leather swivel chairs and rosewood table and paneling polished till it glowed all on its own. The seventeen members of the Executive Council of the Government sat around it, facing the monitor with Jenny's image, flanked by aides and advisors. Jenny was glad for the rock-solid comfort of Erin and Stephanie, also spit-shined and turned out for this meeting.

The Chairman, a white-haired lifelong politician named Gregory Kincaid, stood smartly and faced her with trepidation, but no fear. "Who am I speaking to?" he came just short of demanding. He was more than a canny enough politician to know who held all the cards in this scenario.

"Mr. Chairman. I am Colonel Jennifer Nicholson of the 179th Intelligence Battalion out of Fort Compton. My Executive Officer, Major Stephanie Quentin and my Intelligence Officer, Major Erin Moore. We're Government soldiers, sir."

"Forgive me if I find that hard to believe, young woman," the Chairman said.

"Understandable, sir," Jenny replied. "You may want to sit down, sir. We have a hell of a story to tell you."

"Pardon my misgivings, Colonel," the Chairman said, more than wise enough to respect her rank even if he didn't believe it. "But might I ask what this little altercation is regarding?"

"Just a few small changes to the laws around here, sir," Jenny said. "You see, we're soldiers. Damn good ones, if today was any indication to you at all. We've been away for a while, but we're home. And we don't intend to stop being soldiers and settle for being meek little housewives or humping our brains out in Population Control, if you'll pardon my language, sir. But you and your Council have made a few laws that make that difficult for us, and we intend to see those changed."

"You intend to hold the whole government hostage?" one of the Councilmen asked, disbelievingly.

"That's pretty much the idea, sir," Jenny confirmed.

* * * * *

"So that's pretty much it," Nikki said, wrapped in a cashmere coat against the chill. Gimmel's dictates couldn't keep her away from tight and revealing clothing, and her miniskirt and hose just didn't do it against the bitter wind whipping over the hills in the National Cemetery.

Nikki played with the buttons of her coat, her long strawberry-blonde hair whipping in the wind behind her. "Any job for any woman. No forced Population Control, only by voluntary basis and with the partner of your choice. Equal pay for equal work, too - they couldn't even get that accomplished back during the days of the Democracy. So I guess it was all worth it."

The graves of PFC Josie Madding and Michelle Halifax had no answer for her.

"So, anyway, me and Stephanie and Jenny are getting married soon," Nikki told them. "We found a progressive judge who's willing to do that for us. Steph met this really great guy in the 82nd and she got a permit to have a child by him. We're gonna raise it. Dunno how I'm gonna do as a mommy, and the new job is a little crazy right now, but we figured hey - why the fuck not, y'know?"

"I miss you two," Nikki said sadly. "But at least I don't bawl every time I think of you these days. Just miss you. Wish you could be around, maybe see the kid when he's born."

She wiped her nose roughly with a finger, mindless of the scandalously expensive kidskin gloves she was wearing. Very masculine of her, if she had eyes to see it. "So anyway, tell everybody else I said 'hi,' okay? I'll see you around."

Nikki walked away from them, slowly, not turning back. She owed it to them not to turn back around and live in the past - they never would have wanted that for her. Bad enough that her soldiering days were over - she was one of the best there was, and Jenny was already on record saying she'd never quit trying to get her to re-enlist. But circumstances like this, being unprepared for a woman's emotions and then ordering brave women in her command to their deaths, it wasn't just something you shrugged off. It was a life-changer. And when life changed, you only had the one choice if you didn't want to get buried under it.

Roll with it.