

Metamorphosis

By Sazzy

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Disclaimer: This is fan fiction, but some of the characters bear a striking resemblance to those that are copyright of Paramount Pictures. No infringement on their copyright is intended by the author in any way, shape or form - this is just a bit of fun. This story includes an all female relationship, so if you don't like that then look away now.

n.b. This story takes place against a military backdrop. Though I have tried to make those aspects of the story as accurate as possible, I am not an expert on the army and its workings, so please forgive any unintentional mistakes.

CHAPTER 1

Andrea groggily opened her icy blue eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. Her head pounded mercilessly and a wave of nausea swept over her, forcing her to screw her eyes shut again against the harsh lights of the room. She took a few shuddering breaths as her stomach continued to churn. She tried to bring her hand up to massage her temple and found that her arm was secured to the bed she was lying on, along with the rest of her limbs. The attempt to move her arm also brought into painful focus the fact that her whole body seemed to ache from inside, within her muscles and bones.

Where the hell am I? What the hell happened? She thought hazily.

The searing pain in her head made it hard for her to think straight and she lay still for a moment trying to let the sickness in the pit of her stomach subside. Tentatively she opened one eye again, testing out whether it sent her head spinning once more. Heartened that she managed this small task with no side effects this time, she opened the other one, her gaze trying to take in the room she was in. From her prone position she couldn't see much apart from the white ceiling and bright white strip lights that dangled from it. As she tried to twist her body round so she could get a look at the rest of the room a fresh wave of pain shot through her leaving her gasping on her back her eyes tightly shut again.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Think! Think!

She attempted to blot out the pain and recall what had happened prior to waking up there.

We were at the warehouse, that's right. And...yes...we had been surveilling it for a long time. Months? Yes, surveillance for months, and then - things came to a head when D.I. MacKenzie received that tip off. Cowley's men were getting ready to ship out and we had to hurry. We had to up the schedule and get that warrant - quick smart. Not even enough time for proper backup. And then...and then...we had to press gang uniform into helping us out.

Andrea swallowed back another bout of nausea, which came rolling up her throat. She concentrated, as well as she could under the circumstances. She remembered:

We were waiting...Constable Walker was looking at me...apprehensive, looking for reassurance. No doubt he'd heard those rumours about me being the cool, unflappable one in the squad. Of course they were true. Mind you, I'd also heard the rumblings about me being too arrogant for a mere sergeant...

The threads of Andrea's memory were just beyond her reach. She recalled giving Constable Walker her patented 'Trust Me I'm A Senior Officer' reassuring grin, despite feeling uncharacteristically nervous about the mission herself. Considering

her current situation, Andrea supposed that she had been damned right. She'd seen Inspector MacKenzie give them the signal and then...She found it hard to recall the exact details now with the muddled state of her brain. Brief flashes assailed her mind instead.

I was cuffing a prisoner...there was the gas...seeping in from the vents...the others were gagging and coughing...falling to the ground...the doors were locked...there was pain...intense pain in my body...like a fire erupting from within...I couldn't move...I was on the floor...Walker's lifeless face was staring at me...

Her eyes shot open trying to block out the horror of the last image. But it wouldn't go away. The young man who only minutes before had been looking to her for reassurance had been lying on that cold stone floor, blood trickling from his nose, mouth, ears and eyes. Eyes which remained open, staring...She felt fresh bile threatening to explode from her throat and swallowed several times to stop it.

Am I dead too? Is this...hell? she pondered.

She refused to believe that, the pain seemed too real for this to be some afterlife. Though then again she guessed that was the point of hell.

Perhaps she could try calling out to see if anyone came, though the fact that she was secured to the bed didn't suggest whoever was around had kindly intentions. Instead she gritted her teeth and tried moving one of her arms against the restraints again. The pain started almost immediately, a tingling sensation at first building into an unbearable burning in her arm, but she continued pulling at the restraint. Just when she thought she might pass out from the sheer agony of it her arm popped free. She lay back, panting with the exertion as the pain dimmed. Steeling herself she repeated the effort with her other arm.

After taking a few more deep breaths she pushed herself up into a sitting position. Sweat was pouring down her face from the effort of breaking the restraints and she brushed her now matted blond hair from her face and looked around the room. There wasn't much to report. It was sterile, almost like a hospital room, apart from the lack of equipment and windows. There was a single door opposite her, breaking the monotony of the plain white walls. As her eyes came back to the bed they widened in amazement. She stared dumbfounded at the restraints she had managed to break. They were solid steel - steel that was now twisted and broken.

How on earth did I manage that? They aren't real metal, surely?

She gingerly reached out and touched them. They seemed real enough.

Suddenly a piercing pain stabbed through her brain and her hands shot to her temple as she leant forward and let out a small moan.

I have to get out...get out of this place...find some help...

Another sharp pain assaulted her mind and she could no longer think any coherent thoughts. All she knew was the overwhelming desire to run, to get away. Without

even thinking, driven on by adrenaline that was blocking out any other pain she might be experiencing in her body, she wrenched her legs free of the table, the steel that held them buckling too.

The door...run at it...knock it down

Under normal circumstances she would have known that thought was utterly ridiculous but her body seemed to have taken over, since her mind was incapable of functioning properly at this moment. She charged at the door with her shoulder and it crashed to the floor in front of her.

There are people...people in the corridor...they're coming for me...

Instinctively Andrea lashed out at the nearest person. He went flying back down the corridor a good ten feet through the air. The others looked momentarily shocked before converging on her en masse and pouncing on her. She let out an almost feral cry as she flung the potential captors from her one by one, smashing them against the walls. She sprinted down the corridor and skidded round the corner. Three more sets of eyes turned to converge on her. She was about to rush at them when suddenly the pain returned. Only this time it was so much worse, just like back in the warehouse - intense, burning agony. Her limbs seemed to seize up and she crashed to the floor. Breathing heavily and lying immobile on her side, she could see three sets of feet heading her way. She glanced up and saw a pair of blue-grey eyes framed by red hair before the darkness consumed her.

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Andrea wasn't sure how long it was before she came to again, but thankfully the agonising pain in her body seemed to have stopped when she did. She was happy to find she wasn't bound to a table this time, either. Someone had deposited her in a chair, where she sat slumped, her head lolling forwards. She rubbed the back of her neck and blinked a few times, noting that she was wearing a black jumpsuit. She wondered what had happened to her clothes. Focusing ahead of her, she discovered she wasn't alone in the room.

The only furniture, apart from her own seat, was the table directly in front of her. Behind it sat the red-haired woman she had seen briefly in the corridor before she had passed out. She was studying a file before her on the desk, the hair from her neat bob flopping down slightly about her face as she did. Now Andrea got more than just a brief glimpse, she realised the woman wore a military uniform, which she assumed was an army one. On top the woman wore an olive green v-necked jumper, under which there was a collared shirt, starched to within an inch of its life. Around her neck was a dark green tie, with a crest on it. The jumper was topped off with a pair of epaulets on the shoulders, a single crown on each of them. On her bottom half she wore trousers that matched her shirt; the ensemble finished off with a pair of stout, shiny black boots poking out under the table. Andrea wasn't sure what rank the crowns signified, but she was sure she was about to find out as the woman's blue-grey eyes flicked up.

“Ah, you’re awake...Andrea is it?” she asked evenly, taking another glance down at her folder.

Andrea deduced that the file was about her, making her wonder why the military would possess such a thing.

“That’s right,” replied Andrea frostily, “My friends call me Andi, *you* can call me Miss Hallstrom.”

The blue eyes regarding her barely flickered at the open hostility, maintaining an even gaze the whole time. Andrea refused to look away, returning the stare in kind.

“Well, *Miss Hallstrom*,” said the other woman after a few moments of this, “I’m Major Kate Jarvis. *My* friends call me Kate, you can call me Major, or Ma’am at a push.”

“Decided to do away with the restraints this time did you, *Major*,” asked Andrea sarcastically, rubbing her arm where she had been bound before. She took a moment to survey the rest of the room, noting the mirror that took up most of one wall to the side. She wondered who was sitting behind it.

“I’m sorry about that, we weren’t entirely sure what condition you would wake up in,” said the Major.

“I would say I woke up in a pretty poor one,” stated Andrea coolly, “So would you mind telling me what the hell I’m doing here, wherever here is, and what the fuck happened to me?”

The Major sighed and folded the file in front of her closed. Pushing back her chair she walked round to the front of the desk, perching herself on it to look down at Andrea. Andrea thought the positioning was intended to be deliberately intimidating, placing the other woman higher than her. She could now see that the other woman was a good few inches shorter than she was, perhaps somewhere in the region of five foot five, but still managed to exude a sense of power and authority in the way she carried herself. The way her eyes bored into her also told Andrea that this woman wasn’t someone to be messed with. Andrea considered that she could get up too, to continue to play the challenge game, since she would have the height advantage. She decided to concede for the time being, at least until she found out what was going on.

“What exactly do you remember?” asked the Major, her voice still cool and in command.

Andrea was getting an increasingly uneasy feeling about the situation, wondering what the military had to do with police investigations, even ones that went bad. She also thought that she should have been in a hospital, not undergoing a virtual interrogation. She supposed she didn’t have much option but to answer at the moment, though something about the whole situation was raising her hackles.

“Somehow I think you know these details already,” said Andrea, flicking her eyes at the file, “But anyway, it was a raid, we went in and then it all went pear-shaped.” She

took a moment to close her eyes, to try and think, but the rest of her memories were still jumbled. “It was a setup - once we got in there we couldn’t get out. Then gas was flooding in...everyone was collapsing...that’s about it.”

The Major merely nodded, digesting what Andrea told her.

“Are the others here?” asked Andrea, when the Major didn’t offer up anything.

“The others?” enquired the Major, her brows knitting together in confusion.

“My colleagues, at least the ones who survived,” clarified Andrea, thinking of poor Constable Walker.

The Major pursed her lips for a moment before answering. “You were the only survivor.”

“What?” said Andrea in shock, “Inspector MacKenzie, Madison, Humphreys...all...”

“Dead, yes I’m afraid so,” finished the Major for her as Andrea trailed off.

Andrea just stared at her dumbfounded.

“How?” she asked in a small voice, not quite able to comprehend that they were all gone.

“I can’t tell you that right now...”

“Look, will you cut all this secretive bullshit!” cried Andrea suddenly, leaping up from her chair, “I’ve just seen all my colleagues murdered in front of my eyes and quite frankly I’ve had enough of this crap!” she continued, jabbing her finger towards the Major who didn’t flinch in the slightest, “If you’re not going to answer my questions, I’m leaving.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that,” said the Major, reaching out to place a restraining hand on Andrea’s arm

“Oh yeah, and who’s going to stop me?” seethed Andrea, her eyes challenging the Major to be the one.

The Major didn’t have to answer as the door opened to allow two soldiers to enter, both shouldering weapons.

“Am I some sort of prisoner here?” demanded Andrea.

“Not exactly,” disclosed the Major, “But we can’t allow you to leave for now, it’s for your own safety too.”

“My own safety?” scoffed Andrea, “How did you work that one out? This is bollocks!”

Andrea yanked her arm away from the Major's grasp and made for the door, hoping that the guns were more for show than anything. She couldn't quite believe that the British Army were about to shoot her, no matter how much they wanted her to stay put. One of the men stepped across to block her exit.

"I can't let you do that, ma'am," he said seriously, hand still firmly on his rifle.

"Just get out of my way," said Andrea angrily, trying to barge past the shorter man.

He resolutely blocked her way and she felt her anger building.

I've had enough of this! she thought angrily to herself, *If they're not going to help me, I'll get out of here and get some answers myself – I am a bloody detective after all. Who did they think they are, anyway, trying to incarcerate me against my will?*

She made a grab for him, to try and haul him out the way, and she found herself locked in a tussle with him as he tried to hold her at bay.

"Will you please try and calm down," came the Major's voice from behind her.

Something about the tone gave Andrea pause – the other woman had actually sounded concerned, the first flicker of emotion she had detected in the steely voice. She wasn't about to give up now, though, and she finally managed to push the soldier to one side. The other one now grasped her from behind, wrapping his arms around her to pin her arms to her sides. They spiralled across the room and the Major actually had to dodge out of the way as they careened into the table, sending it skidding across the tiled floor.

Andrea twisted her body as they moved across the room so she could use their momentum to drive the man into the wall on the far side. He let out an "oof" as she thumped him into the solid concrete, before pulling back and using her weight to bash him against it again. On the third thump he let go of his grip, tumbling to the floor. She turned her eyes to the rest of the room, the Major staring at her as Andrea stood breathing heavily from the fight with the soldier. Andrea wondered if she was going to try and stop her too.

Before she could find out, the pain was back, burning inside her. Andrea staggered, grabbing onto the table to try and support herself as it stabbed through her limbs. She tipped back her head and let out a cry as another fiery burst rocked through her, clenching her fingers on the table edge. Her eyes fell on her hand, and she could see that her fingers had driven straight into the table's metal surface, leaving four indentations. She glanced up in confusion, seeing the Major still watching her with...*what? A look of concern? Sympathy?* Then another wave hit, and Andrea crashed to the ground, happy to let the darkness in once more.

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Andrea opened her eyes, and thought that waking up in strange places seemed to be becoming a bit of a habit.

Of course it had happened to her before a few times, she considered, but in all the previous cases there had been drink involved. Now she just felt like she had the hangover, without the pleasure that came before it. At least the burning within her body had subsided again.

Looking around, she saw that she was on a bed in what appeared to be a medical bay. There were various monitors and equipment round the room, along with other medical paraphernalia. It all looked very sophisticated and sterile, not your typical NHS ^[1] hospital, she considered. There were also a couple of other empty beds, besides the one she occupied. As with all the other rooms she had been in since the accident, there were no windows.

A beeping at her bedside made her realise that she herself was hooked up to one of the monitors. Her fingers felt out some sensor pads attached to her forehead, and she immediately peeled them off. The monitor started going crazy, emitting a high-pitched whine. The noise quickly attracted attention - a man in a white coat dashing over to her bedside. The balding man let out a sigh as he realised the cause of the alarm.

“Are you trying to give me a heart-attack?” he asked, pushing his metal-rimmed glasses back on his nose and attempting to give her a stern look. She could tell he wasn’t practised in the art.

“I just don’t like being hooked up to things I don’t know about,” she informed him.

“We were only checking you were ok,” he said, rolling his eyes, and reaching over to take the sensors from her hands, “I think we can assume you are, though.”

“So I can go then?” she asked, sitting up and swinging her legs over the side of the bed to rest on the floor. Since it didn’t seem there were any army personnel about, it struck her as the perfect opportunity to make good her escape.

“Woah, hold on a minute!” he said, holding up a hand, “You’re ok, for now, but we need to find out what’s causing those seizures, unless you want to keep having them?”

“I guess not,” she reluctantly conceded, “So you’re a doctor are you?”

“Was it the white coat that gave it away?” he asked cheerily, “Or maybe my sparkling bedside manner?”

“The white coat, definitely,” she replied, “And the name badge.”

“Ah,” he said, looking down at the badge on his coat that displayed his picture and name, “Indeed.”

“So, Dr Whitman,” she said, having read the name, though noting that the badge didn’t give any indication as to the facility he was attached to, “Maybe you can give me some answers.”

“Answers?” he queried.

“Well, no one seems to be terribly forthcoming about what’s happened to me and what I’m doing here,” she explained.

“Well...er...I’d love to....” he began apologetically.

“But you can’t, right?” she finished for him.

“Sorry,” he said, with a shrug, “I think we’d better wait for Major Jarvis.”

As if on cue, the doors to the sickbay swished open and the Major strode confidently in. Andrea got a brief glimpse of a couple of soldiers stationed outside the doors before they shut behind her again.

“Speak of the devil,” muttered Andrea under her breath as the Major walked over to them. The doctor shot her a quick look, having caught the words, before he turned to face the Major who stood expectantly before him.

“Report!” she ordered briskly, standing to attention and fixing her gaze on him.

“She’s fine...for now,” he informed her. Andrea thought there was more he wanted to say, but quite possibly not in her presence.

“I can have a word with her then?” asked the Major.

“Yes, but please try not to antagonise her again,” said the doctor with a slight tone of admonishment. Andrea could tell the Major didn’t like it from the steely look in her eye, and the doctor quickly excused himself, no doubt wanting to get away from the imposing stare.

The stare now switched to Andrea. “How are you feeling, Miss Hallstrom?”

The question surprised her - she had been expecting more cold evasion. She thought the Major almost carried off the attempt at concern, but the question was just a touch too forced in its politeness.

“Fine, thank you, Major,” replied Andrea evenly.

“Good,” nodded the Major, pausing as if deliberating whether to continue.

“You have something to tell me at last?” prompted Andrea.

“Yes,” confirmed the Major, “Though I need you to sign something before we go any further,” she added, handing Andrea a sheet of paper.

“The Official Secrets’ Act?” asked Andrea, glancing down at it.

“Yes,” confirmed the Major, offering Andrea a pen, “You need to sign it before I can tell you anything about where you are or what happened. And anything I do tell you

is top secret and not to be disclosed to anyone in the outside world, is that understood?"

"Perfectly," said Andrea, taking the pen and scrawling her signature on the document. She wondered what she had stumbled onto that revolved around secret army bases.

"Thank you," said the Major, taking the signed document, and filing it away in a leather document holder.

Andrea was surprised again when the Major then proceeded to sit down on the bed next to her, though she did leave a couple of feet between them.

"This is probably going to be quite hard for you to comprehend or believe," began the Major, slowly, turning her eyes to Andrea, "But I need you to hear me out, ok?"

"Ok," agreed Andrea warily, "Though I can comprehend quite a lot. You'd be surprised what sort of things a police officer encounters."

"Nothing like this, I can assure you," remarked the Major.

The Major pursed her lips for a moment, searching for a place to start.

"You are at the Intelligence Corp's Superhuman Research Unit," said the Major seriously, leaving no space for doubt that what she was saying was fact, "This base is intended as a place where army and civilian scientists can investigate the occurrence of genetic mutations in the general populace, and the potential for these to be harnessed for the benefit of the country."

"Hold on a minute," interjected Andrea, "Genetic Mutations? Superhuman? You can't mean...?"

The Major simply raised her eyebrows, waiting for Andrea to finish. Andrea frowned in return, thinking she must have misunderstood.

Since Andrea didn't seem to want to voice her suspicions the Major continued on instead, "Yes, I mean people with special abilities, what you might colloquially call 'super powers'"

Andrea laughed. "You have to be kidding!"

The Major merely stared at her unwaveringly.

"You're not kidding?" said Andrea dubiously, taking in the look on the other woman's face, "You're seriously telling me that the British Army has some top secret base where they've got a load of super powered mutants running around?"

"Not a load, we currently have three," the Major informed her, "Four including you."

Andrea's eyes widened. "Me?"

“Yes, Miss Hallstrom, you.”

“This is crazy! I’m not some mutant freak,” cried Andrea, leaping to her feet.

The Major rose from the bed, slowly sucking in her breath as she did, as if to contain what her first reply had been.

“I wouldn’t let the others hear you calling them that,” she said eventually, pinning Andrea in place with her blue-grey eyes.

“Well, they won’t have to, if you just let me out of here,” retorted Andrea, heading for the doors, “I’m not hanging around to be experimented on for the ‘benefit of the country’ - I’m not some bloody guinea pig.”

“Do you really think the ability to rend metal with your bear hands is normal?” the Major called after her, stopping Andrea in her tracks.

She swivelled back round. She had thought that perhaps it was all some delusion or dream, since her memories were rather fragmented, but it appeared that it had really happened.

“I don’t have bloody super powers!” she stated adamantly, refusing to accept it. She thought that there had to be some other explanation, something to do with that gas maybe. “This is ridiculous, I’ve never been able to do anything like that before.”

“No,” conceded the Major, dipping her head slightly, “We think you may be a special case.”

“Oh lucky me!” cried Andrea, throwing up her hands in exasperation, “You mean there’s something else as well as being a freak?”

“How many times do I have to say....”

“Look just save it!” snapped Andrea angrily, cutting her off, “Why don’t you give me some more of that whatever it is that stopped the seizures and let me get out of this nuthouse. I do have a life to get back to, you know.”

“I would suggest you try and stay calm...”

“Oh, you would, would you?” replied Andrea sarcastically.

Calm? Calm? She wants me to stay bloody calm? All this bollocks she’s spinning about me being some kind of super-powered mutant weirdo and she wants me to stay calm?

“Maybe I don’t want to stay calm!” she exclaimed, stepping into the Major’s personal space and staring fiercely at her.

She barely registered the movement off to her side, before she felt a sharp jab in her arm. She just had time to give the doctor a surprised look before the sedative took hold.

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Major Kate Jarvis closed the file in front of her and leaned back against her leather chair, letting out a long sigh. Closing her eyes, she ran her fingers through her auburn hair before bringing them down to pinch the bridge of her nose in an attempt to relieve some of the tension in her body. Finding that decidedly ineffectual she loosened her collar, removing the tie from around her neck as she did, and placing it down on her solid wooden desk next to the report. Her jumper quickly followed.

Swivelling her chair around, she got up and crossed her office, undoing her cuffs and rolling up her sleeves slightly as she went. Reaching the cabinet along one wall, she drew out a tumbler and poured herself a good helping of whiskey.

She thought what a long day it had been as she shook her head. She sniffed the glass once to savour the smell of the single malt before taking a good swig, enjoying that slight burning sensation that accompanied its travel down her throat. Taking the glass with her, she made her way over to the window. It was dark out, but she usually found it relaxing to stare off at the stars. Unfortunately, the low clouds in the sky obscured them tonight.

Bloody Scottish weather; it was always either raining or foggy or both.

She took another sip from her glass before turning her mind back to what was bothering her – the difficult Miss Hallstrom. From the moment she had met her, she could tell that the woman was going to be a handful. She just seemed to carry herself with this arrogant attitude the whole time.

And as for those cool, icy blue eyes...

Kate shook her head again; she knew she had a reputation for her deathly stares, but she thought the other woman could possibly outdo even her.

Kate wondered if that was part of the problem - that she was seeing it as a kind of personal contest, and she supposed she ought to try and rein in her own urge to meet the challenge. It was quite possible that Miss Hallstrom was doing it deliberately, just to get a rise out of her. The woman certainly seemed to have a knack for rubbing people up the wrong way, if what Kate had read was anything to go by.

She guessed there was always the possibility that the attitude was all part of some defence mechanism. She had to try and remember that this would all be pretty unbelievable and unsettling for the younger woman, not to mention the trauma of what she had seen.

Rubbing the back of her neck, she pondered over whether the headstrong woman would ever fit in at the unit; manage to cope with the strict regime. Somehow she

thought it was going to be one hell of a battle. A knock at the door prevented her from deliberating it further.

“Come in,” she called, turning away from the window.

The door was opened by Dr Theodore Todd, the chief scientist on the base. He was an incredibly intelligent, if somewhat serious man, and Kate knew he could always be relied upon for an objective assessment of any situation.

“Ah, Theo,” she said in greeting, moving back over to her desk to pick up the Hallstrom file, “I presume you’ve heard about our new recruit then?” she added, sliding it across to him as he took the seat on the other side. She continued to stand, feeling the need to pace across the carpet.

“Doc did mention it yes,” he confirmed, picking up the folder, and starting to leaf through it, “Along with a mention of a slight...attitude problem.”

Kate laughed. “If you call a chip on her shoulder the size of Wales a slight problem, then yes.”

Theodore continued to read, raising an eyebrow every now and then at the contents of the file.

“I’m just not sure she’s going to fit in around here,” remarked Kate, continuing her travels around the room.

“You’ve faced challenges before,” he said, glancing up, “Just look at what you’ve managed with Tardelli.”

“Indeed,” she agreed, “But something tells me our Miss Hallstrom is going to be a whole different prospect.”

“You think she’s going to be trouble?”

“Not necessarily, though she certainly is antagonistic,” she admitted, “But it’s not just that. I can’t quite put my finger on it, there’s a lot more going on under the surface I think, there’s just something else about her...”

“Her arrogant disregard for authority’ maybe?” suggested Theo, quoting from the report in his hands, “Or perhaps her ‘forthright, sometimes abrasive expression of opinion’”

Kate stopped her pacing and let out a rueful laugh, “It does make interesting reading doesn’t it,” she noted.

“Scary more like,” he commented, “I’m surprised she didn’t get sacked from the police force a long time ago.”

“You obviously haven’t got to the bits about how, despite all that, she was brilliant at her job, brilliant in general,” she ventured.

“Brilliant? A police officer? Are you sure?” he asked doubtfully.

“She got a first in Biochemistry from Oxford,” revealed Kate, “Was top of her class apparently.”

“She was?” he asked in amazement, quickly flicking through the pages to try and find proof, “What on earth is someone like that doing as a police officer?”

“Good question,” she noted, “Unfortunately the file doesn’t disclose that.”

“So it seems there is more to our new girl than meets the eye,” he ventured, closing the file in his lap for the time being and turning his full attention to her.

“Indeed it does,” she agreed, “Did Doc also tell you about the problems she’s having?”

“Yes, it’s an unfortunate side effect of her particular mutation I think. We’ll need to analyse it further to be sure.”

“Let’s just hope she’s willing,” muttered Kate.

“You don’t think she’ll want to stay?”

“Oh, I *know* she doesn’t want to stay,” declared Kate, “Unfortunately letting her loose is not an option at this moment in time.”

“Have you fitted her with a tracker then, just in case she does get any ideas about leaving?” he asked.

“Yes, I got Doc to do it while she was unconscious,” she confirmed, “Anyway, it’s late, I think it’s time to try and get some sleep and then take a fresh look at our new ‘problem’ tomorrow.”

After Theo had left, Kate quickly drained the last of her whiskey. She sincerely did want to help Miss Hallstrom, she just hoped that it wouldn’t prove as hard going as the first attempts. As she went to turn off the light in her office she had brief thought, wondering why she was quite so determined to help her. Flicking the switch and exiting the room, she dismissed it as being the same way she felt responsible for all the operatives under her command.

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“It will be all right won’t it?” asked Constable Walker nervously.

“Of course, just stick close, you’ll be fine,” replied Andrea reassuringly.

The young man nodded and she turned her attention back to Inspector MacKenzie, watching and waiting for his signal. She crouched down behind the car, and could

feel the sweat starting to prickle on the back of her neck, running on down her back and dampening her shirt where it was pressed tightly to her by her Kevlar vest.

Why was she so anxious? She had been on plenty of raids before, what was telling her something was wrong in this case?

“All set, Sergeant?” asked her senior officer.

“Yes, sir, everyone’s in position,” she informed him, taking the quick chance to make sure her blonde hair was tightly secured in its ponytail. She didn’t need her hair getting in the way when trying to arrest someone.

He picked up his radio and barked his order, “This is MacKenzie, go!”

Andrea leapt up from her position, flicking out her Asp baton and closely following the team with the door-rammer. It only took them a couple of strikes to break down the warehouse entrance and they were in. The men inside started running as soon as they spotted the police swarming into the building. Andrea picked a target and gave chase, tackling the man to the floor and pulling out her handcuffs as he protested loudly. She yanked his arms roughly behind his back and attached the cuffs, satisfied to see Walker doing the same to another suspect close by.

A soft hissing noise drew her attention and she looked around for the source of the sound. Her eyes fell upon a vent close to the floor, through which white gas was issuing.

“Sir!” she called over to the Inspector.

“What is it, Sergeant?” he asked, coming to join her, before following her gaze to the vent, “What the hell is that?”

“I don’t know, sir, but I’m guessing it’s not good,” she offered.

“Agreed, let’s fall back,” he said, pulling out his radio to make the order to that effect.

She heard some frantic voices over the radio in response, and watched MacKenzie’s face take on a worried look.

“Some bastard has blocked the exits,” he said, looking around frantically, “There has to be some way out of this place! You look over there,” he ordered, pointing for her to go over to the back of the building.

“Walker, you’re with me,” said Andrea, noting that the Constable was looking decidedly nervous.

They dashed over to the far side, searching all along the wall, looking for any means of escape, but it was hopeless - there was nothing. The gas was now pouring in from a number of locations, and suddenly Walker started coughing at her side.

“Ahhh,” he screamed, “It hurts!”

She turned to look at him, horrified to see him clutching at his head in agony as blood poured from his nose. He doubled over, letting out another gut-wrenching scream, before collapsing onto the stone floor. Casting her eyes round she could see the rest of the team being similarly affected, staggering desperately around in pain or already felled by the gas. Perhaps she could still help Walker, she thought, kneeling down at his side

Then it started. Pain. Pain like nothing else she had ever felt. Pain that felt like it was erupting directly from within her. It arced through her whole body and she screamed at the fire shooting through all her limbs. She slumped onto the stone floor, crying at the agony. She was still conscious, just lying there enduring the ongoing pain. Walker’s eyes were fixed on her, cold...lifeless...

“Wakey, wakey!”

Andrea shot up, the sweat dripping down her face as she realised she was actually in the sickbay at the army base.

“Bad dream was it?”

She turned to face the speaker, taking a moment to compose herself, and fight away the nightmare’s images. It also gave her the opportunity to study whoever it was who had rudely awakened her. The man was another soldier, dressed in his fatigues. She surmised that he was an officer, though, since he had two diamond shaped insignias on the rank slide on his shoulders. He was slightly taller than her and possessed the build of a rugby player, she thought, with broad shoulders and a general sturdy look about him. He had short, dark hair and dark eyes, while his skin had a slight olive shade to it, making her wonder if he was of some sort of Mediterranean heritage.

“You could say that,” she answered, running her hand through her damp hair, considering that she really needed to have a shower, and soon.

“Well, good job I woke you then,” he remarked, “I’m Lieutenant Chadwick, by the way, and you’re wanted by the boss.”

“Can I at least get a change of clothes first?” she asked, pulling at her sweaty jumpsuit, “God knows how long I’ve been lying around in this.”

“I suppose so,” he replied reluctantly, “Doc!”

Once the Lieutenant had informed him of her request, the doctor helpfully fished out some army issue clothes for her from a storage cupboard.

“You’ve not got another sedative secreted away in these have you?” she asked, accepting them from the be-spectacled man.

He looked rather abashed, “Sorry about that,” he said, “It was for your own good though.”

“Really,” she remarked doubtfully, before looking expectantly at the two men, “What, you want me to strip off in front of you?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“It’s not like I haven’t seen it all before,” commented the doctor while the other man merely leered at her.

She shot the doctor a withering look, and he hooked the Lieutenant’s arm and forced him to swing round to give her a modicum of privacy. She peeled off the jumpsuit and pulled on the khaki t-shirt she had been given. It was obviously designed for a man, she realised, since it was rather tight across her ample chest. She pulled up the camouflage combat trousers that went with the t-shirt. It was hardly her choice of fashion, but she supposed that at least it was clean.

“I don’t suppose you have some shoes too?” she asked straightening up, noticing that the Lieutenant was already peering round at her.

I wonder how long he was watching, bloody pervert! she thought, shooting him a filthy look.

“Size?” asked the doctor, rooting through the cupboard contents again.

“Seven,” she replied.

He tossed her a pair of standard black army boots that she yanked on and laced up.

“Right, lead on,” she instructed the Lieutenant.

They exited the sickbay into a non-descript corridor. The walls of the corridor were white, it possessed a bare, stone floor and it was brightly lit. The only other thing of note was that there were a number of cameras dotted at intervals along its length. The lieutenant indicated the direction for her to go, and two other armed soldiers fell in behind them as they made their way along.

“How long was I out?” she asked the officer at her side.

“Nearly a day,” he answered.

“A day? Bloody hell! What day is it now then?” she asked, realising she had no idea how long it had been in between her previous bouts of consciousness.

“It’s Thursday,” he replied.

Wow, this guy is a barrel of laughs! She thought to herself, *I’ve met more responsive planks of wood.*

Given what he had told her, she realised it had only been two days since the raid, since that had been on Tuesday. Assuming that the current Thursday was in the same week!

They entered a lift at the end of the corridor. As the Lieutenant pressed one of the buttons, Andrea noticed that they went from two at the top, through one and ground to six minus numbers. She realised they must have been underground, explaining the lack of windows. On the ride up she had a brief chance to assess her situation, recalling what the Major had been trying to tell her during their previous encounter.

She contemplated that it must all be an elaborate deception to cover up the real truth. Though she also considered they could have come up with something slightly more plausible than all the nonsense about super powers. She surmised that the only way she was going to get out of here and find out what was really going on was to play ball and wait for an opportunity to present itself. Obviously this was a high security facility, so they were hardly likely to let her stroll out the front door even if she could slip her present guard.

As the lift reached the second, and topmost floor, the doors swished open on quite a different vista. Gone were the sterile corridors of the underground. Instead they were in what looked like some kind of modern office building. Along this corridor there was lush blue carpet, plants and pictures hanging on the walls.

She followed the lieutenant down the corridor to the end, where it opened out into a reception area. There was a single man sitting behind a desk, looking for all intents and purposes like a secretary, apart from the fact that he wore an army uniform. Behind him was a large window, giving Andrea a view of the countryside outside – *definitely not London then*. Andrea thought it could have been anywhere, since she couldn't see any prominent landmarks or other buildings, the trees and hills stretching out into the distance. The sun was just lowering behind the hills, meaning it was some time around late afternoon.

The lieutenant guided her over to a dark wooden door that bore a shiny gold placard in the centre with "Major Kate Jarvis" engraved in it. He knocked once and a call came letting him know it was fine to come in. He held the door open for Andrea and she entered the office.

"Thank you, lieutenant," said the Major, looking up from her desk on the far side of the room, "That will be all."

He nodded and closed the door after him as he went, leaving Andrea to cross to the chair in front of the desk on her own. She glanced round the imposingly large office as she went. It was sumptuously decorated, plush deep red carpet, expensive-looking dark wooden furniture. The walls were lined with a number of framed photos of groups of military people, some candid shots, others official regimental pictures with a list of names underneath. There were also what looked like commendations, though Andrea couldn't quite make out the writing on them. And of course there was the obligatory picture of the Queen.

The desk sat just off to the left of centre, with a small window overlooking it. There was a metal filing cabinet pushed up against the wall behind the desk, with a bookcase next to it, displaying an array of weighty tomes.

The large window that occupied much of the right-hand wall lighted the whole room. Underneath it was a comfortable looking couch, with a low coffee table in front of that. Next to the couch was a small wooden cabinet, with a model of a sailboat on top of it. Andrea thought it was slightly out of place in the office of an army officer. Even more incongruous was the sight of a telescope on a stand in the corner, and some framed star charts on the wall by it. The overall impression of the room was of order and neatness, no less imbued by the woman sitting behind the desk in her immaculate uniform. Andrea did note that she looked slightly less formal that day, with the tie and jumper missing from the ensemble, the Major's shirtsleeves rolled up to just above her elbows instead.

The blue-grey eyes regarded her evenly as she approached the desk, revealing little. Andrea was impressed; she usually found it pretty easy to read people, but the Major had a good command mask in place.

"Take a seat, please, Miss Hallstrom," instructed the Major, though her tone was tempered with softness.

Andrea complied, maintaining eye contact the whole time to see if she could get the Major to look away. She didn't.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea, coffee, water?" offered the other woman.

"Water would be fine, thank you," replied Andrea.

The Major crossed over to the small cabinet by the window and Andrea realised it was for drinks as the woman delved in and produced a bottle of water, pouring it into a glass.

"Thank you," said Andrea again as the Major proffered the glass, before sitting back into her high-backed chair.

Andrea sipped at the drink, her throat rather sore and dry. She supposed she hadn't actually consumed anything for two days; no doubt they had been maintaining her on a drip or something. The Major herself drank from a stainless steel mug, Andrea catching the scent of strong coffee emanating from it.

"I think we got off on slightly the wrong foot yesterday," disclosed the Major, placing her drink down on a metal coaster, "Despite what you might think, we really do want to help you."

"By keeping me here against my will?" countered Andrea.

The Major regarded her, her eyes narrowing slightly. Andrea could swear that if a pin dropped at that moment she would have heard it.

"Perhaps I should try and continue my explanation of what this place is and what happened to you, since you didn't give me much chance yesterday," suggested the Major after the pregnant pause.

“As long as you’re not going to start going on about mutations and super powers again,” replied Andrea scathingly.

The Major let out an audible sigh, leaning forward on her desk before speaking. “I know you don’t want to believe it, but it’s the truth.”

Andrea rolled her eyes, leaning back and folding her arms to suggest that she certainly didn’t believe it, not for a second. The Major tapped a few keys on the keyboard to her side and swivelled her flat computer monitor so Andrea could see it as well. Grudgingly Andrea leant forward to look at the screen, which displayed a series of images of her dead colleagues.

“What the fuck are you showing me these for?” said Andrea angrily, glaring at the Major.

“To shock some sense into you perhaps?” offered the Major, “And to make the point that for all intents and purposes you should be dead too.”

Andrea didn’t think much of the Major’s way of making a point.

“Don’t you wonder how you survived?” asked the Major.

“Dumb luck?” suggested Andrea tetchily.

The Major flicked off the monitor, the last image of a dead Inspector MacKenzie disappearing into the ether.

“No, Miss Hallstrom, it was much more than ‘dumb luck’,” answered the Major, “You’re an intelligent woman, so I know you’re going to understand when I explain it to you. You have a special gene in your genetic makeup. In your case this gene was dormant and under normal circumstances you would have lived your life and been none the wiser as to its existence. Unfortunately the gas incident changed all that.”

Andrea listened intently. For some reason the look in the Major’s eyes was telling her that the other woman *was* speaking the truth. She thought it could be something to do with how the Major had also dropped the timbre of her voice ever so slightly to soften it.

“In order to save your life the dormant gene activated,” continued the Major, “In turn activating the special abilities associated with it and preserving your life.”

“So you’re saying I’ve now got super powers?” posited Andrea doubtfully, “I don’t feel much different. What exactly are these powers meant to be then?”

“We know about as much as you do at the moment, which is pretty much nothing,” the Major revealed candidly, “Apart from the shows of enhanced strength you’ve already displayed, we don’t know what you’re capable of without further investigation.”

“Helpful,” noted Andrea sarcastically, “And the seizures?”

“We’re not entirely sure about them either, but we think that since your powers were never meant to be active, your body isn’t adapted to them. You appear to lack the ability to control or switch off your power. In effect whenever you use them they run out of control and cause the muscles of your body to seize up.”

“But I’m all right now then?”

“For the time being, yes. The doctor has given you some strong inhibitor drugs to stop your abilities triggering. That’s one of the reasons we need you to stay here, so we can continue to investigate and monitor your condition.”

“Keep me here like some little rat in a cage you mean?” bit back Andrea, “I am a person, you know, not some sort of commodity to be used for whatever use the government sees fit.”

“We do know that,” replied the Major earnestly, “We are very aware of just how individual all the people here are. We only want to look after you - part of what we do is teach people how to explore their abilities, harness them, control them. We have a team of experienced scientists and doctors all here for your benefit. I can assure you, you won’t receive better care anywhere else.”

Andrea considered her words, reluctantly conceding that the Major was probably right. She didn’t think she would get expert help at any normal hospital.

“So you’re in charge of this place then?” asked Andrea, changing tack.

“That’s right, I’m the senior officer on the base,” confirmed the Major, “In command of the company stationed here.”

“And what exactly did you do wrong to be lumbered with this job?” Andrea asked confrontationally.

She detected the slight tightening around the Major’s eyes, the minor pursing of the lips. It was barely detectable, but there was definitely a story there, thought Andrea.

“We do a lot of good work here,” replied the Major. Andrea recognised the evasive answer, and the way the Major’s voice had once again taken on its hard edge.

“And does anyone ever get to leave?”

“Contrary to what you might think, this is not a prison, it’s a research facility,” stated the Major, “However, I think you’d agree that we can’t just have super powered people wandering around the country unchecked, it’s a threat to national security. Any superhumans we discover are offered two choices – either they can stay here with us, or they can have a special chip implanted and leave. The chip monitors their whereabouts at all times and checks they don’t use their powers in the outside world.”

“Great, give me one of these chips and I’ll get out of here then,” said Andrea.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea in your case.”

“So I am a prisoner?” noted Andrea bitterly.

“If you’d just stop and think for a second,” said the Major, her voice edged with annoyance at Andrea’s persistent obstinacy, “You could have a seizure at any time out there and we wouldn’t be around to help you. You’ve been lucky so far, but the doctor thinks they do have the possibility to be fatal.”

Andrea was stunned. *Fatal? Not only am I a genetic freak, but it could kill me?*

“That’s why we want you to stay, so we can help you,” said the Major.

Andrea narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “And what do you get out of it?”

“Obviously we’re doing research too,” replied the Major, “So we would want you to help us with that.”

“And that’s it?” Andrea asked sceptically, “The army is out here at this top secret base, just carrying out some harmless research for the good of humanity?”

The Major remained silent, her hands neatly folded on the table between them.

“Let me guess, you can’t say anything more?” said Andrea, suspecting that there was much more to this place than what she had been told so far.

The Major dipped her head slightly in acknowledgement.

“What about my real life, my job?” asked Andrea, “People are going to wonder where I am.”

“We can arrange extended sick leave for you.”

“Of course you can,” said Andrea, shaking her head. It seemed she really had entered the world of secrets, where anything could be covered up or arranged, “And my flat, my mortgage, my bills?”

“We’re not on another planet, you know,” said the Major, and Andrea thought she could almost see a slight smile touching the corners of her lips. “You can still talk to people by phone, pay your bills.”

“Just be monitored and watched while I do it, right?” remarked Andrea, “Just to make sure I’m not compromising national security?”

“We do have to be careful,” replied the Major, indirectly answering the question.

“So are we ever actually allowed out, into the real world I mean?”

“It is possible, but let’s take one step at a time, shall we?” replied the Major, leaning across the table once more and fixing her eyes on Andrea again, as if she was about to make an important point, “We have to know we can trust you first.”

“You trust me?” laughed Andrea, “Well, I certainly don’t trust you, so I guess the feeling’s mutual.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment, simply maintaining the gaze across the table, Andrea surprising herself by being the first to look away.

“So, if I do agree to stay and learn how to control my powers,” she said, still finding the concept that she had them somewhat laughable, “So that I’m no longer a danger to anyone, including myself, can I then leave for good, with one of those chips?”

“I don’t think you’ll *want* to do that.”

“But if I do?”

“Then you will be free to go,” agreed the Major.

“Well,” said Andrea, leaning back now that she had got that concession, “I guess I don’t have much choice for the time being do I? It looks like I’m staying...for now.”

“Good,” said the Major, also sitting back in her chair.

“So where do I actually live while I’m here?” asked Andrea, thinking of that shower she desperately wanted.

“Why don’t I show you?” offered the Major, getting up from her chair and gesturing to the door.

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As they silently made their way along the corridors, Andrea wondered if all new recruits got this personal treatment from the Major. Though, since there had only been three others so far, she supposed it was a distinct possibility. They were still on the same floor as the Major’s office, as they came to an area set off from the rest of it by a security door. The Major stepped up, allowing a device to scan the retina of her eye. The computer made some positive sounding beeps and the door slid open.

The area beyond the door seemed much like the one they had just left, apart from the fact that Andrea could hear the strains of rock music wafting down the corridor. She looked quizzically at the Major.

“That will be Mr Parsons,” said the other woman in answer, “Don’t worry, they’ll be plenty of time for introductions to your fellow members of the unit tomorrow.”

They finally came to a door that the Major pushed open.

“After you, Miss Hallstrom,” she offered, holding out her hand.

Andrea walked into what looked remarkably like any other studio flat that she might have come across back in London. It all looked brand new and spotless – there was a large lounge/dining area with immaculate furnishings directly in front of her, a small kitchen behind a counter off to the side, plus a couple of doors leading off to what she could only assume were the bedroom and bathroom. She noted that there was also a large window on the far side, outside of which she could see more countryside in the dusk light. She guessed it probably didn't open, just in case she tried to leg it.

“These are your quarters,” the Major informed her, “You should find everything you need, at least for tonight. We can see about getting some of your own things brought here tomorrow. If you do need anything else then you can call someone on this,” said the Major giving her what looked like a wristwatch. “It's a communicator,” explained the Major as Andrea turned it over in her hand, “We use them to communicate within the confines of the base. Think of it a bit like a mobile phone, just dial the number you want. If you need anything tonight, dial 01, and someone will come to see you.”

“Thanks,” said Andrea, trying to take it all in.

“Well, I'll leave you to it, you'll get a proper briefing tomorrow,” said the Major turning to go, “Goodnight, Miss Hallstrom.”

“Wait,” called Andrea suddenly, stopping the Major before she got to the door. “If I am going to stay here, can we get one thing straight?” she continued as the Major swivelled back round. “The only people who ever called me ‘Miss Hallstrom’ were my teachers when I'd done something naughty. I know I told you to, but it's driving me nuts! Please, call me Andrea.”

The Major smiled, the first time Andrea had seen her do it. “Well, good night, Andrea.”

Andrea watched the door close behind the Major and then promptly smacked herself on the forehead.

“Call me Andrea?” ... “Call me Andrea?” That was smooth! What the fuck was I thinking? Am I trying to ingratiate herself with the ice queen Major or something?

Sighing, she plonked herself down on the large couch in the centre of the room, opposite which sat a massive television, hanging on the wall. She considered that it was actually better than her flat, and a hell of a lot tidier.

She leaned back against the soft cushions, closing her eyes for a moment, trying to process all she'd been exposed to over the last couple of days.

So this is to be my life from now on, is it, poked and prodded like some lab rat? Mind you I could think of worse people to be prodded by than the Major.

She bolted upright wondering where the hell the last thought had come from. Thinking more about it, she supposed the other woman wasn't unattractive - quite the opposite in fact, if she was being honest about it.

Especially those eyes...the way they seem to add a whole other level of communication beyond the verbal...

Andrea mentally shook herself. She was sure the Major knew damn well the power she could command with her looks, in combination with that strong, yet also subtle voice.

The woman was army through and through, however, considered Andrea - she was screaming authority from every pore and Andrea had always had trouble with that particular concept. She was sure Inspector MacKenzie had wanted to bang her head against the wall on more than one occasion. Thinking of him reminded her of why she was there - images of her fallen colleagues swimming to the fore of her mind. She vowed that she would get answers about what had happened at that warehouse. Somewhere out there was the person responsible, and there was no way they were going to get away with it.

She tried to think happier thoughts, bringing to mind an image of MacKenzie when he was alive, though he was giving her another dressing down in the memory she recalled. She guessed people in command just couldn't handle being told when they were wrong, and Andrea had no compunction about doing that. She didn't see the need to pontificate on things - say what you thought and meant, that was her credo. Unfortunately, that didn't always go down too well with others. Somehow, she didn't think it would go down too well with the Major either.

The Major's not my type at all anyway, she thought, before catching herself again - Why does my mind keep wandering off like that? Tiredness, no doubt.

Andrea considered that the other woman was so stiff; you could lay her down and iron your clothes on her. A sudden image of the Major, lying down, flashed to mind, and Andrea quickly shook it away.

How long has it been since Meg? Four months? Five? How time flew when you weren't having fun.

Andrea decided now was probably a good time for that shower, and she wandered off through one of the doors to the side of the main area. She found herself in the bedroom, which was tastefully furnished, like the rest of the quarters, with a large bed dominating the room. There were built in wardrobes along one wall and she pulled open one of the wooden doors. An array of clothes hung, and were neatly folded, inside - all army issue.

Looks like I'll have to get used to greens, browns and khaki! she thought ruefully.

Moving through to the bathroom she noted the large corner bathtub and separate shower cubicle, making her realise that this place was definitely better than her flat. Turning on the shower she started to peel off her t-shirt, before stopping herself. She looked around the room, wondering if there were hidden cameras anywhere. Shaking her head, she continued to disrobe - *I'm getting far too paranoid, but then that's what happens when you get involved in this secret squirrel shit!*

Stepping into the shower, she let the steaming water drum down on her in an attempt to wash away the past two days.

CHAPTER 2

Andrea walked down the corridor, her steps echoing upon the stone floor and reverberating off the plain white walls that seemed to stretch on forever. The only other sound was that of her breathing, ragged and harsh against the silence that pervaded the corridor. She couldn't even remember how long she had been walking, searching for a way out.

She came to a junction and cast her eyes down the right hand branch. It was no different, only more whiteness disappearing into the distance. Turning to the left hand branch Andrea was met by a pair of wildly staring eyes.

"Why did you leave me?" wailed the man in front of her, his voice loud in the otherwise empty corridor.

Andrea stumbled back against the wall in shock.

"Walker? I...I...thought you were dead?" she stammered.

"You left me, why did you leave me?" he moaned again. Andrea could see now that he was deathly white.

A thin trickle of blood started to drip from his nose. It splashed garishly on the floor, a bloom of red against the white monotony.

"You should have stayed with me..."

Andrea turned and ran back the way she had come, the dead man's continued pleas a haunting call after her as she fled down the corridor. Turning a corner she suddenly found herself face to face with him again. She pulled up quickly as he tried to latch onto her, to stop her from running again.

"Why didn't you help me?" he beseeched her.

"I couldn't, there wasn't anything I could do!" she desperately tried to explain, still panting from her frantic run.

"No!" he cried, becoming angry and grabbing onto her arm. "You should have stayed with me!"

"Let go!" Andrea shook him off and turned away.

Only there he was again, right in front of her before she could even take a step. Andrea dodged under his flailing arm and ran, knowing only the overwhelming urge

to get away from him. Her heart was hammering wildly in her chest; the sweat was dripping down her face; she could barely breathe. Yet Andrea knew she had to keep going. Rounding another corner, Andrea didn't notice the lack of floor until it was too late and she was plunging off the drop, landing heavily face-first on the hard stone floor.

It was then that she sensed someone standing in front of her, watching. She started to raise her head...black boots...uniform trousers...

“Oi! Rise and shine!”

Andrea sat up abruptly in bed, trying to shake off the dream and recall where exactly she was. Standing watching her with his dark eyes was a soldier. He waited expectantly with his hands on his hips. *Ah, yes, the army base*, she remembered.

“What time is it, Lieutenant...” she asked, trying to recall his name while she composed herself.

“Chadwick,” he answered, “And it’s 8am.”

“8am?” she cried, a frown furrowing her brow. “Why the hell are you waking me so bloody early?”

He shrugged his shoulders unapologetically. “8am is hardly early for the army. We thought we’d let you have a lie in, actually.”

Andrea pushed her blond hair away from her face and rubbed her eyes. “Lucky me,” she said sarcastically. “I presume, since you’re waiting there, that I have somewhere to be?”

“I’m here to escort you to your briefing,” he informed her.

“Right, well, if you’d just give me a minute,” Andrea said, indicating the door.

She waited for the door to close behind him, before clambering out of bed. Andrea stretched her long limbs to get some life back into them. The Lieutenant seemed to have a nasty habit of waking her in the middle of dreams, she considered, as she opened the wardrobe looking for something to wear. She didn’t know what it was about him, but she didn’t like the man. There was just something creepy about him, beneath the stiff military exterior. It appeared that the concept of privacy was somewhat foreign to him too, since he had just strolled straight into her bedroom in order to wake her. Not to mention the way he had stared at her the day before when she had been dressing.

Peeling off the large t-shirt she had found to sleep in, she put on the army issue clothes she had dug out of the wardrobe. Wearing the semi-uniform reminded her of her early days in the police force when she was a young officer on the beat, before she moved on to bigger and better things with CID ^[2]. That seemed like a whole other lifetime right now.

Once she was dressed, Andrea followed the Lieutenant out of her quarters, noting that it was just the two of them today. The lift deposited them on the fifth underground level, where the doors opened onto the plain surrounds of the subterranean portion of the base. Walking along, she wondered exactly how far the base extended, while at the same time trying to ignore the unwelcome reminder of her earlier dream the featureless corridors elicited.

The Lieutenant finally came to a halt in front of a door marked *SRU Briefing Room 1*. “Here we are,” he said, “Time to meet your fellow freaks.”

Andrea shot him a look, surprised at his terminology, though she herself had used the description the day before. He appeared totally unrepentant at having used the insulting term, and pressed the entry button, allowing the door to slide open.

Inside was something akin to a lecture room, with a series of desks and chairs, leading to a larger desk at the far end. On it sat a projector, while a white board took up the wall behind the desk. Three people sat at the tables in the main part of the room, and they all swivelled round to regard the new entrants.

One of the men leapt up from his seat to come and greet them. “Chad! Nice to see you!” The man’s eyes flicked to Andrea, offering her a wink. “So who’s the new girl?”

Andrea noticed that the Lieutenant looked decidedly annoyed by the way the young man had addressed him, his jaw twitching as he clenched his teeth.

“This is Miss Hallstrom,” the Lieutenant replied frostily.

“Well, pleased to meet you, Miss Hallstrom,” said the other man, in what Andrea had now identified as a strong Manchester accent, “I’m Tom Parsons.”

She took the hand he had offered up. “Andrea.”

As Tom shook her hand enthusiastically, Andrea took a quick moment to study his face. He seemed to be about her age and had an open, friendly expression. He possessed a pair of baby blue eyes and short fair hair. She supposed he would have been considered quite handsome, if she was into that kind of thing.

“And I’m Harry,” said another man, pushing Tom out of the way so he could take her hand instead. “Harry King,” he added with a smile.

He was slightly younger than Tom, perhaps somewhere in his early twenties. His features were quite a contrast to those of the other man; his hair was black and his eyes equally dark. Both men wore clothes similar to her own - variations of casual military wear - though neither displayed any sort of rank anywhere. Andrea assumed they were civilians like her.

The Lieutenant pointed out the final occupant of the room. “And that is Miss Tardelli.”

Andrea looked over to the woman, who had remained seated. She received back an icy stare from a pair of dark eyes. The woman had a latin look about her and, judging by the name, Andrea guessed she was of Italian heritage.

“Don’t worry about Bel,” whispered Tom, leaning over to Andrea, “Believe it or not, that’s her friendly expression.”

Taking in the still challenging look she was receiving, Andrea wondered what the woman might look like when she wasn’t being ‘friendly’.

“So, Chad, what’s the scoop then?” continued Tom, nudging the burly Lieutenant in the arm.

“Would you please refrain from calling me that,” the Lieutenant muttered with obvious annoyance.

Tom wasn’t letting up, though. “Ah, come on, Chad, you know it’s just because we love you.”

“Yeah, Chaddy,” joined in Harry, leaning into the man on the opposite side to Tom, “You’re our pal aren’t you?”

The Lieutenant stepped away from them as if he was worried he was about to catch something. “My *name* is Lieutenant Chadwick.”

“Whatever you say, Chad,” said Tom teasingly, and Andrea noticed that Harry was stifling a laugh behind him. She guessed that winding up the Lieutenant was one of their common activities, though the man was so dour it didn’t seem to be particularly hard to get a rise out of him.

Suddenly the door slid open and Major Jarvis stepped into the room, immaculately turned out in her pressed uniform, complete with dark green jacket.

“Good morning, Major,” chorused Harry and Tom.

Andrea glanced over at them in surprise, noting how they had subconsciously stood to attention in her presence. It seemed she commanded a lot more respect from them than the Lieutenant did.

“Tom, Harry,” acknowledged the Major with a nod, “Andrea,” she added turning her blue-grey eyes in Andrea’s direction.

“Major,” replied Andrea evenly. She supposed she could be civil for now until she discovered what they had in store for her.

The Major made the last of her greetings by calling over to the woman in the chair, “Good morning, Bel.”

“Good morning, Major,” responded the dark woman, with a half-smile.

So she did speak! And smile too! thought Andrea. *Obviously only to selected people, though.*

The Major turned back to Andrea. “I presume Lieutenant Chadwick has made the necessary introductions?”

“We got about as far as names, yes,” replied Andrea.

However, one of the things Andrea really wanted to know was what exactly was superhuman about the people in the room. None of them looked any different to a normal person, though she wasn’t quite sure what she had been expecting – *someone with two heads perhaps?* She supposed she would find out sooner or later what special abilities they possessed, apart from a capability to annoy army lieutenants.

“Good,” remarked the Major. “Right, the rest of you are with me,” she ordered, indicating the others. “Dr Todd will be here in a moment to give you an introduction to the facility,” she informed Andrea, before exiting with the other three obediently in tow.

Andrea found herself faintly disappointed that the Major wasn’t going to be briefing her, but didn’t have much opportunity to contemplate that further as a tall man wearing a white coat strode briskly into the room. He introduced himself as Dr Theodore Todd, and promptly dismissed Lieutenant Chadwick, who was only too happy to get out of there. Dr Todd offered her a seat, before he proceeded to outline the background and function of the Superhuman Research Unit to her in what seemed to be a well-rehearsed speech.

Dr Todd had no compunction about bombarding her with a great deal of information in one go. He was like a lot of scientists and academics she had met – intelligent, precise, logical, but slightly lacking when it came to interpersonal skills. She found his no-nonsense, factual approach quite refreshing.

She was surprised to discover that the base was actually on an island, just off the west coast of Scotland in the Firth of Clyde. She supposed that was certainly one way to make sure no one left unexpectedly, unless they fancied swimming several miles to the mainland.

Apparently the unit had been in existence for approximately nine months. There was a mixture of army and civilian personnel on the base, all of who had quarters within the main complex. The base also hosted a number of recreational facilities, along with the various research labs and training facilities for both the “special operatives” and the regular troops stationed there.

The unit had been set up in response to the discovery of genetic mutations that could lead to the development of special powers. The government had decided that this wasn’t really something for public consumption, instead creating this secret facility where the whole subject could be researched.

Andrea wondered if research was all they were really interested in. For a start there was the way Dr Todd had used the term “special operative” when referring to the

superhumans, suggesting an active role in something. Plus there was the fact that the army were running the show. And not just the army, but the Intelligence Corps, which hinted at something clandestine. She would have thought that if research was all they were up to, then there would be no need for the army to be involved. She decided not to voice her suspicions for now – she needed to get a better idea of the unit and whom she could and couldn't trust first.

Dr Todd then moved onto her particular case, reiterating to her what the Major had told her the day before about the problems with her particular mutation. From what he told her, it turned out that all the other operatives at the unit had possessed their mutation since birth, though not necessarily all the abilities associated with it. Andrea's enforced mutation meant that they would have to take things slow with her, especially due to the seizures she had been having. The doctors would carry out a series of investigations to determine what exactly the nature of her mutation and powers were.

At that point, Dr Todd invited her to join him in one of the labs on the floor below where they could start assessing her condition properly. Entering the lab, Andrea noted the vast array of technical equipment spread round the room. There were a number of computers, microscopes, scanning devices and quite a few things she had no idea as to the function of - only that they looked highly advanced and expensive. It appeared that a lot of money was coming into this project from somewhere.

"If you'd like to take a seat," offered Dr Todd, going over to search something out on the far side of the room.

While Andrea was waiting the door to the lab swished open, and she spotted Dr Whitman joining them.

He smiled amiably as he headed her way. "Morning, Miss Hallstrom."

"Morning," she replied, "And Andrea is fine."

"Well, you can call me Doc, since everyone else seems to insist on doing so," he said, with a fake air of exasperation.

Andrea looked at him in bemusement. "Aren't there several doctors here, though?"

"See, that's what I keep telling them," he said, obviously pleased to find someone who could see his point of view, "But Mr Parsons came up with it, and now it seems to have stuck. I think half the people here don't even realise I have a proper first name."

Dr Todd came back over at that point, having retrieved whatever he had been looking for. "Ah, Doc," he noted, "Now you're here to monitor things we can get on."

Doc leaned over to whisper to Andrea, "See, even *he* calls me it!"

Andrea smiled at his annoyance, especially as she thought he was feigning it on purpose to try and put her at ease.

Doc wheeled over a monitor, from which he produced some wires and sensors. “OK, now I’m just going to place these on you so we can check out exactly what’s going on in your brain to begin with. I hope you’re not going to be pulling them straight off again?”

“I think I can cope with them this time,” replied Andrea.

Doc smiled. “Good, because you’ll need to get used to it, what with the number of tests Theo here is likely to want to run on you!”

“Thank you, Doc,” interjected Dr Todd with a slight hint of exasperation. “Though he is right,” he added, addressing Andrea, “We will need to run an extensive set of tests, looking at all aspects of your mutation. It may seem like some of them are utterly pointless, but I just ask you to be patient and bear with us. We need to be thorough so we don’t miss anything.”

Andrea nodded. “As long as you don’t mind the odd question along the way, I kind of like to know what’s going on.”

“Fine,” he agreed, “I’ll be happy to answer any questions you have, as long as they don’t step into areas I’m not at liberty to discuss.”

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Some hours later, Andrea wearily made her way back to her quarters. It seemed she was finally allowed to walk about the base unescorted as she travelled up in the lift alone. She contemplated getting off at the ground floor and seeing how far she might get before she was stopped. She didn’t think it would be far, with the number of cameras and soldiers she had observed about the place.

She tiredly rubbed her neck, thinking that Doc hadn’t been wrong when he made a joke about the number of tests Dr Todd would want to run. Most of the time it seemed like she was hardly doing anything, flexing particular muscles or thinking about particular things, but she had seen that Dr Todd looked rapt in the results he was getting on his computer screen. It had all seemed like one long physical, rather than anything to do with super powers – she hadn’t been called upon to do anything out of the ordinary once in fact. She still wasn’t even sure what it was she was capable of, though Doc had warned her about trying anything to investigate herself while on her own. All she knew so far was that she had exhibited some sort of enhanced strength.

Part of her was itching to know more about it, though at the same time she had to admit that it was all a bit daunting and maybe even a little scary – the prospect that there was this whole other side to her that she herself knew nothing about. She had always prided herself on her ability to meet any challenge, and had rarely found things in life that she couldn’t overcome or control. So to now have to place herself in the hands of others to such an extent was somewhat anathema to her.

Having finished for the day, Doc had offered to take her up to the messhall on the ground floor where the superhumans, scientists and regular soldiers could get something to eat. She had declined his offer though – she didn't expect to be around this place long enough in order to have the need to make friends or socialise. She'd already discovered that her quarters came equipped with a fully stocked fridge the night before, so it wasn't like she had to go to the messhall. These were hardly the sorts of people she would want to be friends with either – a load of squaddies and some juvenile superhumans. The only people she had felt any sort of connection with so far were the two scientists she'd been introduced to, and that was mainly a kind of grudging respect for their intelligence. She resolved that she would just do what she had to do until she could get out of there and back to her normal life.

Thinking of her real life, Andrea realised that she needed to arrange a few things back in London, not least of which was Gerry. God knew what he must be thinking. She realised she should really have asked one of the doctors about making a call to the outside world. Since she was heading up to the second floor anyway, Andrea guessed she might as well drop in on Major Jarvis. No doubt she would need her permission for any such request.

Striding along the corridor, she saw the eyes of the soldier at the desk outside the Major's office nervously regarding her rapid approach.

"Is Major Jarvis in?" Andrea asked the young man brusquely.

"Er...yes," he answered, somewhat taken aback by her brisk tone.

"Good," she replied, not waiting for any other confirmation before strolling over to the door and knocking on it.

The young soldier bumbled up from his desk. "Wait, you can't just..."

Andrea pushed open the door before he had the chance to reach her, and before she got any sort of answer to her knock. The Major's eyes flicked up from her desk, a quick flash of annoyance passing across her features before the cool impassive mask was back in place. Andrea was disappointed she hadn't managed to catch the Major out a little more, although she wasn't entirely sure why. Something in Andrea just felt the urge to try and rile the other woman, just to see what reaction she got – maybe because it seemed like such a challenge to get one at all.

The young soldier pushed past Andrea's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Major..."

"It's all right, Anderson," said the Major with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Come in, Miss Hallstrom, have a seat," she added, gesturing to the one in front of her desk.

So I'm back to being Miss Hallstrom am I? Perhaps I did manage to rile her just a little bit.

Andrea made her way to the indicated seat, the blue-grey eyes watching her intently the whole way across the room, and as she lowered herself into the comfy chair.

The Major leant forwards slightly so her hands rested together on the table. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“I need to make a phone call,” answered Andrea, getting straight to the point.

“May I ask whom you’re calling?”

“You may, but do I have to answer?” countered Andrea.

The Major regarded her for a moment, showing no visible sign of being perturbed by Andrea’s deliberately obtuse take on her question. However, the pause before she spoke was evidence enough. “I’m afraid you will need to, before I can agree to it.”

“I want to speak to one of my colleagues, Maria Fernandes,” said Andrea.

“About?”

“Jesus!” cried Andrea, “Shall I just tell you everything I want to say now? It’s not like you won’t be listening in and recording it anyway, I’m sure.”

“This is a top secret facility,” remarked the Major, still not rising to the bait and maintaining an even tone, “We can’t allow unmonitored communication off the base. This isn’t anything personal against you, it’s the same for everyone here.”

Andrea sighed. “All right, if you must know, I need to get her to look after Gerry for me.”

“Gerry?”

“My cat,” clarified Andrea.

“Your...cat,” repeated the Major slowly, and Andrea could swear she was straining to stop a smile creeping onto her face.

“Yes, my cat. Does it seem so unusual that I would have one?” challenged Andrea.

“No, not at all,” replied the Major, though her expression indicated otherwise. “I think that should be fine,” she continued after a moments thought, “Though please keep off the subject of where exactly you are, or what you’re doing here, or we will be forced to cut you off. I’m sure you can come up with some feasible excuse for your absence, visiting family perhaps?”

“She won’t believe that one!” scoffed Andrea before she could stop herself.

The Major looked at her quizzically, one eyebrow raised, but Andrea refused to elaborate further on the subject.

“Yes, I’m sure I can make something up,” Andrea said instead, getting back to the point in hand.

“In that case, if you want to head back to your quarters, I’ll arrange for your phone to be activated,” the Major informed her.

“Thank you,” said Andrea grudgingly, getting up and heading for the door without waiting to be dismissed.

“Oh, and Andrea,” called the Major, waiting for her to turn back before she continued, “Please don’t barge unannounced into my office next time.”

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Andrea forcefully closed the door to her quarters, trying to restrain herself from seeing if she could rip it off its hinges and fling it across the room. She just felt so frustrated and trapped.

In fact, why should I restrain myself? she considered, If I’m cursed with these new powers, then why shouldn’t I use them to let off a bit of steam? Why do I need someone to tell me when and where I can use them?

Doc’s warnings about trying to use her abilities un-monitored flashed through her mind, but Andrea dismissed them; Doc probably just didn’t want her to find out anything before him. Andrea knew she desperately needed some outlet for her pent up aggression. Talking to the Major certainly didn’t seem to help, since Andrea found herself losing her cool whenever she did. That disturbed her too - she was famed for being the cool, calm one back at the station. Her icy stare alone was renowned for eliciting confessions from criminals.

Andrea felt her anger building again as she thought of the rigid army officer and the reactions she stirred. Snatching up one of the kitchen stools, Andrea gripped the wooden seat in one hand and one of the metal legs in the other. With a single yank the stool splintered in two. Andrea looked at its remnants with satisfaction – *see, there was nothing to it!*

Casually discarding the seat part, she started to bend the metal leg. The effortlessness of it was amazing; anyone would think it was some twig that she was bending with such ease. The steel groaned in protest at the punishment, before finally giving way and snapping. The broken sections clattered noisily on the tiled floor as they joined the rest of the shattered stool.

Just as Andrea was looking around for something else to mutilate, it hit her – intense, agonising pain. She staggered clumsily against one of the kitchen units, sending the utensils on the work surface flying, before tumbling to the floor. Huddled in a foetal position, Andrea simply prayed for the pain to stop as it shook through her body. When the darkness finally overcame her, it was a merciful release.

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The cool surface of the tiles as it pressed against her cheek was the first thing that pervaded Andrea's senses when she finally regained consciousness. Gingerly rising into a sitting position, she rubbed her elbow where it had been bashed on the unforgiving floor. Glancing up at the clock on the wall, Andrea realised she'd been out for about thirty minutes. She supposed it could have been worse, especially if someone else had discovered her. Luckily she'd been spared the embarrassment of explaining why she'd chosen to ignore the repeated warnings about using her powers alone.

Clambering unsteadily to her feet, Andrea made her way over to the sofa. Her hands were shaking disconcertingly as she rested them on her thighs, and she closed her eyes to take a few deep breaths. *In through the nose; out through the mouth. In. Out. Relax.*

She supposed it was just the present situation that was affecting her, making her lose her perspective and compromising her judgement. Maybe the chance to call Maria, and connect with the real world, would help her with that - remind her that she still had friends and a life outside of the base.

Picking up the phone, Andrea listened for the dial tone, relieved to find the Major had kept her word and enabled the connection. As she keyed in Maria's home number, Andrea just hoped her fellow officer wasn't on duty that day.

After a couple of rings the call was picked up. "Maria Fernandes," came the answer from the other end.

"Maria, it's me," said Andrea, grateful to hear her good friend's voice. They had been at Hendon ^[3] together and had remained fast friends ever since.

"Andrea? Christ!" exclaimed Maria, "Are you all right? Where the hell are you? What's going on?"

"Woah, slow down!" interjected Andrea, "One thing at a time."

"Sorry," replied Maria, "It's just that after what happened at that warehouse, and then not knowing what had happened to you...I've been worried."

"It's all right," Andrea reassured her, realising how anxious her friend had been from her frantic tone, "I'm ok. Well, as ok as I can be given the circumstances."

"But where on earth are you?"

"I...can't say," replied Andrea, fully aware of who might be listening.

"You can't say? I've been worried out of my mind and you can't say? What's going on? Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"I'm sorry, Maria, I wish I could tell you more, but you're just going to have to trust me on this one for now," explained Andrea. "How are you anyway?"

“Me?” said Maria, surprised at the question. “I’m fine, though busy since...” she trailed off for a moment. “I just can’t believe all those guys are dead,” she finished quietly.

“Me either,” agreed Andrea sorrowfully, as their faces filled her mind once more. “Anyway, I need to ask you a favour,” she continued, not wanting to linger on those thoughts any more than she had to. She also thought she better get onto what she had to ask, before she said something she shouldn’t and they got cut off.

“Go on, you know I’ll do anything to help if I can,” replied Maria sincerely.

“Can you go and pick up Gerry from my flat, look after him for me?” Andrea found herself inexplicably starting to well up as she thought of her home, with Gerry waiting expectantly for her return. She considered it must just be the fact that she was cut-off from reality that was getting to her.

“Of course,” answered Maria without hesitation, “Good job you made me take that spare set of keys, though you always were the organised one! Do I need to know anything special - what food he likes? Any little habits?”

Andrea tried to pull herself together, stop her mind wandering to thoughts of home and colleagues she would never see again. “No, he should eat pretty much anything, little pig that he is. Especially since he’s been on his own there for 3 days, poor bugger. Just give him a cuddle from me to say sorry, ok?”

“No problem,” said Maria, “Do you know when you’ll be back?”

“No, I’m not sure. I’ll try and call you again when I know a bit more. Just tell anyone else who asks not to worry, and that I’ve gone off to have a bit of time on my own after the recent...trauma.”

“Ok,” noted Maria, before pausing as if waiting for Andrea to say something else. The only audible sound was the faint hiss of the phone line. “Aren’t you going to ask how Meg is?” said Maria eventually.

Andrea didn’t reply immediately. She hadn’t really wanted to talk about Meg on this monitored line. To be honest she hadn’t really wanted to think about her at all – it still dragged up a few too many painful memories.

Maria continued, since Andrea failed to say anything, “She misses you, Andi. I still don’t know why you two broke up.”

“It was complicated,” said Andrea, supposing she had to say something in response, “I know she’s your friend so I don’t want to say too much. Maybe you should speak to her.”

“I have!” said Maria, her voice carrying an edge of exasperation, “But she’s as evasive about it as you are! I think you’re both just being stupid; you two were great together.”

“Look, Maria,” said Andrea, perhaps a touch more tetchily than she had intended, “Even if it wasn’t all over, there’s no chance for us to get back together now.”

“Because you’re off at this place you can’t talk about?”

“That’s right,” Andrea stated.

“Is this place anything to do with the accident?” asked Maria, seemingly unable to resist her natural instincts to investigate. “Only there’s been a lot of weirdness around that, you know, the investigation was...”

The line went dead, cutting Maria off in mid-sentence. Andrea stared at the phone in her hand for a moment, not quite believing what had happened.

What the fuck? This is...unacceptable!

Leaping up, she stormed out of her room to get some answers.

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Kate sat on the couch in her office, drinking her coffee and listening attentively as Theo filled her in on the day’s tests. Apparently there wasn’t a great deal to report as yet, though she hadn’t really expected there to be at this early stage. They all knew how careful they had to be when dealing with superhumans and their powers to avoid any nasty accidents, especially at the beginning when no one really knew the extent of them. As he finished up she decided to probe him for some other types of information.

“So, how did you find Andrea?” she asked nonchalantly.

“Well, considering what we spoke about two days ago, she was actually remarkably accommodating,” he replied.

“She was?” said Kate in surprise, “I wonder if it’s just me she doesn’t like then?”

“Or perhaps she doesn’t like what you represent?” offered Theo, earning him a questioning look from Kate. “I mean authority, control,” he explained, “She strikes me as the sort who likes to maintain those for herself, judging by the number of questions she was asking about the tests.”

“Possibly,” Kate allowed, “Maybe I should check with Lieutenant Chadwick and some of the other officers, see how she is with them.”

“As I said, she was mostly fine with me. She was a little reluctant and suspicious, but nothing that I would classify as openly hostile or antagonistic. And she and Doc seemed to get on well, though she did turn down his offer of joining him in the messhall. Perhaps you need to pull back on the full military side of yourself when dealing with her, if you’re having difficulty.”

Kate raised both eyebrows questioningly as she stared at him. “Are you suggesting I’m too rigid and overbearing?”

He laughed at her expression since it pretty much proved his point. “Not exactly, though you can be intimidating.”

Now it was Kate’s turn to laugh. “I really don’t think I’m intimidating Andrea! I don’t think anyone is capable of that. I mean you should have seen her in here earlier, making demands like she owned the place. Though I’m still not sure whether that’s all a front,” she added, putting down her mug and shifting her position so she could stare off out the window for a moment.

“Go on,” prompted Theo.

Kate tried to decide what it was that was making her doubtful. “I don’t know, I just think that underneath all the outward arrogance and hostility, there is someone who does actually care what people think of her.” She turned back to face Theo. “There’s definitely something driving her to succeed in whatever she puts her mind to – just look at what she’s accomplished at university and in the police,” she noted, recalling what she had read in the young woman’s file, “Despite her rather *individual* approach to her job, she still managed to get into CID at a young age. They must have seen potential in her.”

“Indeed,” noted Theo. “Though the sort of people who strive for success so hard are also often the ones who don’t like failure,” he added with a hint of caution, “And have trouble admitting that they might be wrong or when they need help.”

Kate nodded. “Mmm, I wonder if that’s the case here?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning is she trying to hide any insecurities she might be feeling by being overly aggressive in her attitude?” clarified Kate, “Or is she just like this all the time? I don’t really know her well enough yet to know.”

“No, I guess only time will tell,” he conceded, “There’s also the possibility of post-traumatic stress affecting her behaviour. Don’t forget she did see all her colleagues die in front of her eyes.”

“Yes,” agreed Kate, “It would be odd if that hadn’t had some impact on her. So she could be covering that up too. Maybe you could get Doc to have a surreptitious word with her. Nothing too obvious, just mention the fact we have counsellors here that are for anyone’s use. Something tells me she won’t be keen if we try to force the issue.”

“No, I believe you’re right. I’ll speak to him,” confirmed Theo.

Kate sighed and added a rueful smile. “Well, I sincerely hope she isn’t quite this annoying all the time. I’m just not used to such blatant disregard for protocol!”

“Though you yourself have been known to bend the rules from time to time,” commented Theo, “Not to mention be a touch stubborn.”

Kate stared at him, furrowing her brows in a look of consternation. The stern look didn't quite reach her eyes, though, since she knew he was just teasing her. “Whose character are we assessing here exactly?”

Before he could reply the door to her office flew open, thumping into the wall, and Andrea strode in.

“Why the hell did you cut my phone call off?” she demanded, storming straight over to the coffee table, her pale blue eyes flashing with anger as she stared down at Kate.

Kate shot back a deathly look, but kept her mouth tightly shut for the time being. She didn't trust herself not to say anything she might regret later. Taking a few deep breaths, she slowly rose from the couch and stepped purposefully round the coffee table. She moved so that she was right up in Andrea's personal space, intending to evoke a sense of menace with her proximity. However, the younger woman didn't flinch, despite her closeness.

Kate narrowed her eyes into her most severe look of annoyance and fixed them on Andrea. The tension in the room was palpable as the younger woman just stared resolutely right back at her, neither of their gazes wavering.

“Theo, could you leave us to it?” said Kate eventually, her lips barely moving and her eyes never shifting from their combative regard of Andrea.

“Er, sure,” he replied somewhat hesitantly, perhaps afraid they were about to come to blows.

Kate waited until he left the room before she spoke.

“Miss Hallstrom,” she began, her voice low, dangerous, “I realise you are not one of my soldiers, and therefore not directly under my command. However, I would expect that even you could follow common courtesy.”

“Courtesy?! You want to talk about courtesy?” snapped back Andrea furiously, her breath hot against Kate's face, “How about you chopping off my phone conversation?”

“I believe I did warn you that might happen...”

“Yeah! If I said anything about this place!”

“So what *were* you talking about?” asked Kate, trying to keep calm in the face of Andrea's continued fury, though she was finding it hard.

“Like you weren't listening in!” scoffed Andrea incredulously.

“Believe me, I have far better things to be doing than listening to your personal phone calls,” Kate informed her. Kate considered that she should have been the one bawling out the young woman for barging into her office again, but she tried to remember what she and Theo had discussed – *pull back on the military side*.

Andrea crossed her arms across her chest in a defiant stance. “Really,” she said doubtfully.

Kate almost rolled her eyes – *it was like dealing with a petulant child!*

“Look, I don’t know the particulars of why your conversation was terminated,” said Kate, attempting to be reasonable, “I’ll find out why my men found it necessary to cut you off, ok?”

“Ha! They probably just thought it would be funny! Abusing their little bit of power by getting one over on the new girl. Maybe I wasn’t giving them anything juicy enough to listen to? Nothing to give them their kicks?”

Kate found herself bristling again, and she clenched her fists at her side to resist the urge to slap the other woman. It was one thing to listen to Andrea rant on, but when she started insulting her men that was something else.

“My officers are professionals,” stated Kate seriously, “They do not monitor conversation for some sort of cheap thrill. I’m sure your personal life is infinitely fascinating, but they are just doing their job.”

“Well, you should know all about my personal life,” countered Andrea, “You do have that handy little file on me.”

Kate heaved a sigh. “Contrary to popular belief the government doesn’t make a habit of spying on the people of this country. The only information in that file is data of public record, such as where you were born, your family, your schooling. Plus we have your work records and reports, that the Met ^[4] were kind enough to forward to us.”

Andrea threw up her arms and made a tutting noise. “Oh, I bet that made interesting reading! I’m sure MacKenzie had a few choice things to say. Let me guess – I was a complete pain in the arse who showed a distinct lack of regard for the command structure and protocol?”

“A quite accurate summary...of parts of it,” agreed Kate honestly. However, she sensed an opportunity to diffuse the situation at the same time. “Though he was actually quite glowing in his praise of your results.”

“He was?” replied Andrea, taken aback.

“You sound surprised,” noted Kate. She stepped away and sat back down on the sofa so she appeared less threatening. “Yes, amongst his remarks he did note that though you were...difficult...you actually showed an amazing dedication to the job and that he thought that it was just your desire to do what you thought was right that made you

overstep the mark sometimes. He also mentions the times you went out of your way to help your colleagues when you didn't have to."

Andrea didn't reply, and Kate thought she looked slightly confounded by her sudden change of tack. Most probably she had come in here wanting and expecting a fight. Kate wondered if she was finally making some sort of headway with the younger woman. If she could get past all this outward hostility she thought that Andrea could be an asset to the unit. Not only was she highly intelligent, but the number of commendations in her file suggested that she was someone you could rely on in a crisis and who would be loyal to you – once you had won her respect and trust. Perhaps she should offer something up about herself to try and start the process of winning her trust.

"Andrea," she began, switching back to using her first name to indicate the fact that she was trying to make peace, "I'm not going to judge you on your past record. We've all made a few mistakes in our time; I know I have. All I care about is what goes on here, now."

Andrea continued to regard her evenly with her piercing blue eyes. Kate wasn't sure if she was thinking about her words or contemplating her next riposte.

Kate continued, supposing she might as well see how far she could get before Andrea leapt in again, "You know, you might find things a bit easier around here if you relaxed a bit. I realise the regime can seem strict, but not everything is intended as personal affront to you. Perhaps if you tried to make a few friends you would see that. I hear Doc invited you to the messhall but you turned him down?"

Too late, Kate realised her mistake.

"Oh, more checking up on me, eh?" remarked Andrea scornfully, "And how long did it take for that little bit of information to wind its way to you?"

Kate sighed to herself, realising any hope of a rational conversation had gone for the evening.

"You think you know me do you?" said Andrea with an air of resentment. Kate leaned back on her couch, letting the ongoing tirade wash over her. "You want me to make friends and be happy like a good little camper when all that's happened to me since I got here is that I've been restrained, injected with sedatives, poked, prodded, spied on and generally been made to feel like some lab rat? I am a human being! I have rights!"

Andrea shot her one last furious look before turning on her heel and storming back out the door again, which shook on its hinges as she slammed it behind her.

Well, that could have gone better, thought Kate to herself, tipping her head back on the soft cushions and closing her eyes.

CHAPTER 3

Andrea strained under the weight she was attempting to hold up. A few beads of sweat broke out on her forehead and slipped down the smooth skin of her cheek, where she tried to brush them away with her arm. She had been at this for three days straight now – test after test in the company of doctors Todd and Whitman. The days seemed to merge into one another, and she could hardly believe it was nearly a week since she had first woken up at the Superhuman Research Unit after the warehouse accident.

Today’s particular investigation was the first time she had actually felt like she was exerting herself during the many tests they had performed. She just prayed that didn’t mean she was about to experience another one of the extremely painful and paralysing seizures that had beset her attempts to access her abilities. Since her attempt at a bit of interior design with the stools in her kitchen, she hadn’t risked trying anything on her own, realising that maybe the scientists did know what they were talking about.

At the moment Doctor Todd had her under a weight-lifting contraption, in one of the specialist gyms at the army base. It could be made to simulate various weights electronically by increasing the down-force exerted on the bar she held aloft. Her arms wobbled slightly and she wondered just how much weight was on it right now.

“Are you ok?” asked Doc, monitoring her vital signs the whole time as he did every day.

“Yes, fine,” she replied, locking her arms once again.

Dr Todd flicked his dark eyes up from his computer screen. “You think you can take some more weight then?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Andrea confidently, “I mean, what are we up to now? A hundred kilos or so?”

The two doctors exchanged a glancing look, but didn’t reply straight away.

Andrea looked at them warily. “What?”

“Er...you’re holding up slightly more than a hundred kilos,” began Doc slowly.

“Go on...”

“Well, the down-force is currently 1500 kilograms,” he outlined, “That’s about equivalent to a small family car.”

“Helvete!” cried Andrea in surprise, the Swedish swear word slipping out. She lost her hold on the bar and just had time to dodge out the way as it came crashing back down onto its supports.

She dashed over to look at Dr Todd’s monitor, the scientist moving aside to allow her access. The figures shown were just as Doc had said. But that couldn’t be right, she told herself dazedly - the weight of a car? That was just...impossible!

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Kate stood on the concealed side of the one-way glass, watching as Andrea dropped the bar and scurried across to look at Theo’s computer. Obviously something had shocked her, judging from the bemused expression that had now settled on her face. The pair of them hadn’t spoken directly over the weekend, since the argument in her office on Friday, and Kate considered that that was probably a good thing. Hopefully, a bit of space would have given Andrea the chance to calm down and start to accept the situation she was in. Judging by her current reaction, though, she was still having difficulty comprehending the fact that she now possessed superhuman powers.

From what Theo had discovered so far, it seemed her strength was phenomenal – they weren’t even sure what her limits were yet. Kate found that thought slightly disturbing - someone as volatile and headstrong as Andrea with all that power. She supposed it was down to her to ensure that Andrea accepted her abilities and learnt to control them, though she wasn’t sure how willing a pupil she was going to be.

Deliberating the prospect of trying to handle the wilful woman, Kate felt a pounding sensation building at the back of her brain. She still wasn’t certain if Andrea just liked being argumentative for her benefit, or if that was how she was with everyone. Kate had faced many challenges in her time in charge of the unit, both personal and professional, but the clash of personalities with Andrea was certainly up there with the toughest.

As promised, Kate had looked into why Andrea’s phone call had been cut off, hoping perhaps to try and show the younger woman that she was on her side. Apparently the surveillance team had been instructed to prevent any discussion of the incident at the warehouse that had landed Andrea with them. The strange thing was, Kate herself knew nothing of this order, meaning it had come from one of her superiors. She wondered what it was they were concerned about and were trying to hide.

Now Kate thought back to Andrea’s arrival at the unit, when she had been so disorientated and shocked, Kate suddenly realised what it was that had been bugging her about it. She realised there should have been no reason for Andrea to be brought to them at all. Before the accident, Andrea had been a regular person, with no indication that she had the dormant gene that could grant her superhuman powers. So how had they known she would wake up with superhuman abilities?

Kate may have only been transferred to the Intelligence Corps recently, but she had been in it long enough to know when something didn’t quite add up. She resolved to

speak to General Parsons next time he made one of his regular visits to check up on progress at the base.

Seeing that Andrea had now resumed her place under the bar, Kate decided she really needed to get back to her office and the mountain of paperwork that sat waiting for her there. After all, Andrea may have been the most troublesome of her responsibilities right now, but she was by no means the only one.

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A couple of days later Andrea sat on a low bench in the gymnasium, wiping the sweat from her brow with a towel as the two doctors engaged in a heated debate. From what she could garner, Doc was of the opinion that Dr Todd was pushing her too hard. There had been a couple of times when Doc had been forced to step in when one of Andrea's seizures had started during the experiments. She could see his point since the seizures were extremely painful, leaving her gasping and in agony as her muscles seized up. Luckily a quick injection from Doc was usually enough to counteract the effects, but she would rather not have to endure them at all.

"Ok," said Dr Todd eventually, "How about we call it quits for today?"

"Fine by me," agreed Andrea as they looked to her for confirmation, "Though I am curious to know when I'm going to find out the results of all these tests. We've been at this for days now."

"I'll be making a proper report to Major Jarvis tomorrow," Dr Todd informed her, "You're more than welcome to attend."

Andrea raised a single eyebrow to indicate her slight surprise. "Really? Are you sure you don't want to check with the Major first? You might have some top secret things you want to discuss about me."

"I'm not trying to hide anything from you," said Dr Todd reasonably, "You know everything we do."

"All right," conceded Andrea, getting up from the bench and flicking the towel over her shoulder, "Yes, I would like to attend, thank you."

"Now that's settled," interjected Doc, "How about some dinner?"

Andrea weighed up his offer for a moment. Her instant thought was to refuse, and go back to her room on her own, as she had done every other night since she arrived. However, even she had to admit that it was getting pretty boring spending so much time alone. She was really starting to miss her home comforts and her friends. She had been provided with all mod cons in her quarters – she even had a Playstation to go with the massive television – but that didn't make up for the lack of personal touch. What she wouldn't give for some of her books right now, so she could bury herself in them.

She remembered that the Major had mentioned that she could have some of her belongings brought to the island, but that meant she would have to see the Major to arrange it. Since their last encounter, Andrea had been trying to avoid the other woman as much as possible. Andrea didn't like the capacity the Major seemed to have to unsettle her normally unflappable demeanour. Something about her just made Andrea want to act up to see what happened, to see what reaction she got. She realised it was rather childish, yet she couldn't seem to help herself. She supposed the report Dr Todd was going to deliver would give her the perfect opportunity to bring up the subject of her belongings without her needing to make a special trip to the Major's office.

In the mean time, she guessed it couldn't hurt to go along with Doc. She wasn't so stubborn that she couldn't admit that maybe she did need to socialise with the people there, if only to try and maintain her sanity. Anyway, she reasoned, Doc really wasn't that bad and at least he wasn't one of the military personnel. Andrea had continued to receive a chilly reception from most of the soldiers she had encountered, especially the annoying Lieutenant Chadwick. She sensed there was a more deeply routed antagonism between the majority of soldiers and the superhumans; one that had been there even before she had arrived.

"Ok, why not," replied Andrea eventually, in response to Doc's offer.

Doc was flabbergasted by her response. "R-really?" he stammered, "You're going to come to the messhall? With me?"

A smile twitched the corners of Andrea's lips when she saw his obvious surprise. "That's what I just said, wasn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Doc, a stunned look still on his face, "It's just that I've asked you every night and each time you've turned me down."

"I guess you must have finally worn me down," said Andrea jokingly, "Now come on, before I change my mind."

Doc shrugged at Dr Todd, and then quickly scurried after Andrea as she headed for the door. As they made their way to the messhall, Andrea had to admit to herself that there was another reason she felt like company. She hadn't mentioned it to anyone else, but ever since she had arrived on the island she had be plagued by nightmares.

Nearly every time she closed her eyes they were there – Walker, MacKenzie, Madison. Sometimes it was all of them, sometimes just one, but it was always the same theme – them chasing after her, her unable to get away from their bloodied faces. She shook her head to try and clear the images that were now impinging on her waking thoughts too. She had been hoping that the nightmares might lessen with time, but if anything they were getting worse. Doc had mentioned something in passing about counselling facilities, and she wondered whether she should speak to him about it. She had her suspicions that he had been prompted to mention it to her, though, and was concerned exactly how confidential any such sessions would be. The last thing she wanted was the Major and everyone else at the base knowing about her inner demons and insecurities. Maybe if she could find out more about what had

caused the accident and who was responsible, it would help her lay those ghosts to rest. Though there wasn't much chance of that while she was stuck on the island, she realised.

Stepping out of the lift on the ground floor, Doc led her to a set of double doors along the main corridor. As they entered the large dining hall, Andrea could swear that the level of conversation dropped a couple of notches. She could see several sets of eyes swivelling in her direction from the mixture of soldiers and civilian personnel that sat at the tables.

"Don't worry," Doc whispered to her, obviously having picked up on the reaction too, "They just don't see many new people round here."

"Really," said Andrea doubtfully. More likely they had heard all about her from the likes of Lt Chadwick. She could see him now, at a table in the corner, laughing with a group of soldiers as his eyes flicked to her.

"Come on, let's get something to eat," offered Doc, heading over to the counter along one side of the room.

Andrea noted that the conversation seemed to resume as they made their way across the room and Doc handed her a tray for her food.

"Good evening, Doc," greeted the man behind the counter, "And, who is this we have with you?" he asked, switching his attention to Andrea, a broad smile on his face.

He was another soldier, though he wore a short apron over the front of his camouflage trousers that rather detracted from the overall military impression. He was a short, stocky man, with an unruly shock of red hair.

Doc made the introductions, "Andrea this is Corporal Lister, Lister, this is Andrea,"

"Nathan, please," said the cook, wiping his hand on his apron and extending it towards Andrea.

"Nice to meet you, Nathan," replied Andrea amiably, shaking his hand.

Nathan took back his hand and looked at them expectantly. "So what can I get you?"

"I don't know, what have you got?" asked Andrea, scanning the dishes laid out on the hot-plate surface as she did.

"Well, on the menu we have either spaghetti bolognese, salmon or some vegetarian thing that you'll have to ask my colleague Bill about," he informed her, "But if there's something special you'd like, I'm sure I could rustle it up. We should treat our new guests well after all."

"Spaghetti would be fine, thank you," she noted with a smile.

“Good choice,” Doc whispered in her ear as Nathan dished some up, “You’re never quite sure what you might get when Nathan ‘rustles you up’ one of his specialities.”

“What was that?” asked Nathan, placing the steaming plate on Andrea’s tray.

“Nothing,” said Doc innocently, “Fish for me, please.”

“Hmm,” noted Nathan suspiciously, as he dolled out Doc’s request, “You don’t want to listen to this lot,” he added to Andrea, “I mean, are you really going to listen to the culinary recommendations of a bunch of squaddies and scientists? Philistines the lot of them!”

Having picked up their cutlery and a couple of drinks, Doc led her across the room. Through the troops she spotted the other superhumans at a table on their own, and realised that Doc was heading in their direction.

“Can we join you?” he asked when they got there.

Tom turned round and shot them a smile. “Sure, grab a seat,” he said, “Nice to see you here, Andrea.”

“Oh,” said Doc suddenly, just as Andrea was sitting down next to the young blond man, “You know what, I’ve just realised there was something I forgot to do back in the lab. I’d better head back down there,” he continued, turning to go.

Andrea frowned up at him from her seat, knowing when she had been set up. She supposed she might as well stay, now she was there, though she would be having words with Doc later.

“So, how are you doing? Settling in ok?” Harry asked Andrea.

“Fine, thanks,” replied Andrea, between mouthfuls of food. She noted that Tardelli was eyeing her suspiciously from beneath her eyebrows in the seat next to the dark-haired young man on the opposite side of the table.

“I’m surprised you haven’t gone nuts, locked down in those labs with just Doc and Theo for company,” said Tom.

“They do seem rather keen on their tests,” Andrea admitted, continuing to eat the Bolognese that actually wasn’t half bad.

Tom laughed out loud. “Keen? They’re bloody fanatics! We’ve all been through it, you know, when we first came here. I swear, there were times I was tempted to try and tickle Dr Todd, just to see if I could actually get a smile to crack that face!”

“Now that I would like to see,” remarked Harry, sipping his drink. “So what powers have you got then?” he asked Andrea.

“They don’t know for sure yet, some sort of super strength at least.”

“Ooh, better watch out who you’re shooting those looks at then, Bel,” said Tom, flicking a glance at Tardelli.

Tardelli narrowed her eyes at him, but said nothing.

Harry had spied the annoyed look on her face too. “She’s just jealous because she’s the human icicle,” he teased.

“Human icicle?” queried Andrea, picking up her own drink. As it touched her lips she realised it was frozen solid. “Helvete!” she exclaimed, setting the chilly glass down on the table.

“Very funny, Bel,” said Tom, rolling his eyes. Tardelli merely smirked at him in return.

Tom tutted once more, before switching his attention back to Andrea and fixing her with an eager look. “Anyway, enough shop talk, what we really want is the gossip!”

“Sorry?” asked Andrea, pushing her plate to one side having finally finished it.

“Oh come on,” he said in exasperation, “It’s not like we get many new people round here, at least not ones that aren’t bloody soldiers.”

“I see, and what exactly would you like to know?” Andrea asked warily.

He thought for a moment. “How about letting us know if there’s anyone special?”

“Special?”

“You know, a boyfriend, a husband?”

“No,” answered Andrea simply.

Harry sat up taller in his seat all of a sudden. “Really?” he remarked, “Well, if you need someone to show you around the base, show you the facilities then I’m your man.” He smiled warmly at her before taking another swig from his mug.

“I’m a lesbian,” stated Andrea succinctly.

Harry’s face suddenly went red as his drink lodged itself firmly down his windpipe. When he started making choking noises, Tardelli thumped him resoundingly on the back.

“You don’t have a problem with that, do you?” Andrea asked, half-jokingly. It never failed to amuse her, the varied reactions revealing her sexual orientation provoked, especially from men. The comments she got usually ranged from ‘but you’re too feminine’ to ‘can we watch’.

“Er...no...no...” stammered Harry, recovering from his coughing fit.

“You’ll have to forgive Harry, but we don’t get many beautiful women round here,” said Tom, desperately trying to stop himself from laughing. “So, there’s no *girlfriend* then?” he asked, correcting his earlier assumption.

“Not at the moment,” replied Andrea. She didn’t really want to disclose any more for now.

Tom shrugged in disappointment. “Ah well, probably for the best. What with you being stuck out here with us for the time being. Maybe we could go cruising for some action on the mainland some time, we can check out the women together!” He flashed Andrea another of his grins. “What’s your type anyway?”

“I don’t really have a particular ‘type’,” Andrea replied, “It depends on the person.”

“Ah, good answer,” he noted, nodding sagely.

Just then, Andrea became aware of another presence hovering behind her and Tom. She swivelled round to see that the Major was standing there. She was out of her normal stiff uniform, instead sporting the same more casual camouflage outfit as the rest of the soldiers, the sleeves of her shirt neatly rolled up to just above the elbows.

“Good evening, everyone,” the Major said, casting her eyes round the table and offering them a smile. The blue-grey eyes finally came to rest on Andrea. “I’m glad to see you here, Andrea. Getting to know the others are you?”

“Yes, thank you,” replied Andrea, a hint of insolence in her tone to indicate that indeed she was and that she was doing it quite well on her own.

Perhaps sensing the frosty atmosphere, Tom stepped into the conversation. “So...did you take The Flyer out at the weekend then?” he asked the Major.

The Major laughed, “You’re not still angling for me to take you on her are you?”

“Oh come on, I promise to be good,” he pleaded.

“Really,” noted the Major, a doubtful look on her face, “Why do I think it’s more likely that you’ll run the poor girl into the ground in an attempt to see just how fast you can make her go?”

He put his hand on his chest to show his mock hurt at the suggestion. “As if I would!”

“The Flyer is very picky about who’ll she’ll let handle her, you know” explained the Major, “She’s quite temperamental. You need to know how to use just the right amount of toughness allied with a soft touch.”

Andrea had to mentally shake herself when she realised she was staring at the way the Major’s lips formed the words ‘soft touch’.

“I can be soft and subtle,” insisted Tom.

Harry burst out laughing opposite him. “You’re about as subtle as a brick!”

“This from Mr Hit-On-The-Lesbian “ noted Tom, causing Harry’s face to redden at the reminder of his earlier faux pas.

Andrea spotted the brief quizzical look that passed across the Major’s face, as she tried to work out to what Tom was referring.

“So,” continued Tom, turning his attention back to the Major, “I presume that’s a no to me coming for a spin?”

The Major smiled down at him again, clapping her hand on his shoulder. “I’m afraid so, but keep trying, Mr Parsons, you may wear me down eventually. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll see you all tomorrow.” Andrea watched her striding confidently back across the messhall and out the doors, only realising she had been staring again when Tom prodded her in the ribs.

“Sorry, what did you say?” asked Andrea, turning back to him.

“I was just asking if the Major was your type,” he repeated.

“Definitely not!” she stated, perhaps a bit more forcefully than she had intended.

“Oh, shame,” he remarked, “Well, I certainly wouldn’t say no,” he added with a wink.

Andrea’s brows knitted together as she regarded him with a mixture of surprise and doubt.

“I think she’s rather attractive, don’t you?” he offered. Andrea found she was starting to get rather uncomfortable with where the conversation was heading as he continued with his explanation, “She’s got that whole older woman, power thing going on. And as for that voice...It almost makes you want to step out of line to get that husky dressing down.”

“Oh yeah, I know what you mean,” joined in Harry, nodding in agreement.

“Maybe,” conceded Andrea, “But she’s so...military!”

Tom laughed, “Well, yes, she *is* a Major! But once you get to know her a bit, you’ll see there’s more to her than that. She’s not like Chaddy and some of the other cretins round here. Most of them think we’re a bunch of freaks, whereas she treats us like human beings.”

“If you say so,” said Andrea sceptically.

“Just give her a chance,” Tom suggested seriously, fixing his pale blue eyes on her.

“So what’s this ‘Flyer’ anyway?” asked Andrea, trying to steer the conversation off the present topic.

“It’s the Major’s boat, The Dorset Flyer,” explained Tom, “She’s got it moored over at Troon harbour and takes it out most weekends. You might have seen the model of it in her office?”

“The yacht on top of the drinks cabinet?”

Tom nodded, “That’s the one. I’ve been trying to get her to take me out on it for bloody months, but she always goes out alone from what I can tell.”

“Or maybe she just doesn’t want *you* along?” commented Harry.

Tom ignored his comment and the conversation shifted focus. Andrea was glad her personal life was no longer the main topic, as the others revealed more about themselves during the course of the discussion. At least Tom and Harry happily revealed more about themselves, Tardelli remained silent most of the time, looking like she’d rather be pulling her teeth out with a pair of rusty pliers.

There was another choking incident when they got on to discussing previous jobs, and Andrea revealed her background in the police. After composing himself, Tom had confessed that he had been in prison immediately before coming to the unit. In fact, he had been given the offer of staying in prison or coming there, which had been a no-brainer as far as he was concerned. Harry had also quite willingly joined the unit, wanting to discover more about his mutation. So it seemed Andrea was the only reluctant member of the group. Talking to the pair of them, she realised that perhaps she had been wrong to distance herself from them in the first place. They were in the same boat as her, after all.

When the messhall started to empty, they decided to head up to their quarters for the night. As they reached the corridor where all their rooms were located, Andrea pulled Tom back for a moment, to speak to him on his own. Harry and Tardelli continued on without them, though Tardelli shot Andrea a filthy look over her shoulder as they went. Andrea was rather bemused by the other woman’s behaviour, but she wasn’t going to lose sleep over it for now.

“What you said in the messhall, about going to the mainland...” she began, casting her eyes about nervously to check no one was in around.

“Yes?” prompted Tom.

“Were you just joking, or can you actually get off the base?”

He sucked in a breath for a moment, regarding her evenly, weighing up what he should say in response. “Not here,” he finally said.

“Huh?” said Andrea, confused by his meaning.

He cast his eyes up at the ceiling and over the walls. “You never knowing who’s watching or listening,” he explained quietly, “Let’s go outside...”

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The following afternoon Andrea sat in the Major's office, listening attentively as Dr Todd outlined the results of his investigations. She'd had an interesting discussion with Tom the evening before, once they'd found a suitably secluded spot to talk out in the chill night air. It had certainly given her plenty to think about in terms of how she might get off the island. For now, though, she was more interested in what Dr Todd had to say.

He had started off by explaining all the tests he'd been running. Since she knew all about those anyway, Andrea had taken the opportunity to observe the Major as she sat behind her desk, nodding in response to Dr Todd's points. She seemed genuinely interested in what he had to say, her eyes fixed on the scientist who stood to the side of the desk so he could address all those present, which included Doc in the seat next to Andrea.

"So, our investigation are only really just beginning," continued Dr Todd, "But we do have some initial findings. I think the best analogy for how we think your powers work is that you're a bit like a rechargeable battery."

"A battery?" interjected Andrea doubtfully, not sure she liked being compared to a small cylindrical object.

"It is just an analogy," he explained, "What I mean by it is that you take in energy, store it, output it in another form when needed and then replace the energy you've used once again. In your case the energy you take in is in the form of light. Even normal daylight or the artificial light in a room seems sufficient to recharge you, though again that would be something we'd need to investigate further. Anyway, this light energy is stored in your body in the form of chemical energy which can then be used to give you superhuman strength. As soon as you use any of this energy, such as by lifting a heavy object, it is immediately replaced automatically by your body, without you having to think about it."

"Ok," nodded Andrea, as he paused for a moment to check they were all still with him, "Though I'm sensing there's a 'but' coming."

"And you would be right," he admitted. "As we mentioned before, because your power-granting gene was never intended to be active, though it is present, you don't seem to have the necessary control over your power. Basically, what happens is you're unable to control the absorption of the light energy by your body. What this means is, even if the "battery" is fully charged, that is you've reached the limit to what you can store, your body still keeps trying to absorb more."

Andrea furrowed her brow. "That doesn't sound good."

"No," Dr Todd agreed, "And it's that which leads to the seizures you keep having. Whenever you access your abilities, you use some of the energy stored in your body. Then the re-charging process starts and doesn't stop. The energy overloads your muscles until you basically pass out from the pain, stopping the absorption process."

“Great,” said Andrea ruefully, “So what you’re saying is I can’t use these powers without the prospect of becoming unconscious every time.”

“Not unmonitored or without some external intervention, no. And not only that, unconsciousness is not the worst that could happen.”

“You still believe one of these attacks could kill me?” she offered through pursed lips.

“We don’t know for sure, but it is a possibility, and not something we would want to chance.”

“Me either,” she agreed, “Though, wait, I haven’t been passing out when we’ve been running these tests.”

“Indeed not,” he replied, “And I was just getting to that. Though you can’t access your powers without risk naturally, we think we may be able to give you a helping hand. Doc has been working on something all week.”

Andrea and the Major shifted in their seats to focus their attention on the balding man instead.

Doc started briefly, like he hadn’t been paying attention to the other doctor’s words, and had only just realised all eyes were on him. “Right, yes,” he began uncertainly, “Well, as you know we’ve had to give you a few injections this week when you’ve had any problems, using an inhibitor drug that we’d previously developed. So I’ve come up with a special device based on that.”

He reached over and picked up the box he’d earlier placed on the desk, opening it to produce what looked like some sort of armband with small electronic equipment attached to it. “You wear it strapped around your arm so that it touches your skin,” he outlined, “What it does is monitors the energy levels within your body and if they start to go over your threshold then it delivers a very small dose of the drug to you. The dose is small because obviously you don’t want your powers inhibited completely for any length of time. Instead the dose should be just about enough to curtail the automatic energy absorption and that’s all.”

He handed the band to Andrea and she studied it, turning it over in her hands a couple of times. Something that she had been bothering her all week was why exactly they had this inhibitor drug in the first place, though she supposed she should be grateful that they did now.

“You’ll need to wear it all the time, apart from when you’re sleeping,” continued Doc, “Since you never know when you might accidentally activate your powers. There’s a refillable compartment on the side there for the drug,” he said, pointing to where he meant, “Though you shouldn’t need to top it up very often, since each individual dose is very small.”

Andrea flicked her eyes back up to him. “Thank you,” she said, “Though I guess this means I won’t be leaving here any time in the foreseeable future?”

“We wouldn’t recommend it for now, no,” agreed Doc regretfully, “We still have so much more to find out about your powers. There could be other aspects of it that we haven’t even discovered yet. We may also find some better way to help you control them.”

The room went quiet for a moment as they all considered what they had heard. Andrea realised this made her dependant on them for now, a position she wasn’t keen on.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” said the Major eventually, now it appeared the two scientists had finished, “If that’s all, I’d like a word with Andrea on her own.”

Both men nodded and left the room, leaving the two women alone. Andrea wondered why the Major wanted to talk to her. Of course she herself had intended staying behind to speak with the Major anyway, but the other woman had preempted her. For some reason that galled Andrea. The Major got up from behind the desk and came round to perch herself on the front of it, closer to Andrea. Her eyes regarded Andrea evenly, giving no clue to the purpose of the upcoming conversation.

“We’ve not had much of a chance to speak the last week or so,” said the Major, after a moment’s perusal of Andrea, “I’ve just been wondering how you’ve been getting on?”

“Getting worried that I’ve been too quiet are you?”

The Major let out an audible sigh at Andrea’s response, rubbing her hand over the back of her neck as she did. “Why don’t we sit over on the couch?” she suggested, gesturing in its direction and moving off, before Andrea had any chance to disagree.

Andrea supposed the Major thought the comfortable setting might make her less antagonistic. She hadn’t even intended to be difficult when she came in, the previous sharp retort just slipping out. Getting up from her chair, she crossed to the expansive sofa beneath the window, taking a seat next to the Major. Andrea sat up straight as the Major leaned back into the cushions, crossing her neatly pressed trousers and placing her hands on her raised knee. Despite the outwardly relaxed demeanour, the Major’s eyes never left Andrea.

“Look,” said the Major, “We can go on like this if you like, sizing each other up all the time, playing this game of one-upmanship, or we can start to try and get on with each other. Since it seems like you’re going to be spending some more time with us for now, I think the latter is the more preferable option, don’t you? However, if you want to carry on with the former, I’m quite happy to oblige, though, quite frankly, it is getting rather tiresome.”

As the Major finished Andrea contemplated her words for a moment. She supposed it *was* all a bit stupid. She had been disorientated, not to mention annoyed, when she had first arrived at the base. Everything had seemed so far out of her control and no one was giving her answers. In that situation she didn’t see why everyone shouldn’t be as unnerved as she was. Now she’d had the chance to settle in, she guessed there wasn’t much point carrying on with her confrontational attitude all the time. Also, if

she was more willing to go along with them, she would arouse less suspicion. Hopefully that would give her more opportunity to put her plan to get off the base into action. Though the revelation that she needed the inhibitor drug to control her seizures certainly made that prospect more difficult.

“Ok,” conceded Andrea eventually, “We can call a truce if you like, though that doesn’t mean I’m any happier about the situation. If I had my way, I’d leave this island right now and never come back. I’d like to just forget all about mutations and super powers and go back to my normal life. However, I’m not stupid, and I know I need your help for the time being. But don’t think that I’m just going to meekly play along from now on - I’ll still be asking awkward questions and wanting answers.”

“Of course, I would expect nothing less,” noted the Major with a hint of sarcasm.

“Hmm,” commented Andrea, catching the tone, “Far be it from me to contradict anyone’s expectations.”

The Major’s brow knitted together in confusion at Andrea’s remark. “I’m sorry?”

“You read that report on me before we even spoke for the first time, right?”

“Yes, some of it.”

“So you can’t tell me that it didn’t put a few preconceived notions in your head, about what I was like, how ‘difficult’ I might be,” ventured Andrea, “Well, I don’t like to disappoint,” she added raising her eyebrows and tilting her head to the side.

The Major let out an incredulous laugh. “So you’re telling me that you’ve been acting up because I expected you to?”

“Partly,” agreed Andrea with a shrug. She wasn’t going to admit that it was hardly as pre-meditated as she was making out. It served her purpose better for the Major to think she was in control and had deliberately acted the way she had, rather than the truth that it was more a defensive by-product of how insecure she felt.

The Major ruefully shook her head. “Ok, in the spirit of concession, I’m willing to admit that I may have made some assumptions about what you would be like. I was wrong to assume the worst,” she confessed, causing Andrea to raise her eyebrows again.

“You looked surprised,” noted the Major as she watched Andrea’s reaction.

“I guess I wasn’t expecting you to so readily admit to any kind of misjudgement,” Andrea disclosed honestly, “I thought you army types were always right and stuck by your decisions.”

“So you had a few preconceived ideas of your own then?”

“Sorry?” said Andrea curiously.

“You saw my uniform and thought – rigid, inflexible, rule follower?”

Andrea had to smile at being caught out. “Ok, you may be right,” she allowed.

“So we both got a few things about each other wrong then?”

Andrea dipped her head in agreement. She wasn’t sure why the Major was being so accommodating all of a sudden, but she wasn’t complaining. Or maybe the other woman had been trying to be accommodating all along, and Andrea had been too caught up in her quest to be as recalcitrant as possible to notice.

“How about we start again, without all our preconceptions and judgements?” ventured the Major, “Of course we do have rules here, and I would expect you to abide by them, just as I would expect anyone else to. But that doesn’t mean we’re totally inflexible. I realise that you’re a civilian and can’t be expected to follow all the strictness of a military regime, though I would presume you have some experience of following orders from your time in the police.”

“I’m sure you read that I wasn’t always the best in that regard.”

The Major made a small laugh at Andrea’s frankness. “I did read that, yes, but since we’re starting off on the basis of making no assumptions, I shall reserve my judgement until I’ve got to know you and can draw my own conclusions – how does that sound? In return, I hope you can reserve judgement on me?”

“That sounds fine by me.”

“Good,” commented the Major, offering Andrea a smile of acknowledgement.

Andrea thought it noticeably softened her face, making her seem almost human. She had to concede that maybe this was the better way to proceed after all. Being obdurate was all well and good, and it had made them realise she couldn’t be easily bossed around or controlled. However, now she felt less unsettled herself, she supposed there wasn’t any harm in co-operating. At least until they pissed her off in some other way. Then they’d find that she could still be a bitch on wheels.

“Since we’re in the mood for concessions, you mentioned before about getting some of my belongings brought here,” said Andrea.

“That’s right, if you want to get someone to organise it for you, we can arrange for them to be picked up and brought here,” the Major informed her.

“In which case I’ll need to make another phone call,” said Andrea tentatively.

The Major’s eyes met hers for a moment, though neither of them spoke. Andrea presumed the Major hadn’t forgotten the irate scene in her office the last time Andrea had tried to call one of her friends either.

When the Major spoke again, her tone had become notably more pinched, “That should be fine.”

“Just as long as I watch what I say, right?” remarked Andrea. “Since we’re on the subject, I may as well ask if you found out why my last phone call was disconnected?”

“I did look into it,” began the Major slowly, weighing up how much to reveal, “It was because you started talking about the accident at the warehouse.”

Andrea regarded her curiously. “Why would that be deemed a topic unfit for discussion?”

“To be completely honest with you, I don’t know,” admitted the Major, “The order to prohibit that subject came from above.”

“And you’re telling me you don’t know any more?” Andrea thought this was getting more and more suspicious, and making her even more anxious to find out the truth behind the accident.

“No, I don’t. This is the army and sometimes I’m not privy to why my superiors order certain things. There is a command structure, so it’s not my place to question them either,” said the Major candidly. Despite her words, which were trotting out the standard military response, Andrea couldn’t fail to notice the edge of frustration in her tone.

“So,” continued the Major, seemingly wanting to get off the subject, “How are things otherwise, any other problems?”

“Apart from the fact that I suddenly have super powers and have to take some strange drug to control them?”

The Major’s eyebrows edged up her face, though she stopped from completely rolling her eyes. “Yes, apart from that.”

Andrea restrained herself from smiling at the expression on the other woman’s face. “Yes, I think everything else is ok.”

“Nothing else bothering you at all?” asked the Major again.

Andrea wondered if there was something specific she was probing for. If she didn’t know better she would think the Major somehow knew about her nightmares, but of course that was ridiculous. “No, nothing else,” she confirmed.

“In that case, you can go and make your call if you want.”

“Thank you,” said Andrea, getting up from the sofa, the Major following suit.

“I’m glad we had this chance to talk civilly for a change,” said the older woman, “I hope it’s a sign of better things to come.”

Andrea made a small smile since the Major was regarding her with a rather soft look on her features. "Me too," she nodded, before turning and leaving the room.

CHAPTER 4

Andrea felt the bang on the back of her head and swivelled round to grab whoever was responsible, her hands clutching at thin air as she spun on her heels. She cursed to herself – this was like trying to catch the wind! Glancing round the room she tried to spot her opponent, bouncing on her toes in readiness for their next attack. It did her no good though, as a swift punch to the stomach caused her to reflexively double over, though it hadn't in fact hurt.

She stayed in her hunched position, deciding it was time to try a different tack. She closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of the room, trying to feel the air as it shifted to indicate the movement of the other person. *There!* Her arm shot out and made purchase on something solid.

Andrea straightened up, holding her attacker up off the floor by the scruff of his neck, his legs flailing frantically as he tried to squirm free. It still amazed her that she was capable of such a thing with no effort at all.

“Hey, no fair! You were faking!” cried Tom, holding onto her arm and futilely trying to release her unshakeable grip.

“I didn't realise there were rules,” she replied nonchalantly, “I certainly didn't see you playing by any.”

Another voice interrupted them, “Ok, ok, you can put him down now.”

Andrea turned to see the Major crossing the floor of the cavernous room towards them. They were on the lowest underground level of the base, which housed the largest rooms in which the superhumans were trained how to use their powers. Andrea released her grip on Tom, who stumbled slightly as he found his feet again.

“Thanks,” he noted ruefully, rearranging his shirt.

“Very clever,” the Major remarked as she reached them, “You deduced where his next attack was coming from the displacement of the air?”

“That's right,” confirmed Andrea, “With Tom being so fast it's no good trusting your eyes, you need to go with a certain amount of instinct.”

“I'll have to remember that one for next time,” said Tom sceptically, “Instinct indeed. I just think you got lucky!”

Andrea laughed. “But I did get you!”

“So how's the inhibitor working out,” asked the Major, interrupting their banter.

Andrea brought her left arm around to check on it. “Fine, I’ve not had any problems with seizures since I started wearing it.”

“Good,” commented the Major, “Well, if you’re up for it, how about giving it a go with Tardelli?”

“Should be interesting,” Andrea noted with a wry smile.

Ever since she’d arrived at the base, Tardelli had been giving her a frosty reception. Which was kind of apt, she supposed, since the other woman’s powers revolved around the cold. Andrea still hadn’t worked out exactly what Tardelli’s problem was, particularly since she seemed reluctant to even speak in her presence.

“Ok, let Tom and I go back to the observation room and we’ll send her in,” suggested the Major.

As they left, Andrea took a moment to re-affix her hair that had become dislodged from its ponytail during the session with Tom. This was the second day she’d actually been engaged in utilising her powers properly, after Doc had produced the armband that allowed her to do that safely. Despite her initial reservations about the whole super power thing, she had to admit there was a certain thrill about being able to do something no one else could.

Waiting for Tardelli, she paced across the floor in her army issue boots. She was kitted out in other army training gear too, though she had dispatched with the jacket, wearing only a vest on her top half. She’d be happy when her own clothes finally turned up and she didn’t have to spend every waking hour in military clothing. At least she’d managed to speak to Maria a couple of days ago and get her to sort out some stuff to be sent to the base. They’d even managed to have a whole conversation without being cut off, though Andrea had to be careful to steer Maria away from any potential danger areas. Anyway, if things went well, she would have the opportunity to have a more candid discussion with her soon.

The sound of the door swinging open on the far side of the room broke her out of her thoughts. Tardelli skulked into the room, her usual surly look on her face, her dark eyes sizing Andrea up. Andrea offered her a sarcastic smile in return. Both of them circled round the room maintaining their distance until the beeps sounded, indicating the training session had been activated.

Suddenly the room sparked into life, with obstacles popping in and out of the floor and walls and projectiles flying round the room to try and distract them. The object of the exercise was to catch your opponent and get them to submit. Though any excessive violence was frowned upon, as Andrea had found out when she’d managed to lay out Harry the day before. She hadn’t meant to punch him quite so hard but she was still getting used to her enhanced strength. An icy blast past her face brought her back to the present and her current opponent. From the look in the other woman’s eye, Andrea wasn’t convinced that Tardelli was going to adhere to the restrictions on excess force.

Rolling across the floor, Andrea snatched up one of the discarded projectiles and lobbed it in Tardelli's direction. With Andrea's superhuman strength spurring it on, it whizzed across the room and smacked hard into Tardelli's head, the dark-haired woman crashing to the floor. With Tardelli down and dazed, Andrea sprinted across to her, determined to push home her advantage. She leapt over a couple of obstacles that sprung out and managed to grab hold of Tardelli before she could orient herself again. Picking her up she flung her easily across the room, where she impacted against the wall.

Andrea was beginning to enjoy herself, toying with the other woman. Suddenly Tardelli surprised her though, by composing herself quickly and firing off another ice blast before Andrea could get to her. Andrea found her feet encased in thick blocks of ice, securing her to the floor. Tardelli grinned evilly as she staggered up off the floor.

Andrea was reluctant to take her eyes off the woman as she approached menacingly, but she realised she needed to free herself quickly. Bending down, she made a fist and drove it into the ice, satisfied when it split into tiny pieces with just one powerful punch.

However, just as she raised her eyes, she realised she hadn't been quick enough – Tardelli was upon her. A thick wedge of ice flew up and struck Andrea on the chin, sending her flying. Andrea tried to scramble to her feet, only to find that she couldn't get any purchase on the floor – she was lying on a thin sheet of ice. Then Tardelli was on top of her, her arms gripping Andrea biceps. For a moment Andrea thought Tardelli had made a mistake getting so close where Andrea had the strength advantage, until she suddenly felt a chill sweeping through her entire body from within.

Pain lanced sharply through her, and Andrea gasped as she struggled to move her arms. Her limbs were so numb she could barely feel them. She realised with horror that Tardelli was freezing her from the inside out. She stared incredulously up at the other woman wondering if she was actually going to stop. Andrea couldn't even open her mouth to speak as Tardelli merely sneered down at her, her breath an icy whisper from her mouth. Andrea felt her eyes drooping as the effort to keep them open became too much. As the darkness swept in to claim her, she thought she could hear a faint voice.

"I said stop!" came the voice more forcefully from right beside them now.

Suddenly Tardelli's icy hands were whipped off her arms, and Andrea could sense the feeling slowly coming back into her body. Opening her eyes, she saw that it was the Major who had intervened, her hand still gripping Tardelli's arm where she'd had to haul her off Andrea.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" demanded the Major, finally letting go and shoving her hands on her hips as she regarded Tardelli with a steely gaze.

Tardelli shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't realise how far it was going," she replied nonchalantly.

“Bollocks!” cried Andrea, clambering unsteadily up off the floor, “You knew exactly what you were doing - you were trying to bloody kill me!”

“Vaffunculo!” spat back Tardelli, Andrea presuming the Italian word wasn’t a pleasant one, “Like you weren’t trying to do the same to me! I was just defending myself.”

“By freezing my blood solid? What the fuck is your problem?”

“I guess it must be you!” said Tardelli aggressively.

“Fulla helvete!” Andrea snapped, deciding to play Tardelli at her own game by using the Swedish swear words.

“Puttana!”

“Skitstöver!”

“That’s enough! Both of you!” ordered the Major, stepping between them with her hands up to keep them apart, before the name calling degenerated to something worse.

Andrea and Tardelli stared at each other from either side of the Major, a baleful glance in evidence at both ends of the officer’s arms.

“Perhaps now is a good time for a break,” suggested the Major, glancing between them. “Isn’t it?” she added strongly when neither woman seemed to notice her first comment.

“I suppose so,” agreed Andrea reluctantly, shooting Tardelli one last disparaging look before turning and heading for the door.

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Andrea stepped out of the door to her quarters and started walking in the direction of the lift. Accompanied only by the sound of her boots brushing across the carpet, she thought the corridors were unusually quiet. Normally she bumped into someone on the way - a soldier, one of the other superhumans - but today there was no one. Reaching the lift she pressed the button to summon it, pacing nervously back and forth as she waited for it to travel up to the second floor. She wasn’t entirely sure why she was nervous, only that she had this anxious feeling in the pit of her stomach. The ping to indicate the lift had arrived resounded loudly in the oppressive silence. She stopped her pacing and positioned herself in front of the doors as they slid open.

She was surprised to see that there was already a single occupant of the lift, standing with their back to her, their head hunched over as they leaned against the back wall. Even odder was that they didn’t exit the lift, or even turn to acknowledge her in any way, remaining resolutely where they were. She found herself reluctant to join them in the enclosed space, but told herself she was being stupid and forced herself forwards. Turning away from the silent person, she pressed the button for the second underground level, taking a nervous gulp of air as the doors slid shut once again.

As the lift shuddered into life, she could sense the presence of the person behind her, but refused to look round. If they wanted to play silly buggers then that was fine by her.

Suddenly a hand clapped onto her shoulder, causing her to practically jump out of her skin.

“Helvete!” she exclaimed, lapsing into Swedish in her surprise, “What the fuck are you...”

Her words died on her lips as she spun round to regard the other occupant of the lift.

“I-Inpsector MacKenzie,” she stammered in shock, “What are you doing here? I thought you were dead.”

“I am dead, Andrea,” he replied, his eyes cold as he stared at her, “You killed me.”

“No, no, it was an accident...” stuttered Andrea, backing up until she was pressed against the doors, “...the gas...”

Mackenzie lurched slowly forwards. “You could have helped us. You could have saved us.”

“There was nothing I could do,” stated Andrea as determinedly as she could, though she was anything but inside. “I was paralysed!” Which was a bit like how she felt now, stuck in the lift with the menacing Inspector.

“You failed us, you let us down,” continued MacKenzie, seemingly ignoring her words as he loomed towards her.

“No, I couldn’t help you,” repeated Andrea, leaning as far back as she could in a futile attempt to get away from him.

Mackenzie grabbed hold of Andrea’s forearms, pinning her against the doors. “How did you survive when we didn’t?”

“I don’t know!” she cried, a chill sweeping through her body from where his bony fingers gripped her.

“I always knew you’d abandon us when the time came,” he noted with a sneer on his face, “I knew I couldn’t rely on you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice small.

“Sorry isn’t good enough.” Mackenzie’s face was right up in front of her now. As his eyes bored into her, it dawned on Andrea that she should be able to feel his breath on her face, only she couldn’t. He wasn’t breathing at all.

Suddenly the doors of the lift flew open and Andrea fell backwards out onto the hard concrete floor. Glancing up she saw that MacKenzie had disappeared; there was no sign of him in the lift.

Suddenly another voice broke the silence. "He's right you know, you are a failure."

"Dad?" cried Andrea in amazement, swinging her head round.

"You never could stick at anything could you, no wonder you left them all to die."

"You mean stick at what you wanted me to," said Andrea angrily, clambering to her feet to face him. This was more familiar territory to her – an argument with her father about how she had failed his expectations.

"All that time and money we spent on your education and for what, so you could waste your life?"

"My life is not a waste!"

"What a disappointment you are."

"Leave me alone," Andrea snarled, brushing past him to carry on down the corridor.

Only when she got to the end MacKenzie stepped out in front of her again "Running away again are you?"

"No!" she exclaimed, turning away from him.

"Face it, you failed us all!"

"No!"

Andrea shot up in bed, her t-shirt clinging to her body where the sweat had been pouring down her back.

It took her a moment to get her bearings and realise where she was. It had just been another nightmare, though certainly a doozy of one. She took a few deep breaths and brushed her disarrayed hair back from her face, before flicking on the bedside light. Stumbling in the direction of the kitchen area, she grabbed a glass and filled it with ice-cold water. Steadying herself by resting a hand on the worktop, Andrea gratefully gulped down the water.

Attempting to go back across the darkened room, she banged her shin on the coffee table, letting out a curse as she did. Flopping down on the sofa, she put her head in her hands. When were the nightmares going to stop? And now, not only were her colleagues after her, but her father had decided to join in too. Who was going to be next? Her mother? Her brother? Her university lecturers? Her primary school teacher?

The repeated nightmares made her more determined than ever to get some answers to what had happened at the warehouse. Someone was responsible and it wasn't her.

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The following evening Andrea was in her quarters once again. She delved into the large cardboard box, rummaging at the bottom until she found what she was looking for. Withdrawing the book, she smiled to herself – *good old Maria*. A knock at the door stopped her from further investigation.

“Come in,” she called, quickly placing the book under a pile of others on the coffee table.

She was surprised when the door opened to reveal the form of Major Jarvis. Of all the people she might have expected to pay her a visit in her quarters at night, the Major was one of the more unlikely.

“Good evening,” said the Major, having stepped into the living area, “I just wanted to check you got all your things ok.”

“Yes, thank you. As you can see I'm just doing a bit of unpacking,” Andrea explained, indicating the open boxes scattered around the room, with their contents spilt haphazardly onto the floor or table.

The Major's eyebrows rose noticeably as she regarded the mess. “I see you've already found your clothes.” she remarked, her eyes coming back to Andrea who was dressed casually in jeans and a form-fitting t-shirt.

Andrea wondered at the remark for a moment, but then disregarded attributing any significance to it – she supposed it was only natural that the Major would notice her change of attire after so many days spent in army fatigues. “Yes, they were one of the first things I unpacked,” answered Andrea, “No offence, but it's nice to get out of that military stuff.”

The Major made a small laugh. “I know what you mean,” she said, “Believe it or not I do occasionally get out of my uniform too, though it may not seem like it.”

Andrea had to pull her mind up sharply when she found it wandering alarmingly to thoughts of what exactly the Major had on under her uniform. In her distraction she failed to notice that the Major was now glancing over the books on the table. As she picked up the top one, Andrea's heart leapt into her mouth. She prayed the other woman didn't look down further in the pile.

“Not exactly light reading,” remarked the Major, looking at the front cover that read ‘From Chance To Choice: Genetics and Justice’^[5]. She flipped over to the back to read what it was about. “Quite a coincidence considering your current situation,” she added with a wry smile.

“I like to keep abreast of a wide variety of topics,” said Andrea, moving over quickly to take the book off her as nonchalantly as possible. “Would you like a drink?” she found herself saying as a diversionary tactic.

The Major looked almost as surprised as Andrea by the offer. “Thanks,” she replied after a moment, “I’ll have a coffee.”

Andrea moved over to the kitchen, still perplexed by how the suggestion had snuck its way out of her mouth. She had half-expected the other woman to politely refuse anyway, but it seemed the Major was on a mission to confound her expectations at the moment. First they’d had a civil chat in her office a couple of days ago, and now here she was seemingly round for a friendly visit. Or maybe there was some ulterior motive that the Major hadn’t got to yet.

Fishing out some mugs, Andrea glanced over her shoulder. “How do you take it?”

“Black, please, no sugar.”

Andrea was pleased to note that the Major had followed her towards the kitchen and away from the books. She was now sitting on one of the high stools at the counter. Fortunately the Major didn’t notice or comment on the fact that one stool seemed to be missing.

Andrea fixed the requested drink, making herself a tea at the same time. Crossing to where the Major sat, she set the drinks down and took up a position on the stool opposite the other woman.

“Thank you,” said the Major, picking up the mug and actually sniffing the contents for a moment. Andrea raised her eyebrows at the rather candid gesture. The Major glanced up, suddenly realising what she had been doing. “Sorry, force of habit,” she laughed.

“You obviously like your coffee.”

“A little bit too much,” agreed the Major, “I keep telling myself I won’t have any past 6 o’clock at night, but it always seems to tempt me. And then I wonder why I can’t sleep.”

Andrea picked up her own drink and took a sip. It was rather hot, but she needed something to stop her conspiratorial mind drifting again, as it had as soon as the Major had mentioned her sleeping habits. “Was there any other reason for your visit?” asked Andrea, not really sure what she was expecting or wanting the Major to answer.

The Major took a sip of her coffee before answering. “No, just making sure everything is all right. I like to make sure all our operatives are happy.”

It took a moment for Andrea to realise the Major was waiting for a response. She had barely registered the words that had issued from the other woman’s lips, so focussed was she on the way they played across the rim of the mug instead. The light from the

lamps just highlighted the moisture dappled on them, generated by the warmth of the mug. “Right,” noted Andrea, guessing that was a safe enough bet for something to say.

The Major peered up from her mug, showing no sign she had noticed Andrea’s distraction. “So, how are you getting on with the others?”

Andrea’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You mean how am I getting on with Tardelli?” she deduced.

A small smile curved the Major’s lips. “Well, I don’t think anyone could have failed to notice the slight ‘antagonism’ between you two,” she said diplomatically.

“If you call ‘slight antagonism’, wanting to kill me,” agreed Andrea. “I guess I just rub some people up the wrong way,” she noted, cocking her head to one side as a not-so-subtle indication of who those other ‘people’ were.

“Yes,” remarked the Major, picking up on the reference, “Though I hope that we’re getting on better now?”

“I suppose so,” replied Andrea noncommittally. She wasn’t going to concede anything to the other woman just yet. Especially not with the tricks her body was presently trying to play on her. She wondered if it was just the relaxed atmosphere or late hour that was causing it to rebel so badly. The small smiles the Major kept offering up certainly didn’t help, nor did the way her voice had gotten even huskier as she drunk the coffee. Andrea didn’t think the Major even realised what she was doing.

“At least we seem to be able to have a conversation without any doors being in danger of destruction,” joked the Major.

“For the time being,” Andrea agreed, deciding it was probably safer just to keep her answers short.

“So, there’s nothing you know of that’s upset Tardelli?” asked the Major, returning to the main topic of discussion.

Andrea shook her head. “No, she’s barely said two words to me since I got here. Well, apart from some choice Italian swear words.”

The Major laughed again. “You seem to know a few choice words too, Swedish I’m guessing?”

“That’s right. I was born in England but then lived in Sweden until I was six, before coming back to this country,” explained Andrea, surprising herself again by offering up such personal details. Something about the Major was making her feel like she could confide in her, though. It did cross Andrea’s mind that it could all be a well-practised routine to elicit information – Andrea was no stranger to those herself. “Perhaps you should try speaking to Tardelli herself,” suggested Andrea, trying to

steer the conversation away from her background before she revealed too much. “Maybe she can tell you what’s got up her nose, because I sure as hell don’t know.”

“Yes,” nodded the Major, “Though something tells me I won’t get far - Bel is almost as stubborn as you are.”

Andrea raised a single eyebrow. “I just like to keep you on your toes.”

“My toes are well and truly worn out from all the time I’ve spent on them recently,” admitted the Major. “Apart from Tardelli, is there anything else bothering you at all? Any other problems?”

Andrea regarded her for a moment, pondering whether she should mention the nightmares. This was the second time the Major had asked her this, and she was beginning to wonder if it was just genuine concern or something else. Andrea decided against bringing up the dreams – she still wasn’t comfortable with the idea of admitting any weakness to the Major or anyone else at the base.

“I don’t think so,” said Andrea in answer.

“Ok,” said the Major, though something in her face suggested to Andrea that she didn’t quite believe her. “Well, I suppose I should leave you to your packing,” added the Major, finishing the last of her drink and slipping off the stool. “Thanks for the coffee.”

Andrea walked over to the door with her. “You’re welcome.”

“Good night,” said the Major, flashing Andrea a quick smile as she departed.

Andrea closed the door and let out a long sigh. She tried to tell herself that the tension she had been feeling was just from the prospect of the Major uncovering the book and nothing else. Thinking of that, she headed back over to the table and fished it out from the bottom of the pile. Opening it at the back, she peeled away the last sheet where it was attached to the cover. A single small piece of paper fell out into her hand. As Andrea read the brief text she smiled to herself – at last she might get some answers about the accident.

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Andrea clambered up the ladder and onto the quayside. She quickly glanced around to check she hadn’t been spotted, but the stone jetty was deserted. Her only company were a few seagulls perched on the tethering posts that lined the walkway, most of them dozing in the moonlight that reflected off the damp flagstones. She reflexively pulled her collar up to ward off the chill wind that whipped in off the sea, and turned towards the town.

As soon as she had received the note from Maria the day before, Andrea had known it was time to put her plan into action. Tom had already informed her about the supply boats that came to the island and exactly what times they docked. With her newly

enhanced strength it had been no problem hanging onto the side of the ship until they had departed from the island where the base was located, avoiding the final checks made by the soldiers. Once they were on the way back Ayr, which was the closest town on the mainland being a few miles distant, Andrea had clambered on board and hidden herself until they reached the harbour.

Tom had also been able to tell her about the various pubs around Ayr, one of which she was heading to now. It made Andrea wonder exactly how many times he had been off the island, or whether he was all talk. He could easily have come by the information from some other source, other than personal experience – some of the soldiers; the men from the supply boat. It occurred to her that perhaps he wanted to see how she got on before trying anything himself. Or more precisely, he wanted to see what happened to her when the Major found out.

Andrea knew the Major would not be happy, to put it mildly. Most likely the army officer would tear into her with venom when she caught up with her. And Andrea had little doubt that they *would* track her down eventually. She had made sure she left behind the communicator, which probably had a tracking device in it, but these were resourceful people, and Andrea suspected she wouldn't have long at large. That didn't matter, though, as long as she had time enough to get what she wanted. Andrea had deliberated about leaving behind the armband she had concealed under her shirt too, but had decided against it – the last thing she needed was to have a seizure in the middle of town. Instead she had carried out a thorough inspection of the device, but hadn't uncovered anything obviously suspicious.

Thinking of the reaction her impromptu trip off base might generate, Andrea's mind drifted back to the Major. It was a shame she was going to anger the other woman, just when they had been starting to get along. She tried to picture the exact reaction she might get - most probably a mixture of anger and disappointment. It was something she was used to generating in others, but for some reason she felt particularly disturbed that she was about to evoke it in the Major.

From the way Tom and Harry's had spoken in the messhall, she could well imagine that the Major could be very imposing when she was angry. Andrea had caught a few brief flashes of the Major's ire herself, but had to admit that the older woman had done well to maintain her composure in the face of Andrea's belligerence. However, Andrea thought that this latest escapade would be one thing too far in her challenging of the Major's authority.

But in the end what could the Major do to her anyway by means of punishment? Andrea was practically incarcerated on the island, as it was. Perhaps she would lose some privileges or something, but it would be worth it if Maria could give her the answers she was looking for. That was the main focus of her trip, and the Major and the army base couldn't be her concern her right now. It had been over two weeks since the accident, yet the images of her dead colleagues still haunted Andrea's dreams every night. She owed it to herself and them to find out what had happened that day. They deserved justice and she deserved some peace.

Walking down the street, which ran from the harbour along the bank of the River Ayr, she thrust her hands into her pockets and kept her head lowered. There were quite a

few other people out for a drink that Wednesday night. The stiff breeze whipped a few odd strands of her blond hair into her face and she had to reach up to brush them away. She was surprised quite how busy it was, what with it being mid-week, though it was probably a good thing – she was less likely to arouse suspicion in a crowd. The sound of laughter filtered out onto the street from an inviting looking pub, but Andrea passed it by – she had a specific destination that night. There certainly wasn't a shortage of pubs along the street she noted; all seemingly having names centred round things nautical. There was The Smugglers, The Boathouse and the one she was heading for - The Anchor.

Pushing open the door, Andrea was pleased to see it too was crowded. She barely caused a flicker from the throng as she crossed to the bar. Though the frontage of the pub made it look like a traditional Scottish hostel, inside it was actually smartly decorated – obviously having fallen foul of the trend for pub modernisation and homogenisation. If it wasn't for the predominance of Scots accents floating around the room, Andrea could just have easily been in a pub back in London.

Waiting for the barman, she cast a quick glance over the drinks on offer, including some rather suspicious looking local beers that she was going to steer well clear of. She also took the opportunity to study the other occupants of the pub. They were quite a wide variety of people all mingling together – office workers out for a post work drink; a few salty looking sailor types; groups of young townies. Andrea's police side had suspicions that a good number of the last group were underage. Once she got served, she decided to stick with a reliable bottle of Budweiser. She took a grateful swig of as she checked her watch again.

Luckily she didn't have to wait long before her friend arrived. Andrea spotted her as soon as the short, dark-haired woman stepped in the door. As Maria's eyes met hers, Andrea couldn't help breaking out into a huge grin – it was so good to see a familiar face.

Maria smiled in response and quickly joined her at the bar. "Andi, it's good to see you!" she said, wrapping her arms around Andrea and pulling her into a warm embrace.

Andrea held on to Maria for a touch longer than she would normally have done. "And you too."

"How are you?" asked Maria, pulling back, her face displaying obvious concern, "And what the hell is going on?"

"I'm fine, and it's a long story!" replied Andrea, "How about I get you a drink, and we can talk about it?"

Getting another Budweiser, they headed off to a table to the side of the bar. Andrea couldn't quite believe Maria was there; it made everything seem almost normal again. However, then Andrea had to launch into her explanation of everything that had happened the past two weeks, and the illusion was shattered. She could see Maria's draw dropping in incredulity as Andrea's tale progressed, and she realised how utterly ridiculous much of it sounded. She had to impress on Maria that she was telling the

truth and hadn't just lost her mind. It said something about their friendship that Maria was willing to accept what Andrea was telling her without any proof.

"My god," was all a stunned Maria could manage, once Andrea had finished.

"I know, pretty unbelievable, huh?" Andrea knew she must have shocked Maria since the normally effusive woman was stuck for words. "It all started with that raid at the warehouse. There's something really suss about that whole thing, not just because they didn't want us speaking about it."

"Yeah, well even odder is the fact that we aren't even investigating it any more," revealed Maria.

"What?" cried Andrea a bit too loudly. A couple of other drinkers swivelled round in their seats for a moment, staring at her, before turning back to their own conversations. Andrea continued on in a quieter voice, leaning forward to whisper her comments. "But how can that be, twelve people died in that warehouse!"

"I know," agreed Maria, "And don't think there haven't been questions asked, but the case has been sealed, and all our documents shipped out."

Andrea shook her head. "Something is seriously wrong here. Who ordered the closure of the case?"

"It came right from the top apparently, the Chief Constable himself. Even I haven't been able to dig up anything on it, and I've certainly been trying."

Andrea slowly sucked in a breath. This wasn't what she had been hoping to hear. "And what about Cowley, is he still under investigation at least, since it was his warehouse?"

"No, everything about him has been shipped out too. Not that you had that much on him anyway, the mystery man that he is. No one even knows what he looks like, or even what his first name is."

"Which is why he should still be under investigation!" Andrea declared with frustration. "This is unbelievable we spent months tracking his network of deals and now it's all been shut down?"

"All I can do is keep plugging at it, trying to find things out where I can" noted Maria ruefully, "But it's pretty much like banging your head on a brick wall to tell you the truth."

"Well be careful," said Andrea, "Someone obviously doesn't want this investigated, someone with influence."

"You do seem to have a habit of finding trouble," Maria remarked, "Though I think even you've outdone yourself this time."

Suddenly Andrea let out a sigh. "Oh, great," she muttered to herself.

“What is it?” asked Maria, confused by the outburst.

Andrea indicated the far side of the bar with her eyes. “Looks like my keeper is here to fetch me.”

Maria turned her head to follow Andrea’s gaze. Standing on the far side of the room, scanning the crowded bar, was Major Jarvis. She was alone and looked rather out of place standing in the bar in her full uniform. However, none of the bar’s other occupants seemed to be too bothered by her presence. Andrea supposed that the soldiers stationed on the base were allowed shore leave, and that perhaps this was one of their regular haunts, being close to the harbour. Andrea deduced she must have caught them off-guard enough for the Major to follow her without first changing into something less conspicuous.

“I don’t think *I* would be running away from that,” noted Maria, still looking over her shoulder at the Major.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Andrea, not sure what she was getting at.

Maria swivelled back round to face Andrea. “Oh, come on, you can’t tell me you haven’t noticed how gorgeous she is?”

“I suppose so,” admitted Andrea grudgingly, not willing to confess that indeed she had, but had found the concept too disturbing to ponder for long.

“Now I really know something is wrong! Ok, where’s my friend Andi, and what have you done with her?”

“Ha, ha,” replied Andrea, rolling her eyes as Maria poked her to check she was real.

“I know you never could resist a woman in uniform.”

“I resisted you didn’t I?” replied Andrea, trying to get off the current topic.

They didn’t have the chance to discuss it further as the Major had finally spotted her target, and was heading their way. Andrea considered that she could make a break for it, but no doubt there were other soldiers outside. Instead she remained seated as the Major approached, her eyes dark beneath her furrowed brow.

“Andrea, if you could please come with me,” requested the Major when she reached the table. The words were polite, but her voice so low and deadly that Andrea could barely hear it over the general hubbub of the room.

Andrea simply stared mutely up at her for a moment, just to let her know that she was reluctant about agreeing, before rising from her seat. Andrea glanced back at her seated friend. “Sorry, Maria, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sure, Andi,” replied Maria, obviously having caught the major’s stern demeanour and not wanting to intervene.

“My apologies, Miss Fernandes,” said the Major evenly, “But, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to have a chat with one of my officers, if you wouldn’t mind, to apprise you of the delicacy of this situation. You can wait here, and he’ll be in momentarily.”

Maria flicked her eyes to Andrea to verify that it was all right to comply. “Er, of course, no problem,” she replied, having got a consenting nod.

Andrea followed the Major silently outside and into the back of a waiting black car. Neither of them spoke as the driver started it up and pulled off into the evening traffic. They sat next to each other in the back, but the Major’s eyes were resolutely trained forward, her face a mask of cold disapproval. Andrea wondered exactly where they were going, but didn’t ask – she wasn’t going to be the one to break the deathly silence. If the Major wanted to give her the silent treatment that was fine, she could give as good as she got. Andrea didn’t really feel like talking in her current mood anyway. She had been hoping the talk with Maria would clarify things, but it had just left her with more questions. *Why had the case been closed? Who had taken away the case papers? It was all so bloody frustrating!*

Glancing out the window and away from the thinly veiled annoyance that radiated off the other woman, Andrea watched the people of the town going about their normal business, enjoying their nights out. Before she realised what she was doing, she found she had mangled the door’s armrest in her powerful grip. Looking down at the twisted metal and plastic, she wondered if *her* life would ever be normal again.

After several more minutes with just the sound of the engine purring away to fill the silence, Andrea could stand it no longer.

“Well, aren’t you going to tell me off, tell me how irresponsible I’ve been?”

“So you do realise that you have been then?” The Major’s voice was biting cold as she stared out the front of the car. When the streetlights periodically lit up the interior, Andrea could see that the Major hands were clenched tightly into fists as they rested on her thighs. The barely suppressed rage, waiting to erupt in Andrea’s direction, was palpable.

“That’s not what I said,” retorted Andrea defiantly, “But I’m sure it’s what you want to say.”

“But will it do me any good?” remarked the Major pointedly.

“Sorry?”

“It seems no matter what I tell you, you just ignore it anyway,” clarified the Major, “There hardly seems to be much point does there?”

“I suppose not,” Andrea agreed insolently, “So we’ll just sit in silence all the way to wherever we’re going shall we? Or maybe we could play a bit of I-spy, or sing a song to pass the time?”

The Major thumped her fist on the seat between them. “This isn’t some game, Andrea!” she exclaimed, whipping her eyes round to pin Andrea in place. The fiery look in them practically roasted the young woman where she sat.

“Do you still think we’re doing all this out of some private vendetta against you? Do you really think we have the time to bother?” the Major demanded furiously, each question emphasised with a pointed hand gesture. “I know you find this concept hard to grasp, but we are trying to do something good out at the base. All we’re interested in his helping you, yet you seem determined to throw it back in our face.”

“Right! Of course!” replied Andrea with disdain, “And there’s nothing in it for you lot, poking and prodding the weirdos to see what we’re all about.”

The Major threw up her hands in exasperation. “Oh, we’re back to that are we? Yes, it helps us to gain knowledge about you and your powers, but you can’t say that we’ve used you. We’ve kept you informed as to all we’ve been doing, explained everything you’ve wanted to know about. We treat you fairly don’t we?”

Andrea stubbornly refused to reply, rather than concede the point. She resolutely crossed her arms across her chest instead.

“Don’t we?” repeated the Major sharply, her eyes boring into Andrea, demanding an answer.

“I suppose,” mumbled Andrea in reply, looking down at her lap and wondering at how fast the Major had managed to make her feel about the size of a flea and as welcome as one too.

“And yet you still keep acting like a spoilt child,” continued the Major scornfully, “Running off and wasting mine and everyone else’s time chasing after you!”

Andrea’s eyes flicked up as something struck her. “And just how did you find me so bloody fast?”

The Major glanced away, momentarily stymied.

“There’s a tracking device somewhere on me isn’t there?” deduced Andrea from the Major’s reaction. “Where is it? In the armband? I knew I should have left that damn thing behind.”

The Major still failed to meet her gaze. “It’s not in the armband.”

Her sudden change in mood was making Andrea nervous. “Where is it then? Somewhere in my clothes? You bastards went through them before you delivered them to my room didn’t you?”

“No,” replied the Major, taking an audible breath and turning her eyes back to meet Andrea’s, “It’s implanted in your right arm.”

Andrea's mouth dropped open in shock. "Implanted...in...my...arm," she repeated dumbly. "Implanted in my arm?" she said once again with more force as the full implication hit her. "You claim to treat me fairly, respect my rights, but then you go and sneak a tracking device on me? Under my skin, in my body?"

"Well, it looked like we needed one didn't we?" replied the Major caustically.

"That's hardly the fucking point is it? You violated me!"

"And I am sorry we did," insisted the Major, "It was in the first days when you were with us, when you kept having those seizures..."

"So you thought you'd take advantage and carry out a little surgery while I was unconscious?"

"We didn't know what you might do. If you had left the island at that point you could have had a fatal seizure and we wouldn't have been able to help you."

"And I'm sure my health was foremost in your mind!" Andrea said with derision, "Nothing to do with you wanting to stop me running off and letting everyone know what's really going on at your top secret base."

"I would be lying if I said that wasn't part of the reason, but we do want to help you..."

Andrea cut her off with a disdainful snort. "I can see you'll always have some excuse to justify your actions. It's funny how people in power can always explain away their decisions with dubious logic."

"So you want me to just cut you loose do you?" the Major fumed back, obviously not liking Andrea's disparaging assessment of her character, "So you can tell the whole world about the base?"

"Yeah, that would be a start," agreed Andrea aggressively, "Anyway, why didn't you pick me up as soon as I left the island, if you've got this damn tracker beaming my every move back to you?"

The Major didn't reply, resolutely holding Andrea's gaze instead. The space in the back of the car seemed even more oppressively enclosed than it really was with all the high emotions swirling around it.

"You wanted to see who I was meeting, right?" surmised Andrea after a moment, "Just another little bit of spying, eh? You just can't help yourselves, can you? You want to control every little thing on that island and off it. Forget about the fact that we are human beings with rights or the capacity for independent thought. No, we all have to be good little drones, following the rules, toeing the line. God forbid we might actually have an opinion or want to leave!"

"This is not all about you!" the Major interjected, her voice harsh and unforgiving, "We have to maintain tight security, there's more at stake here than you realise."

“Oh really? Then why don’t you enlighten me? Oh, I forgot, you can’t – national security and all that bollocks!”

The Major looked like she was about to shoot back another angry salvo, but she caught herself. Her lips became a tight, thin line as she took a few deep breaths through her nose. “And has it ever occurred to you, in your selfish desire to do what you want, what that might mean in the grand scheme of things?” she finally asked.

Andrea held her gaze, a quizzical look crossing her face. *What was the Major talking about now?* Andrea considered it could be some sort of disarming tactic to try and distract her from the previous discussion, since the Major was on a loser with that one.

“You may find that there are people out there who do not have quite such noble intentions towards superhumans as us,” purported the Major.

Andrea was confused. “What do you mean? I thought our existence was a secret?”

The Major didn’t answer immediately, and in the dim light Andrea could just make out the thoughtful expression on her face. Andrea decided to wait and see what the Major was going to offer up, since her anger seemed to have subsided for a moment.

The Major eventually reached whatever internal decision she had been considering, her voice softer as she continued on. “Ok, I’m going to tell you something in the hope that you will understand one of the reasons we need to be so careful, even though I shouldn’t really be doing it.”

Her comments peeked Andrea’s interest – it appeared the Major was about to violate some sort of protocol regarding what she was allowed to tell her subordinates. Andrea wasn’t sure why she was doing it, but she wasn’t about to stop the other woman. She dipped her head slightly to acknowledge she understood.

“Though the existence of superhumans isn’t publicly known,” outlined the Major, “We know of at least a couple of ‘groups’, shall we call them, that are more than interested in getting their hands on superhumans, or any data pertaining to them, such as we collect. We’ve had a few close calls at the base, but so far we’ve managed to keep security pretty tight.”

Another streetlight flashed its glare through the back of the car just in time for Andrea to catch the tightening around the Major’s eyes when she said the words ‘close calls’. Andrea wondered what exactly they had been? Had someone tried to sell information? Had one of the other operatives escaped? Whatever it was, it had certainly annoyed the Major.

Andrea decided to defer those questions for now. She didn’t think the Major would be too receptive to discussing them anyway, if her expression had been anything to go by. “And why would these ‘groups’ want a superhuman or this information?”

“Just think of the power that would give someone,” ventured the Major, “Having a superhuman on your side, or maybe even the ability to create your own superhumans.”

“What?” exclaimed Andrea, her confusion increasing.

The Major nodded seriously. “Yes, we think that’s definitely on the agenda for these groups. Imagine that, a whole army of superhumans, for hire to the highest bidder.”

“And is that possible, to create a superhuman?” asked Andrea doubtfully, “I thought you needed this special gene.”

“Normally, yes,” confirmed the Major, “But there may be other ways to enhance a regular person, using DNA from a superhuman. In order to do that though, you need to have a source of that DNA.”

Andrea tried to process the other woman’s words as she spoke, “But surely, if you think about it, you’re one of these ‘groups’ too. You’re doing all the things that you’re talking about them doing. Hell, perhaps you want to create superhuman soldiers too!”

“There is one big exception, we’re here to serve the country,” the Major stated emphatically. “These people are only out to serve their own best interests. And I doubt they would have many qualms about how they got their information. You think our tests and experiments are tough? Well, try and picture what such ruthless people might do if they got their hands on you. And not just you, your actions put everyone at the base in danger – Tom, Harry, Bel.”

Andrea was silent for a moment, digesting what the Major had revealed. If these groups really did exist, she could see how valuable an asset a superhuman would be. She had a brief thought about seeking one of them out, though the Major’s warnings about their intentions rung in her ears. However, Andrea didn’t know if she could trust the other woman or not. It was in the Major’s interest to keep Andrea with her ‘group’, so why would she make any of these other ones sound appealing? On the other hand the Major could be telling the truth, and Andrea certainly didn’t want to be the one responsible for landing any of the other superhumans in trouble. She already had enough things weighing on her conscience as it was.

With Andrea still contemplating her options, the Major continued on, “Of course we do want to gain knowledge about you for our own interest, but we also want to help and protect you. We can hardly do that if you start wandering off the island on your own.”

“Your own interest is about right,” Andrea said scathingly, “You make out you’re all concerned about us and our well-being, but more likely you’re just worried about your job! It would look pretty bad for you, losing one of your people wouldn’t it?”

Andrea could immediately see she had hit a raw nerve. The Major’s eyes sparked angrily and a muscle in her cheek was visible as it twitched from where her jaw was clamped firmly shut.

Andrea pressed on, “Is that why you had to dash off after me in person, to keep it quiet?”

“No, for some stupid reason I felt responsible for you!”

“I don’t need anyone to look after me, I’m a big girl.”

“And what if you’d got into trouble, had a problem with your powers?”

“I’ve got your little device now, haven’t I? I would have been fine,” insisted Andrea. She wasn’t about to reveal that she’d had no intention of staying off the island for good anyway. Even she could see that she needed help for now, but she didn’t mind letting the Major worry.

“You may have the armband, but there are still other things that could happen to you,” insisted the Major. “There may be other aspects of your power that we haven’t uncovered yet, that you wouldn’t have been able to cope with.”

“Again with the mock concern!”

“I *am* concerned!” cried the Major, “It seems someone has to be, since you have a blatant disregard for your own safety or that of anyone else.”

Andrea looked at her sceptically. “Oh yes, I forgot, you’re trying to protect us all from these scary people who are just waiting to snatch us away?”

The Major tried to ignore Andrea’s sarcasm. “Not just from those people, but also from the general public to some extent. Think how you reacted when you learnt what you were. I believe ‘freak’ was the term you used, and you’re a supposedly intelligent woman. Do you think the average person is going to be too happy to discover he has ‘freaks’ living next door to him? Welcome them with open arms, invite them in for a cup of tea? I don’t think so, do you? More likely he’s going to want to put a brick through their window. It’s not the way it should be, but there are a lot of narrow-minded individuals out there.”

“So instead we shut ourselves away and pretend we don’t exist?” challenged Andrea.

“For now, but in time, who knows? We’ve known about this for such a short amount of time, these are just the first tentative steps. We just have your best interests at heart, I wish you weren’t so blasted stubborn that you could see that.”

“Yeah, well, I guess you’re going to have to keep trying.”

The Major sighed, realising she was making little headway. “Believe what you want. Just as long as you don’t continue to endanger yourself and others by your foolish actions, I don’t care. Why are you so desperate to get off the island anyway? What was it that you needed to discuss so urgently with your friend? Or more to the point, what was so secret about it that you couldn’t discuss it over the phone?”

Andrea laughed bitterly. “Like I’m going to tell you! That’s exactly why I needed to see her off the island – so you bastards weren’t listening in! Have you ever even heard of privacy?”

“Yes,” the Major replied, “But as I said before, we have to know what’s going on at the base, and more importantly any communication off it. Were you discussing the warehouse incident again?”

“We might have been.” Andrea wasn’t going to disclose any more voluntarily.

“I know it must have been hard for you, having lost all your colleagues like that…”

“Hard for me? You have no bloody idea!”

“You would be surprised,” said the Major so quietly that Andrea barely caught it. Andrea wondered if the other woman had even meant to let it slip out, since the Major herself seemed to ignore it, adding instead, “I won’t have any idea unless you tell me.”

Andrea stopped for just a moment. A tiny voice, way in the back of Andrea’s mind was prompting her to tell the Major, tell her about the nightmares. Andrea squashed it down. “I’m not telling you anything.”

The Major sighed, rubbing her eyes in an overt display of her frustration.

Andrea pressed her advantage, “So does that mean you’re going to put me under the spotlights now? Force it out of me?”

The Major’s eyes shot to Andrea in disbelief. “Who exactly do you think we are?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?”

The Major shook her head, obviously deciding she didn’t. “No, we won’t be ‘forcing’ anything out of you. I had hoped that you might volunteer the information, since I was good enough to explain the situation to you when I didn’t have to, but I guess not. All this means is that we’ll need to keep an even tighter watch on you from now on, now you’ve shown you can’t be trusted.”

“I can’t be trusted? You are unbelievable!” cried Andrea, “Fine, do whatever you want. Stick a million little trackers on me, cameras all over my quarters – I’ll still find a way to outsmart you lot.”

“Were you planning this little escape the whole time?” the Major asked with an air of disappointment, “Just playing along until you got your chance? For some reason I thought we were actually starting to make some progress, but I guess that was all just an act on your part. Your arrogance and selfishness knows no bounds does it? Do you ever consider anyone else but yourself?”

The Major’s words stung, and Andrea was tempted to correct the assumptions. The Major was partly right, though, Andrea had been planning to get off the island, but not

for purely selfish reasons. And it hadn't *all* been an act. In fact, if Andrea was being brutally honest, she had to admit that she'd actually started to have a grudging respect for the Major, maybe even like her a bit. Andrea was hardly about to tell the other woman that now, in the middle of receiving a bollocking. And especially not after the character assassination she'd just received. Her stubborn side was telling her she should just remain silent and let the Major think she had been fooled instead.

Since Andrea had steadfastly refused to respond, the Major shifted in her seat, leaning closer. She got so close that, even in the low light, Andrea could make out the whites of her eyes. Andrea felt like a small animal caught in headlights, unable to move under the intense stare. When the Major started speaking again, her voice had dropped to its lowest register, whispering out across the short distance between them with deadly menace.

“I really don't care if you like me or not, or anyone else at the base for that matter. All I care about is the well being of my people. So let me make it perfectly clear that if you ever, *ever* do anything like this again, I shall make you will wish you had never been born.”

CHAPTER 5

Kate ducked her head inside the door of the pub, quickly pulling back her hood and shaking the rain from it. She ran her hand through her auburn hair in an attempt to put some life back into the bob that had gotten rather damp in the quick dash between the boat and the quayside pub. That was despite her heavy duty, all-weather jacket. It seemed the Scottish rain could beat anything, even a coat touted to be able to withstand arctic conditions. Given the horrendous weather, Kate was surprised to see the pub was still pretty busy that Saturday lunchtime. She should have known that a bit of rain would hardly be enough to keep the Scots from their drink. In fact she could hear the whiskey calling to her now.

Making her way over to the bar, she found a single malt already waiting for her on the dark wooden bar. Taking it she offered the barman a quick smile before she put the glass to her lips and downed it in one gulp.

“Cheers, Angus, just what the doctor ordered on a foul day like today. I’ll have another, and whatever you’re having.”

“Thanks, Major,” replied the man in his thick Ayrshire accent.

Kate rolled her eyes and then fixed them on the barman as he put her glass to the optics. “Angus, how many times have I told you - I come here to get away from people calling me that. If I wanted to be the Major, I would have worn my uniform. It’s Kate, please.”

He put her fresh drink back on the bar, bringing his finger up to tap on his nose. “Sorry, *Kate*. Incognito today are we?”

“Hardly,” laughed Kate, “I think everyone in this town knows exactly who I am. It’s your favourite source of gossip isn’t – what goes on at the mysterious army base?”

“Someone has a high opinion of their own importance.”

“So you’re saying no-one ever mentions it?” queried Kate with the quirk of an eyebrow.

“You can hardly blame them,” he said with a shrug, “You turn up here less than a year ago with all you weird and wonderful equipment and your exclusion zones and your secrets. Of course that’s going to be a goldmine for rumours in a quiet corner of Scotland like this. And then you only go and encourage the gossip with nuggets like that little confrontation in here two weeks ago.”

Kate frowned for a moment and looked down at the light brown liquid in her glass. She was unable to keep the dark look from her face as she recalled how she’d had to

turn up in the bar and haul Andrea away with her after the young woman had gone against the Major's wishes and left the island base. Even worse was that Andrea had been meeting and talking to a colleague of hers. Kate just couldn't believe Andrea's recklessness sometimes. The friendly inquisitiveness of the locals was one thing, the attentions of a trained police officer was something else. It was hard to imagine Andrea had ever been a successful police officer herself if that was the way she normally went about things - ignoring her superiors and risking the confidentiality of her cases.

Angus noticed Kate's momentary distraction and obviously realised his mistake in bringing the incident up. "Though that didn't keep them occupied long," he added, trying to lighten the tone again, "Before you were relegated back to your usual place as second favourite topic of conversation."

Kate glanced up at him again. "And what do we come behind?"

"The state of the Scottish football team of course."

Kate let out another laugh. "Ah yes, I can see how we'd come second to such a rich vein of material as that!"

"Don't you be starting now!" replied Angus jokingly, "You English, coming up here and rubbing it in, like you've done so well since '66. ^[6]"

"Ok, point taken," agreed Kate, sipping at her drink this time.

Angus picked up a glass, starting to wipe it dry with his tea towel. "So, no sailing today then?" he asked, deciding a switch to a safer topic was in order.

"Sailing?" repeated Kate incredulously, "Have you seen the weather out there?"

"That? Och, that's a just a wee breeze, and you call yourself a sailor!"

It was true that Kate would normally like to spend at least part of her weekend sailing her boat out of Troon harbour, just up the coast from Ayr. However, even she drew the line at taking the Flyer out in a force ten gale for pleasure. The trip over from the island had been bad enough and she wouldn't have bothered if she didn't have a meeting to keep.

"Ah, looks like your friend is here," noted Angus, causing her to swivel on her bar stool.

She quickly hopped off to accept the hug that was fast approaching, along with the kiss on the cheek that followed it.

"Sophie, good to see you," said Kate with a smile, pulling back from her friend's embrace.

"You too, Kat, though you could have arranged a bit of better weather for me. I almost bloody drowned between the car park and here!"

Kate chuckled at Sophie's disgruntled expression. "I thought you would have been used to it, being a hardy Scot yourself."

"It must be all those years away with the army that have made me weak. Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Iraq have nothing on crappy Scottish weather!"

"You love it really," commented Kate with a wink. Ordering a drink for her friend, they went over to sit in one of the booths away from the bar.

Kate had met Sophie McAllister at Sandhurst^[7] fifteen years ago where they'd quickly cemented a firm friendship, having the common cause of being two women against the old boys network that still prevailed there. They'd both been determined young women back then, intent of making the most of their army careers. Not that it had all been serious – they'd also found plenty of time for fun and games, often at the male officers' expense. They made a slightly unusual pair, the petite, yet quietly confident and powerful Kate, and the more obviously larger than life Sophie, with her stout, muscular frame. They'd gone their separate ways since then, into their respective postings and regiments, but they'd always kept in touch and met as often as possible.

Sophie scraped a hand through her short, dark hair as she took a swig from her pint of lager. "So how are things going with you at the top secret base then?" she asked conversationally

"Not too bad," replied Kate, "Though I'm having a bit of trouble with one of my new operatives."

"Well, that's what you get for babysitting civilians - no respect for the chain of command. You know you never have told me what's so special about these people that they need a whole squadron of the British Army's finest to look after them."

Kate regarded Sophie with friendly suspicion. "And I'm not going to, no matter how much you try and wheedle it out of me or how many drinks you try and ply me with."

"Now that sounds like a challenge!" Sophie craned round in her chair. "Angus, another whiskey for the good Major!"

"Sophie! It's only one o'clock."

"Since when did you care about a little daytime drinking?" scoffed Sophie, "I can remember you drinking a fair few of those pompous twats under the table at Sandhurst. They never could quite get over the fact that a woman might be able to hold her drink better than them."

"No," chuckled Kate, remembering the sight of officers in their dress uniform tumbling to the floor in a drunken stupor, "Though it didn't stop them coming back for more or trying their hand at other things."

"Indeed, though as I recall you were a demon on that snooker table too. I know I certainly made a packet from betting on you."

“I’m glad I was able to provide such a good source of income.”

Sophie tipped her head nonchalantly to the side. “Where do you think I got all those cigarettes and bottles of booze from?”

“I didn’t like to ask!”

Sophie smiled, raising her glass in Kate’s direction. “Well, here’s to beating the twats!”

Kate clinked her smaller glass against it. “To the twats!” She finished off her whiskey, accepting the replacement that Angus had brought over.

“So, can you tell me about this difficult guy then, the one that’s giving you problems,” asked Sophie, “Or is that secret too?”

“It’s a woman actually,” replied Kate.

“Ah, well that explains everything!” exclaimed Sophie, rolling her eyes, “You don’t have to tell me about women and what a pain in the arse they can be!”

“Oh, she’s that all right,” concurred Kate with a rueful shake of the head.

Sophie looked at her inquisitively having caught the tone. “Sounds intriguing.”

“That’s one way of putting it. You’re right about the civilian thing, though, it does make it tricky since they’re not directly answerable to me as such – it’s not like dealing with your average squaddie where they know exactly who’s boss.”

“So this woman is challenging your command then?” asked Sophie in obvious surprise, “Does she value her life?”

Kate laughed out loud, drawing a few stares from the other patrons. “You don’t know Andrea,” she continued on more quietly, “She’s stubborn, wilful, headstrong and bloody clever too. I think I may almost have met my match.”

Now Sophie’s dark eyes really did widen in shock. “My god, I need to meet this woman! Someone who can stand up to Kate Jarvis and live to tell the tale!”

“Well, she’s barely living,” allowed Kate wryly, “I had to really chew her out a couple of weeks ago for a blatant breach of protocol.”

“Ouch, I bet that hurt!”

“Indeed, though now she’s just avoiding me as much as possible which doesn’t make my job any easier.” Kate took a moment to rub her hand across her temple and down her face as she was reminded of the frustration of trying to deal with Andrea since their talk in the back of the car. She had hoped that Andrea might have seen sense after that, but if anything she was even more obstinate.

“Sounds like you have your work cut out then,” noted Sophie, “Though I have little doubt you’ll win her around. You just need to turn on a bit of that Jarvis charm.”

Kate snorted a laugh. “I hope so, I can’t really afford any more cocks ups, since I already have those two black marks against my name.”

“Two? Iraq and...?”

“Adam.”

The single word was enough to cause Sophie to purse her lips thinly together. “Ah, yes, I had tried to erase that whole mess from memory.”

“Me too.” agreed Kate.

“Well, it’s your own fault if you will insist on involving yourself with men,” remarked Sophie with a shrug of the shoulders.

“Uh oh, I sense the recruiting speech coming on,” sighed Kate, “Weren’t you telling me a minute ago how much of a pain in the arse women are?”

“That’s true,” conceded Sophie, “But they’re also wonderful, beautiful, intelligent...fantastic in bed.”

Kate choked on the latest sip of her whiskey, coughing a couple of times to try and ease its path down her throat.

“Certainly better than you’re going to get from any guy,” added Sophie.

“This from the self confessed lesbian – have you ever even slept with a man?”

Sophie made a face of disgust. “No, and I don’t want to or need to, thank you very much. Urgh, just the thought of penis,” Sophie shuddered. “How can you even look at it without laughing?”

“Well, you never know until you try it,” offered Kate, “I did dabble on your side of the fence after all.”

“Now that’s flattering, I’m a bit of a dabble now am I?”

“No offence, but it really wasn’t my thing...” remarked Katherine. She quickly spied Sophie’s slight frown, “Not that you were bad or anything...” she tried to explain rather tactlessly.

“Carry on, carry on,” said Sophie with a wave of the hand, “I’m just wondering how much deeper you can make this hole before you can’t get out.”

“Much, much deeper unless you take pity on me and pull me out?” Kate attempted her most winning smile.

Sophie narrowed her eyes as she stared back at Kate. Finally she gave in and sighed. “Damn, you know I’m a sucker for that smile, always was,” she confessed. “It’s just such a shame.”

“What is?”

“You being straight, it’s a major loss to the lesbian community, no pun intended.”

“Oh right, like I’d have them queuing up,” remarked Kate sceptically.

“Are you kidding?” cried Sophie, “You’d be fighting them off with a stick, especially if you let them see you in that uniform of yours.”

“Is that your normal ploy then?”

Sophie smiled wickedly. “It never fails.”

Both women laughed heartily. More drinks were ordered and the conversation drifted through a number of topics from more reminiscences of their time at Sandhurst, through their latest postings to the state of their respective love lives. The last subject was fairly short from Kate’s point of view – she didn’t have a love life, at least not since the disaster that was Adam. Sophie on the other hand seemed to suffer from the opposite problem – too many women and not enough time. By the time Kate had moved onto the pints too, she found the discussion had come round to Iraq, where they had both served during the recent war, though with different units. She wasn’t quite sure how they had got onto talking about it, and she was entirely comfortable with it either. As Sophie made some comments, Kate remained quiet, studying her glass intently instead, sliding her fingers through the condensation on the outside.

As she stopped talking, Sophie noticed the other woman’s distraction. “Sorry I didn’t mean to bring up painful memories,” she said gently.

“Forget about it,” said Kate quietly, not looking up.

“Should we though?”

“What?” Kate glanced up. Sophie was regarding her softly.

“Forget about it,” she clarified. “I mean we’ve been best friends for how long now? Fifteen years? We’ve told each other everything over those years, shared the good and the bad, but you’ve never really talked about what happened in Iraq.”

Kate thought there was a good reason for that, it had been painful enough for her at the time and she really didn’t want to be dragging it up now, raking it all over again. She’d been through it enough times over the past year as it was.

Sophie wasn’t being put off by Kate’s continued silence, though. “I left it to begin with, I thought it was just the rawness of the pain that was keeping you quiet, but it’s

been a year now and you've still not really said much about it. I'm just worried for you - that you're bottling it up."

Kate exhaled slowly, deciding she owed her friend some sort of explanation. "I appreciate the concern, and I'm not shutting you out on purpose. The thing is there are aspects of what happened there that are classified and I find it hard to talk about any of it without mentioning those." That was only partly true, but it made a convenient excuse.

"Classified? Even from me?" asked Sophie doubtfully.

"I'm afraid so," insisted Kate, "I wish I could tell you."

"But have you talked to anyone about it?"

"Oh yes, I've had enough counselling to last me a lifetime," she said, closing her eyes and shaking her head as she recalled the parade of psychiatrists and psychologists that she'd been forced before, "They would hardly have allowed me back to command if they didn't think I was of sound mind would they."

"Maybe," admitted Sophie, still unsure, "Though it always struck me as a bit of a strange move. One minute you're in the infantry with the Devon and Dorset's and the next minute you're with the Intelligence Corps, hiding away on some secret island in Scotland. Are you sure they trust your skills?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence!"

"You know what I mean, the Intelligence Corps is hardly the front line is it? A load of desk jockeys snooping on phone calls and emails."

Kate didn't directly answer that, since she herself thought that way sometimes. "After Iraq I was lucky to keep my job at all," she commented instead, "In fact I might not have if Lieutenant Colonel Parsons hadn't stepped in on my behalf and arranged my transfer."

Sophie raised her eyebrows. "I didn't realise he saved your butt."

"Yes, well he's always looked out for me where possible," replied Kate, "So when there were a whole host of people clamouring for my head or worse, he discretely organised extended leave before getting me the position in charge of the base."

"Lucky you have friends in high places."

"Tell me about it," agreed Kate, "Especially after my other total lapse in judgement six months ago."

Sophie made to open her mouth but Kate quickly shot a hand up to stall her.

"Don't even say anything. I know it was stupid, we've already mentioned his name once in this conversation, let's not bring it up again. Anyway, coming so close after

Iraq, I was extremely lucky to survive that one and I certainly won't be getting a third chance. Any more cock ups and it will be court-martial here I come."

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Andrea crouched down in the undergrowth trying to find shelter from the harsh April weather that consisted of rain driving over the island like a million icy needles, whipped in from the Atlantic by the howling wind. The inclement weather only added to her sense that the training games they were engaged in were an annoying waste of time. Her soaked fatigues clung to her body as she dreamt of a warm bath and a good book. She didn't know why they had to be outside on a day like today and had noted how the Major had buggered off to the mainland and left them under Chadwick's supervision. She considered that maybe that was why they were stuck out there – the lieutenant was hardly the biggest fan of the superhumans after all. He was probably safely ensconced in a jeep somewhere, watching them run around like idiots in the wind and rain.

"Knock, knock!"

Andrea turned to her companion with a quizzical look. The bright blue eyes of Tom Parsons regarded her expectantly from beneath the brim of his peaked cap. Like her he was soaked to the bone, though it didn't appear to have dampened his spirits.

"You looked like you were miles away," he noted.

"Sorry, I was just thinking how pointless these stupid games are."

"Pointless maybe," he allowed, "But I still want to win!"

Andrea merely rolled her eyes at his enthusiasm. A grin was never far away from Tom's face, whatever the situation.

"Oh like you don't want to?" he commented, noticing her expression, "Don't try and pretend you're not competitive - you were practically trampling Bel into the dirt to get there first on the last one."

"Yes, but that was Tardelli."

Tom laughed at the deadpan delivery of the remark. "You two really don't get along do you?"

"Not for want of trying," said Andrea with a sigh, "You and Harry have been fine, you've helped me out a lot in settling in here. But with Tardelli...I don't know what it is! Even though she practically tried to kill me, I've attempted being nice. I've tried to entice her into games of pool in the rec room, chat with her over meals, but she just doesn't seem to like me for some reason."

"I can't imagine why."

Andrea fixed him with a stern look. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you can come across as a bit...er...,” he searched for the right word, avoiding her penetrating gaze, “...overpowering sometimes. Maybe even a little arrogant.”

“I am not arrogant,” insisted Andrea indignantly, “I’m just confident of my own abilities.”

Tom shrugged nonchalantly. “Like I said, arrogant.”

“Do you want me to trample you into the dirt too?” asked Andrea, raising a single eyebrow as she pinned him in place with her eyes once more.

Tom laughed again holding up his hands in supplication. “I think you just take a bit of getting used to that’s all – all that plain speaking can be a bit of a shock to the system if you’re not ready for it. And you are a bit of an egghead too, so it can be a bit intimidating to us mere mortals.”

“Oh, yes, I can see you quaking in your boots,” said Andrea sarcastically, “And as for Tardelli...intimidated is not the word I would use to describe her attitude towards me.”

“Ok, not exactly, but I don’t think she likes to come second best to anyone, especially not the posh new kid on the block.”

Andrea let out an incredulous laugh. “Posh? Me?”

“Well, compared to Tardelli at least,” suggested Tom.

“I wouldn’t let her hear you calling her common, unless you fancy some of the same treatment I’ve been getting, or maybe your testicles handed to you on a plate.”

Tom was quick to refute her words. “Hey, I never used the word ‘common’, I would say...good, honest working class.”

Andrea shook her head as she made a small chuckle at his choice of expression. “Very diplomatically put. But I’m hardly some upper class twit am I - I did have a normal job before I came here.”

“True, but to someone like Tardelli - who grew up on a council estate in London - you’re from a whole different world. And then you’ve got the fact that she’s somewhat determined and strong-willed, just like you are, and you’ve got a recipe for disaster. You just rub each other up the wrong way. That’s probably your problem with the Major too.”

“No,” corrected Andrea quickly, “She just gets on my nerves, full stop. All that army dogma, all those rules, regulations and secrets. Not to mention the embarrassing way she turned up at that pub two weeks ago and then gave me a right bollocking like I was some small child.”

“Well, you did sneak off the base without permission.”

Andrea narrowed her eyes at him. “Whose side are you on exactly?”

“No one’s – we’re all meant to be on the same side, remember,” he replied, “I keep telling you to give her a chance. I know you seem to think she’s got some personal vendetta against you, that it’s all her doing, you being stuck here, but it’s not. She’s just doing her job. If you’d stop and think for a minute, you’d see that she actually wants to help and make your time here as easy as possible. She’s very approachable you know.”

Andrea snorted with derision. “Are we talking about the same person here, because I could have sworn we were discussing Major Jarvis the woman who tore me an extra orifice not two weeks ago.”

“You’re just lucky she waited so long to do it,” commented Tom cryptically.

“What do you mean by that?” Andrea was blindsided for a moment, mystified by his remark.

“Well, you gotta admit you were a complete pain in the arse pretty much since the moment you got here...”

“With some justification...” interjected Andrea.

“Ok, maybe,” allowed Tom, “But if you let me finish, the point I’m trying to make is that, though I said the Major is approachable, she isn’t a soft touch either. She wouldn’t normally have stood for the sort of crap you were giving her for that long.”

A faint dawning was occurring in Andrea’s brain. “Hang on a minute, is this your roundabout way of saying she actually likes me?”

“I’m just going by what I see and hear, and I’m telling you, no one normally gets away with acting that way or speaking to her like that. At the very least, I think she understands what you’re going through and wants to help you, be your friend.”

“You seriously think she likes me?” scoffed Andrea, thinking he must be mad, “Now I know you’re joking!” A stubborn thought flashed through her mind, hoping that he wasn’t, but she ignored it.

“You know what I think,” said Tom, a slight air of exasperation in his tone, “I think you’re just being obstinate because you don’t want to admit you might have been wrong about her.”

“If you say so,” said Andrea dismissively before turning her attention away from him. She’d had enough of discussing the Major for the time being. Ever since the incident in Ayr she’d tried to keep their interaction to a minimum. She was unwilling to even consider that Tom might have a point, though deep down she knew he did. She realised she had been somewhat obnoxious since her arrival at the base and had pretty

much deserved everything she got, but the way the Major had spoken to her had wounded her pride.

Concentrating instead on what they were currently doing, she dug out the compass from one of the many pockets in her combat gear, shaking the drips from the peak of her cap so she could read it properly. That was another stupid thing about this exercise – why did they have to use a map and compass when there were perfectly good things such as GPS to navigate with? And to make matters worse they weren't supposed to be using their powers either. She was just starting to come to terms with her new abilities, and now they were telling her not to use them – it was all very confusing. Not that they'd learnt much more over the past couple of weeks. She still had to wear the special inhibitor armband all the time, to make sure she didn't have any unwanted seizures from using her powers. Or power, to be more precise since it seemed to consist only of enhanced strength. It was hardly the most interesting of abilities, she considered.

Brushing the rain from the plastic cover of the map she gauged where they were on the island. “So what is this meant to be teaching us exactly?” she asked Tom.

“I don't know,” he confessed, “Army tactics or something?”

“And have you wondered why we would need to know such things?” she pondered out loud

“Er, I dunno,” he replied, making a thoughtful face, “I thought it was just something to get us out and about a bit, rather than being cooped up indoors all the time, helping the boffins with their research.”

“Right,” said Andrea sceptically, “I'm sure that's all it is.”

“You know your problem, you're just too suspicious of everyone and everything. No one would ever guess you were a policewoman.”

“I think it's healthy to be curious about the world around me,” noted Andrea defensively, “We shouldn't just accept things without asking questions.”

“And boy do you love to ask those questions,” recalled Tom, grinning, “Christ you even manage to annoy Dr Todd sometimes and that is some feat. I bet you were a sodding nightmare in interrogations. If it were me under the spotlight, I think I would have been confessing to anything to get out of there.”

Andrea regarded him dubiously, sizing him up while he maintained his best innocent expression. “Hmm, I doubt that - I bet you were a handful too, always one step ahead of the law, a right likely lad. I guess it's lucky our paths never crossed.”

“For both of us,” he agreed, “Anyway, I'm a reformed character now, an upstanding citizen.”

Andrea couldn't keep the smile from her face. “Sure you are, that's why I've heard all about your stash of contraband.”

Tom looked surprised at her revelation. “Who told you that?”

“Ah-ha,” she said, wagging her finger at him, “I never reveal my sources.”

“It was Nathan wasn’t it,” deduced Tom for himself, referring to the supplies officer and de facto chef, “That man has the biggest mouth this side of the Clyde. You’re not going to tell anyone are you?”

“What, like the Major? As if!”

“It’s not like alcohol is banned on the base, anyway,” said Tom by means of explanation, “I mean they serve it in the bar – the squaddies would be rioting if they couldn’t have a pint of an evening.”

“And you just like to cater to their needs out of bar hours?”

“Exactly, supply and demand - I’m just fulfilling the natural need of your average soldier for booze.”

“And making a tidy profit while you’re at it?”

Tom grinned once more, dipping his head slightly to acknowledge the truth of her remark. “It doesn’t hurt. At least you know where to come if you need anything. What is your tippie of choice anyway?”

“I’m not really that big a drinker,” she admitted. She liked the odd one or two with friends but that was about the limit of it. She didn’t really see the point of solo drinking, not to mention the lack of control that alcohol brought on.

“Call yourself a proper policewoman?” he cried, “Ok, something else then?”

Andrea thought for a moment before replying. “I’m not sure if there’s anything else I need that I can’t get just by asking for it to be brought in. I have to admit that’s one thing they have been good about, and I made sure I asked for some particularly obscure scientific journals, just to see.”

“Journals? Flipping hell? How old are you exactly – sixty? Do you ever have any fun?”

“I’m twenty-seven years old for your information,” Andrea stated, “And I know how to have plenty of fun, but our opportunities are slightly restricted on this island after all. I did get a bunch of cds and the latest playstation games too if that’s more to your taste.”

“Ah, now you’re talking!” said Tom, a smile spreading across his face, “Don’t let Harry know, though, or he’ll be round your room faster than you can say Tekken. But there are other things I can get, things that you might not want to ask one of the stiffs for.”

Andrea's brow creased together as she wondered at his meaning.

"You know..." he said, tipping his head to the side and raising his eyebrows, before finally adding some crude hand gestures.

"Ah," she said in sudden realisation, "You mean pornography."

"Yeah, that kinda thing," he confirmed, "I'm sure I can get hold of some stuff suited to your particular tastes."

"You mean lesbian porn."

"Yeah, come to think of it I wouldn't mind seeing some of that myself..."

Andrea slapped him playfully around the head as he got a faraway look in his eyes, pleasant daydreams no doubt filling his mind.

"Oi!" he cried indignantly.

"Come on, let's get going," suggested Andrea clambering to her feet, "Then we might finally be able to get back to civilisation, or at least what passes for it on this godforsaken island."

Tom rose too, indicating ahead of him with his hand. "Lead on."

On the way to their target, Andrea's mind started drifting back to civilisation anyway, and the life she had led before coming to the island. She'd only spoken with Maria a couple of times since their curtailed meeting at the pub, and both had been brief conversations, with Andrea being acutely aware of who might be listening in. She just hoped that Maria was having some luck into her investigation of the warehouse incident, though officially she was meant to be on other cases since that particular one was closed. If Andrea had trusted any of the army officers on the base, she might have brought the suspicious way it had been swept under the carpet to their attention, but for now she had to rely on Maria.

Eventually they came out of the meagre cover offered by the small copse of trees and a fresh gust of wind buffeted Andrea in the face, almost whipping the hat from her head. She put her hand on top of it for a minute as she glanced around for the checkpoint.

"There!" called Tom over the sound of the storm, pointing to the top of a rocky outcrop.

They both started running for the red and white marker, Andrea more from a desire to get there and then get back in the warm. Reaching the foot of the slope, she spotted two other forms joining them from the opposite direction and also heading for the top at speed. Andrea pulled ahead of Tom, scrabbling nimbly over the slippery rocks as he floundered behind her. Despite the fact that she could see Tardelli gaining out of the corner of her eye, Andrea stopped for a moment to check on her partner.

“Don’t worry about me,” he yelled as she hopped back down the slope to help him up. She could see he had gashed his arm on the stones where he had stumbled. “Go!” he instructed waving her away frantically, “Tardelli’s gonna get there first!”

The dark haired woman had clambered past them now, intent on the winning post. Harry, meanwhile, was sliding about somewhere back down the slope, far behind them all.

“I don’t care about that, you’re hurt,” replied Andrea, bending down by Tom.

“I care! I’ll be fine, go on!”

Andrea eyed him for a moment, evaluating the seriousness of his injury, before turning and resuming her push for the top. She had to admit that part of her also wanted to beat the abrasive woman. Andrea’s long legs carried her over the uneven ground more quickly than the shorter Tardelli and she drew alongside as they reached the crest. Tardelli suddenly realised Andrea had caught her up, turning to offer her a surly snarl through the rain as they made the final sprint. Andrea ignored her, forging on against the wind that battered them directly in the face now, sweeping across the exposed outcrop. The tag on the checkpoint flapped tantalisingly in the air and Andrea made one final lunge to reach for it.

An icy blast suddenly clattered into her side, spinning Andrea away from the marker. Stunned, she crashed to the ground, tumbling haphazardly across the wet stone that lay over the top of the precipice. She didn’t realise she was at the edge until it was far too late and she was plunging off over it into thin air.

The wind whistled past her face and she just had time to get her arms up in a futile attempt to protect her head before she hit the rocks at the bottom.

Only she didn’t hit them.

It took a couple of seconds for that fact to register in Andrea’s mind and for her to realise she was no longer moving downwards either. Peeling her arms away from around her head, she tentatively glanced down. Her eyes widened in shock as she realised she was hovering in mid air, a couple of feet above the ground.

“Andrea?”

Andrea glanced back up to the top of the cliff where Tom, Harry and Tardelli were all peering anxiously over the edge at her. Suddenly Andrea’s downward movement resumed and she fell the remaining distance to the ground, jarring her right elbow on the hard rock. She was still sitting on the stones rubbing it when the others had finally made their way down to join her.

“How in the hell did you do that?” asked Tom in amazement, nursing his own arm.

Andrea glanced up at him. “I-I don’t know...” she replied, stunned. She looked back up at the cliff as if that would give her some sort of answer.

“However you did it, it was amazing – you were flying!” chimed in Harry excitedly.

“Hardly flying,” noted Tardelli, always one to look on the down side, “More like hovering and then falling.”

“Whatever it was, it’s a bloody good job I did it,” said Andrea, regaining her senses and rising to her feet to stare balefully at Tardelli, “Since you nearly killed me...again!”

“Yeah, but I didn’t did I?” replied Tardelli crossing her arms defiantly.

Andrea was getting increasingly angry at the other woman’s petulance. “Fulla Helvete! We weren’t even meant to be using our powers!”

Tardelli uncrossed her arms, pressing forwards into Andrea’s personal space. “What did you just call me?”

“Uh oh, here we go again...” managed Tom from behind them.

“A loose translation is ‘fucking bitch’” Andrea informed Tardelli matter-of-factly.

Tom just about managed to grab Tardelli before she launched herself at Andrea, hauling her away to the side.

“Just leave it, Bel!” he cried as she flailed in his grasp.

“You heard what she called me!”

“Yes, and you did almost kill her so why don’t you just count yourselves even?” Tom reasoned.

The sound of a vehicle approaching drew all their attention, and Andrea spotted an army jeep bouncing over the long grass towards them, leaving great muddy gouges in the turf behind it. It halted at the edge of the rocks and Lieutenant Chadwick climbed out from the passenger side, a pair of binoculars still in his hand. No doubt he had been watching the whole thing, including Andrea’s “flying”. She still wasn’t entirely sure that she had done it - maybe it had been a freak gust of wind? A *really* freaky gust of wind.

“Is there some sort of problem here?” he asked, glancing between Andrea and the still struggling Tardelli.

“No, no problem,” replied Andrea succinctly.

“No, everything’s fine,” agreed Tardelli as Tom released her, putting on a united front for the army officer’s benefit. Whatever their differences, they would still stick together against the military personnel.

Chadwick eyed the pair of them doubtfully, before turning his full attention to Andrea. “And what was that? What you were doing off the cliff?”

“I think it’s called flying,” interrupted Harry helpfully.

“I know it’s sodding flying, you moron,” snapped Chadwick at the young man, “But how was *she* doing it?” he added pointing an accusatory finger at Andrea.

As the two men spoke Andrea was still pondering over how she *had* done it. She wondered whether she could repeat the feat if she consciously thought about it. She closed her eyes for a moment to help her concentrate. Perhaps if she imagined herself rising off the ground, ever so slightly, just wafting up on the breeze.

“Hey! Get back down here!”

Andrea’s eyes flicked open to see the open landscape stretching out before her, the white crests of the waves on the choppy sea just about visible in the distance. Casting her eyes downwards, she saw Chadwick looking furiously up at her from his position several feet below her dangling boots. This time she made sure she kept thinking about maintaining her position so she didn’t come crashing down to earth with a bump.

“And just how are you going to make me?” she asked cocking her head to the side and drifting slightly further away from him. It really was the most wonderful yet unsettling feeling she had ever felt, just hanging there in the air with nothing to hold her up. Another blast of wind rocked her as she tried to prolong the fantastic experience.

Chadwick’s hand moved to rest on his handgun in its holster. “I could always shoot you,” he said seriously.

“Hey, man, that’s not funny!” Harry said angrily, coming round in front of the lieutenant in a challenging stance.

“Well, tell your freaky friend to get back down here then,” said Chadwick, pulling the gun out and waving it in Harry’s face.

“It’s all right, I’m coming down,” said Andrea, floating back down to the ground next to the two men, “You can put it away, Chadwick.”

His dark eyes turned to her, his lip curving into a nasty sneer. “Let’s get back to base shall we, I’m sure the docs and the Major will have something to say about this.”

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Andrea wandered into her quarters, flicking on the light to illuminate the darkness and going over to the fridge to grab a pepsi. As she popped the cap and took a swig, she supposed that ingesting sugar and caffeine probably wasn’t a good idea when she was already on such a high. No matter how many times she told herself, she still couldn’t quite believe it, but it was true – she could fly.

For the first time she actually felt good about the idea of being different from everyone else, of being a mutant. Flying, now that was a super power really worth having, she considered, smiling to herself. Everyone else seemed to think so too, if their reactions were anything to go by. As soon as they'd got back to the base, she'd been whisked off to see Drs Todd and Whitman so they could investigate this latest development in her abilities. However, Tom and Harry had also tagged along, fascinated to see what she could do.

Of course Doc wanted to take things slow as usual, ever cautious for her well-being. She, on the other hand, was itching to try it out and they could barely keep her on the ground in the underground training room. It was just such an exhilarating rush, that feeling of freedom, of floating in the air. She desperately wanted to go outside and just fly off into the sky, but Doc had looked aghast when she had even suggested it.

She supposed she could attempt it anyway, though it wouldn't be long before they discovered what she was up to, since they had bugged her. That was something that still rankled - that they would have the audacity to plant a tracking device in her arm. She subconsciously rubbed her right bicep where she knew it sat under the skin.

Andrea wondered how they would then stop her, even if they knew she had left. Chase after her in a helicopter? Shoot her down? It wasn't as if any of the others could fly so they wouldn't be able to catch her. She might even be able to go faster than a helicopter, or even a jet – she just didn't know at this stage.

Sitting down on the sofa, she guessed she would have to abide by doctor's orders for the time being, and allow them to observe and closely monitor her first attempts. It wasn't like it had all been plain sailing earlier on, and she had been grateful for the padded floor of the room on several occasions. Andrea didn't really relish the thought that she might lose concentration while several hundred feet in the air over the island. No amount of padding would protect her from a fall from that height.

When she'd pressed Dr Todd for an explanation of exactly how come she suddenly had this added ability, he had been rather evasive. He'd made some noises about energy conversion and needing to investigate further, but Andrea suspected that he was about as surprised as she was. Given that her ability to fly had only come to light nearly a month after the original accident, she wondered if there were any other dormant powers just waiting to burst forth. That thought was a little scary and she considered that the scientists probably thought much the same thing. And as for the Major...Andrea had little doubt that she wouldn't be too impressed by this latest development when she heard about it. This new power would make it even harder for them to contain and control her. Chadwick would probably be running to her as soon as she got back from the mainland to fill her in, and then it wouldn't be long before Andrea got a visit, she was sure of that. A small flutter of anticipation skittered through her at that thought.

Needing something to distract her from that last troublesome sensation and her restless to desire to go and explore her powers right away, Andrea leant forwards to grab the large, padded headphones that sat atop her stereo. She thumbed through her cds, selecting a suitable loud funky house compilation. As the thumping beat started in the headphones, she leant back against the cushions and closed her eyes.

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Kate strode along the corridor, trying to get her head around the new information she'd been presented with before she got to her destination. Chadwick had been waiting to see her as soon as she'd stepped off the boat from Ayr. Luckily the bracing sea air on the return crossing had gone some way to sobering her up and his news had been an added dash of cold water.

After her initial surprise she realised that the fact that Andrea could fly was fantastic in one way. It was certainly an interesting new mutation for them to get to grips with and could prove very useful. Not to mention how thrilling it would be for Andrea. Unfortunately that was where the problem lay. Chadwick had already told her how Andrea had wanted to fly off when they were outside, how he'd practically had to drag her back against her will. Once they'd got back to the base, she'd been eager to pursue things. Kate was pleased to some extent – at least Andrea was finally showing some enthusiasm about her abilities – but on the other hand she was wary about the level of power she was exhibiting. She considered that she only had Chadwick's word for what had occurred at the moment, and she wasn't entirely convinced she could trust her second-in-command's opinion, especially when it came to Andrea. The pair of them hadn't hit it off at all. Kate could understand that – she had her doubts about the man too. If nothing else at least *someone* had a worse relationship with the Andrea than she did.

Given Chadwick's unreliability as a source of information in this particular case, she had resolved to come and speak with Andrea herself. Kate had gone via her quarters first and changed back into her uniform to try and add that final touch of sobriety, hoping that the last traces of alcohol weren't detectable on her breath. She was wearing her regular barrack dress of olive green shirt and matching trousers, but had foregone the tie and jumper, hoping that she would come across as authoritative yet at the same time relaxed.

Reaching Andrea's door, she pressed on the entry chime. When there was no response she tried again. There was still no answer. Kate made a quick call to the security centre to check Andrea's location, but they informed her that she was indeed in her quarters. Kate tried the chime once more, getting increasingly worried – maybe Andrea had had one of her seizures and was lying unconscious in her room. Kate quickly used her command authorisation to override the lock on the door.

Stepping into the dimly lit room she spotted the bobbing blond head immediately, surprised by the degree of relief she felt at seeing Andrea was all right. Kate crossed the room, seeing that Andrea's eyes were closed as she listened to her music, the beat of which could just be heard drifting up from the sofa despite the headphones. Kate found herself suddenly unsure how to proceed, an unusual occurrence for her. Should she alert Andrea to her presence, thereby revealing she had let herself in the room and risk her ire, or should she just leave the young woman to it? While she considered her options she couldn't help studying Andrea's face - the perfect bone structure, the smooth skin, the full lips.

Kate shook her head – what was she, some sort of voyeur? Watching while the other woman was unaware she had an audience?

Having decided she should take the latter of her options, Kate turned for the door only to be alarmed when a sound issued from Andrea's mouth. Kate froze in place, feeling like the kid that had been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. She swivelled back to Andrea, trying to ready her excuses, only to see that the other woman's eyes were still closed. Another murmur slipped past Andrea's lips and Kate suddenly realised that she was actually asleep. Kate almost laughed out loud – how on earth could she sleep with that racket banging in her ears?

Relieved that she hadn't be caught out after all, Kate was about to leave when she saw Andrea's brow crease together in a frown, her eyes still firmly shut.

“No...leave me alone...”

The faltering, pleading words surprised Kate - they didn't sound like the normally confident Andrea at all.

“...I couldn't help you...”

It was obvious Andrea was having some sort of nightmare, and Kate was faced with the same decision as before – should she intervene or not?

“...no, no...”

Andrea was getting increasingly agitated now, her head flopping from side to side. Kate couldn't stand by and watch any longer.

She sat down next to the young woman and pulled off the headphones, the music suddenly louder in the room as they clattered to the floor. “Andrea!” called Kate firmly.

“...no...please...”

Kate grabbed the other woman's arms to shake her. “Andrea!”

Andrea's eyes flew open, flicking wildly around the room as she tried to get her bearings. They finally settled on Kate, a searching uncertainty in them for the briefest of moments before recognition dawned.

“What are you doing in here?” demanded Andrea, sitting up straight.

It was only then that Kate realised she still had her hands on Andrea's arms. She quickly dropped them, folding her hands in her lap instead. “I came to talk to you, but there was no answer to the chime.”

“So you just let yourself in?” challenged Andrea.

Kate noted how she ran her hand roughly through her long hair as she spoke and thought the young woman was still rather unsettled by the dream she'd been having.

"I thought perhaps something had happened to you, such as one of your seizures."

Andrea was momentarily stymied by the show of concern. "Well, as you can see, I'm fine, so I'd be grateful if you didn't barge in here unannounced in future."

Kate thought Andrea's annoyance stemmed more from the fact that she'd been caught in a moment of weakness, rather than Kate's presence per se. Considering that, she thought it best not to press Andrea on what she had been having a nightmare about for now. Andrea would most likely deny having had one at all in order to save face and then just get more aggressive to cover it up.

"An interesting choice of music," noted Kate instead, tipping her head to the headphones on the floor.

Andrea bent down to pick them up, putting them on top of the stereo and turning it off. "I like a bit of loud dance music to help me unwind."

"It was certainly that," agreed Kate amiably, casting a look at the other cds arranged on the small table by the stereo. "You got all the ones you wanted did you?" she asked indicating the pile with her eyes. She was hoping to steer the discussion onto more lightweight topics while Andrea recovered her composure and calmed down a bit.

"Yes, thanks," replied Andrea curtly.

"Quite an eclectic mix there," commented Kate, reading a few of the titles before peering round the rest of the room. She noted how the books that had been all over the place when she had last visited Andrea's quarters were now neatly arranged in a bookshelf against the near wall. It wasn't large enough to hold them all, though, with a couple of cardboard boxes at the side containing the overflow. "A bit like your choice of reading."

"As I said last time," Andrea said her tone starting to soften, "I like to keep abreast of a variety of subjects, as well as just reading for fun. You can never have enough knowledge."

Kate turned back to her with a smile. "Ah, is that why you like to ask all those questions of our scientists?"

"I just like to check they know what they're doing," said Andrea, shrugging, "It's not a problem is it?"

"Of course not, it's good that you're interested. God knows none of the others have ever shown much of an interest in that side of things. I'm sure Theo and the other doctors are only too happy to share their knowledge with you."

“You might want to check with them before you make such claims,” suggested Andrea, the beginnings of a smile touching at her lips.

Kate made a small laugh. Theo *had* moaned to her that Andrea was constantly pestering him with questions, though she thought he secretly enjoyed it. It appeared that Andrea was only too aware of what she was doing too. “I suppose it’s only to be expected with your scientific background,” commented Kate, “And the field of work of your family.”

Kate immediately noticed the thinning of Andrea’s lips at the mention of her family, deducing she had made a mistake bringing them up. She had thought perhaps talk of home and family might be safe, but obviously not.

“What was it you wanted exactly?” asked Andrea, her tone now icy and her body language stiff, “Since I presume you didn’t come here to discuss my taste in music or literature.”

Kate supposed there wasn’t much chance to resume the friendly conversation. “I wanted to talk about what happened earlier, on the training exercise.”

“I thought you might.”

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Andrea rose from the sofa, putting a bit of distance between her and the Major as she crossed to gaze out at the night sky. She guessed this was going to be the part where she got the lecture on using her powers responsibly and so on, plus a telling off for giving Chadwick trouble, though he had been the one with the problem. She took a few deep breaths trying to calm her thoughts. She still hadn’t quite gotten over how the Major had disturbed her latest nightmare.

“So...?” came the Major’s voice from behind her.

Andrea turned back round. “Hasn’t your little lapdog filled you in already?”

“If by that you mean Lieutenant Chadwick, then yes, he has given me a version of events, but I’d like to hear what you have to say too.”

“I’m sure he gave you full and detailed report, though perhaps omitting the part where he threatened to shoot me.”

The Major looked shocked. “I beg you pardon?”

“You can ask Harry or Tom if you don’t believe me.”

The Major’s expression had now been replaced with one of concern and thoughtfulness. “I didn’t say I didn’t believe you,” she said, fixing her eyes on Andrea, keenly studying her. “And you did nothing to prompt this?”

This conversation wasn't going the way Andrea had expected, it seemed the Major really did want to listen to her opinion. Andrea had thought the Major would have flown in to defend her officer's honour as soon as his actions were called into question.

"I was just floating off the ground a bit, but I wasn't trying to go anywhere," explained Andrea, "I was interested to see if I could repeat what had happened when I fell from the cliff. And then Chadwick got his knickers in a twist and started waving his gun around."

The Major shook her head, her auburn bob bouncing slightly from side to side as she did. "I think I shall be having words with the Lieutenant."

Andrea had been so busy watching the way the light caught the red in the hair that she wasn't sure she had heard right. "What you actually believe me? You're not going to check with the others?"

"Do I need to?"

"Well, no..."

"Good," said the Major simply, actually offering Andrea a smile. "So, how do you feel about it?"

Andrea was completely confused now. "Feel about it?"

"About being able to fly of course, it must be quite an amazing feeling."

"Er...yes...yes...it's..."

Andrea was at a loss for words to describe the sense of joyful wonder she felt when floating off the ground. The only comparisons she could think of off-hand were sexual and she didn't think they were entirely appropriate for the Major's ears.

Wondering why her mouth was suddenly dry, she decided she needed another draft of her pepsi. It was then that she realised her mistake – she had left it on the coffee table by the sofa, where the Major was still sitting looking up at her with her soft blue eyes, waiting for an answer. Andrea could hardly go to the kitchen and get another one when it was obvious she already had a drink. Now she was thinking about the drink, her conspiratorial mouth felt the need to poke her tongue out and lick her lips.

Andrea quickly walked back over to the sofa and sat down, picking the can up off the low wooden table and bringing it gratefully to her lips.

"Hard to describe is it?" asked the Major, honest interest in her tone.

"What?" said Andrea looking to her side. She had forgotten the topic of conversation for a moment in her desire to just get the drink. "Oh, the flying, yes, it's difficult to put into words. It's...wonderful, so...liberating..."

Andrea could mentally kick herself, it still sounded like she was talking about sex or something. Why wasn't the Major interrupting? Why was she letting Andrea burble on like this? And why was her stiff khaki shirt open at the neck like that, revealing the slope of her chest?

"It sounds fascinating," commented the Major, finally taking pity on Andrea.

Forcing herself to look the Major in the eye, Andrea decided they needed a change of subject. She supposed she may as well go for something that had been nagging her since the Major seemed to be in a receptive mood. "Can I ask you a question?"

The Major looked taken aback by the request, and Andrea stared at her quizzically.

"Sorry, it's just that you don't normally ask for permission," noted the Major in explanation of her reaction, "But, yes, fire away."

"It's about the accident, at the warehouse..."

"Go on..."

The Major's tone had been slightly wary, but she hadn't cut Andrea off so she pressed on. "Maria told me that the case had been closed to the police, that all the paperwork had been sent elsewhere. I was just wondering if you knew anything about it?"

The Major didn't reply immediately, considering her response before she spoke. "I'm going to be honest with you, ok?"

"Ok."

Now this was interesting, thought Andrea, the Major was actually going to be candid? Would wonders never cease?

"I've had my own suspicions about that incident. Something about it just doesn't add up, and I don't just mean the fact that twelve people were killed. I mean the whole thing with you and your powers too."

"You make it sound like some conspiracy."

"Not necessarily, but someone somewhere is keen to keep the details a secret. Remember how I told you about the order to prohibit discussion of it, after your phone call was cut off. I was telling you the truth, I really don't know why that order was made, but I intend to find out as soon as I get the chance to speak to my commanding officer in person."

"All well and good," said Andrea, "But are you then going to tell me if you do find out something?"

"Yes, of course," replied the Major straight away, "I'm not deliberately keeping secrets from you."

Andrea narrowed her eyes for a moment, studying the Major's face to assess her honesty. "All right, I'll trust you for now." Though she had said the words, they still surprised her.

The Major looked quite surprised too, though also pleased. "Good. Well, this does seem like a night for progress," she remarked.

Andrea hadn't intended it to be, especially not when the Major had caught her off-guard to begin with. However, somehow the other woman had managed to steer the discussion successfully, without even appearing to try. Andrea merely dipped her head in acknowledgement of the Major's comment.

"Since I answered your question, I was wondering if I could talk to you about something else?" continued the Major.

Andrea supposed it would be churlish to refuse and nodded her consent.

"All right. Before I go on, let me just say that I'm just concerned for your well-being, which is why I'm bringing this up."

Andrea nodded again. She was slightly wary of where the Major was heading, though also a little amused that the normally commanding woman seemed so nervous about Andrea's reaction that she had to prefix it so.

"You've not really spoken about the accident with anyone have you?"

"No."

"I just think you might want to."

The Major wasn't really pushing, the tone of her voice was gentle, but Andrea was still uncertain. Though the Major had mentioned this before, no doubt being witness to Andrea's earlier nightmare had coalesced thoughts of it in her mind once again. Andrea suspected that the Major knew full well that the accident had been the source of her nightmare.

"Counselling can actually be helpful," continued the Major, "And it would be entirely confidential," she added, sensing Andrea's trepidation.

Andrea glanced to the Major who regarded her evenly, her blue eyes now shading to gray in the low light. Andrea knew she probably did need to talk to someone – her nightmares had continued unabated since she'd arrived at the base – and yet she was still reluctant to confide in a stranger.

"Well, just think about it," said the Major eventually, "And if you do want to proceed come and see me..anytime."

CHAPTER 6

Andrea opened the door to the recreation room and almost got bowled over as a young soldier came barrelling out past her in a hurry.

“Sorry!” he called over his shoulder as he dashed off down the corridor.

She watched him disappearing round the corner before she turned back to the door, shaking her head in bemusement. Andrea entered the room where superhuman, soldier and scientist alike went to relax on their off hours. Making a quick scan of her surroundings, she spotted Harry and Tardelli engaged in a game of pool on one of the two tables. The other one was empty, as was the full-size snooker table next to it. In fact there was no one else in the room at all, apart from them and Tom, sitting watching the big screen television.

Andrea crossed to join him on the couch. “Is it always like this when the bigwigs are visiting?” she asked him, referring to the emptiness of the room.

“Pretty much,” he confirmed turning from the tv to face her, “Everyone has to be on their best behaviour. All the squaddies run around like headless chickens, desperate to make a good impression.”

“Is that why we got the day off then – they don’t want us embarrassing them in front of the top brass?”

“I never thought of it like that, but you could be right,” he agreed, “The Major probably didn’t want you asking the Lieutenant Colonel any tricky questions!”

“Would I do something like that?” she enquired innocently.

“Yes!” replied Tom as if the answer was obvious.

He picked up the remote control and began flicking through the channels. They all had televisions in their rooms, but it was more sociable to come and watch the one in the common room and Tom was nothing if not sociable. “A-ha!” he cried having found something to his taste, “Excellent, ‘Soccer AM’^[8] is still on.”

He relaxed back into the cushions, before suddenly realising something. “Oh, is it all right if we have this on? If there’s something you’d rather watch...”

Andrea smiled, “No, it’s fine. Especially since Helen Chamberlain is quite fit.”

Tom chuckled. “Yes, she is,” he agreed glancing at the presenter on the screen.

As they watched it for a moment, Harry and Tardelli came to join them, sitting in a couple of the other comfy chairs arranged around the television. Andrea thought it a

little odd, since there was no way they could have finished their game so quickly. She glanced over her shoulder at the pool table, noting that half the balls were indeed still on the green baize, including the black. As her eyes came back round to the screen, she spied Tardelli giving her one of her usual filthy looks.

“So I’m guessing you’ve seen this before,” said Tom conversationally to Andrea as she was returning Tardelli’s look in kind, “You a footy fan are you?”

“Yes,” confirmed Andrea, “A die-hard Liverpool supporter”

Tom slapped his hand against his forehead. “Oh no! Say it isn’t so!”

“Uh oh, don’t tell me…” began Andrea slowly, “You support Man United?”

“You got it!” he beamed, “The mighty Red Devils! But at least I *am* from Manchester, what’s your excuse?”

“Believe it or not I was actually born in Liverpool,” revealed Andrea.

Tom stared at her disbelievingly and Andrea saw Tardelli and Harry had swivelled round too on hearing the information.

“You’re a scouser? ^[9]” asked Harry incredulously.

“Technically speaking I suppose,” agreed Andrea, “But I only spent the first six months of my life there, so it’s not like I remember it.”

“Ah,” remarked Tom beginning to understand, “So where did you move to?”

“My parents moved back to Sweden with work, to the city of Uppsala,” she answered.

“So they were Swedish then,” deduced Tom, “Now I know why you keep coming out with all those incomprehensible swear words,” he added, shooting a grin at Tardelli, the target of most of those words. As he turned back to Andrea his brow creased again in confusion. “But you don’t really sound very Swedish either, in fact you sound like you come from somewhere in the Home Counties.” ^[10]

“Are we all meant to sound like the Swedish chef or something?”

“Er…no…”

She just raised her eyebrows at him, knowing that was exactly what he thought, despite his denial. “We didn’t actually stay in Sweden very long either, to tell you the truth. We moved back to the UK just after my sixth birthday.”

“Blimey, sounds like you were all over the place. So where did you end up that time?”

“Birmingham. Though we stayed put there then, at least all the time I was at school.”

“Birmingham?” said Tom with slight distaste, “Lucky you didn’t pick up *that* accent.”

“I bet she went to some posh-nob private school,” muttered Tardelli, “Rather than mixing with the riff-raff at the local comprehensive.”

Andrea fixed her with a dark look, though she couldn’t deny the remark - she had been sent to a selective girls school by her parents, but it had hardly been her choice. All the strictness of it had been hard to stomach and she would have been just as happy at a state school, though she had to admit she probably wouldn’t have been taught half as well there.

Sensing the slight atmosphere Tardelli’s comments had generated, Tom switched the topic back to football, having a long discussion with Andrea over the merits of their respective teams. Every now and then Andrea’s eyes would flick to Tardelli who appeared to be quietly fuming the whole time. As an advert break came on the television, Tom excused himself for a moment, Harry following him out the door on the pretext of getting something to eat. That left Andrea alone with the glaring Tardelli.

Andrea stared back for a moment, the heat in the room palpable. “Look, what is your problem, Belinda?” asked Andrea eventually, using Tardelli’s full first name in the knowledge that the other woman hated being called it. True to form, she could see Tardelli’s jaw twitching in anger.

The dark haired woman got up from her seat, stalking slowly towards Andrea who rose to meet her. Tardelli came to a stop directly in front of Andrea, only a foot or so between them. She had to crane her head up to meet Andrea’s eye though, since she was a few inches shorter.

“Maybe I don’t like you moving in on things you shouldn’t,” she said with menace.

“Oh for Christ’s sake,” said Andrea rolling her eyes, “It’s not like I have any choice about being here. We’re all in the same boat, can’t we at least try and get along?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Tardelli’s voice was still deathly low.

Andrea looked at her in puzzlement. “Sorry, you’re really not making any sense.”

“I wasn’t talking about you being at the base,” explained Tardelli, her lips barely moving as she spoke, her eyes never moving from Andrea’s face.

“Well, what then?” demanded an exasperated Andrea.

Tardelli made a scoffing snort. “Like you don’t know.”

“Believe me, I don’t!”

Tardelli looked like she could barely contain her anger, blurting out her furious words. “I’m talking about you fawning all over Tom, shamelessly flirting with him!”

Andrea stared at her in incomprehension for a couple of seconds before bursting out laughing. When she noticed that Tardelli didn't look like she found it in the slightest bit amusing, she tried to reign in her mirth. "Tardelli, in case you'd forgotten, I'm a lesbian," she spelt out.

Tardelli's ire was unabated though. "So you say, but maybe you just fancied something different."

Andrea couldn't help it – she started laughing again, bringing up her hand to try and cover her merriment. "I can assure you I am one hundred percent lesbian," she said finally, "As lovely as Tom is, he does nothing for me in that department, we're just friends."

Tardelli maintained her intense regard of Andrea, though didn't say anything. Andrea hoped that meant she was beginning to realise her mistake.

"Why are you so interested anyway?" asked Andrea, before realisation dawned in a flash, "Oh! You're jealous!"

"I am not," stated Tardelli, glancing away for the first time.

"You are!" crowed Andrea, "You like him! Why don't you say something to him?"

Tardelli flicked her eyes back to Andrea, uncertainty in them. "Do you think I should?"

"Yes, why not?" urged Andrea, "What have you got to lose?"

"I could look like a total twat when he turns me down," offered Tardelli, "And then we'd still have to work together."

"Hmm, I guess that is a possibility," pondered Andrea, "But I think he likes you too."

"You do?" said Tardelli, unable to contain her excitement on hearing the words. "You're not just saying that?" she added more cautiously.

"No, no, he definitely checks you out when you're not looking," Andrea revealed, "And I know when someone's checking out a woman."

Tardelli laughed at that, and Andrea was glad that they seemed to have finally been able to break the tension between them. Tardelli's body language was suddenly much more relaxed and she took a couple of steps back to put a more appropriate distance between them. "So have you never done it with a guy?" asked Tardelli.

"No, and never had the desire to either," stated Andrea emphatically, "And don't you dare even say something along the lines of 'but how do you know you're a lesbian if you've never slept with a man'. Take it from me, I know."

Tardelli put up her hands. "I wasn't going to say anything of the sort," she insisted, "I was just curious."

“So is that why you’ve been giving me the evils all this time? You thought I was hitting on Tom?” Andrea shook her head, laughing again. She spotted that Tardelli had put her hands on her hips in a stance of annoyance, but could tell it was more for show than because she was really angry anymore. “Sorry, sorry. It’s not funny, of course not,” noted Andrea, still smiling. “But hang on, though, you were mean to me as soon as I got here, long before I got friendly with Tom.”

“Yeah, well, I thought you were just some posh twit,” allowed Tardelli.

“And now?”

“I still think you’re posh, but maybe not quite such a twit!”

Andrea chuckled at the honest response. “I suppose it’s a start.”

A sound from behind them indicated that one of the men had re-entered the room. Seeing that it was Tom, Andrea leant closer to Tardelli.

“Here you go,” she said in a whisper, “Here’s your chance.”

Andrea made to get up, but Tardelli clutched her sleeve. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Leaving you two alone!” replied Andrea with a sly wink, making it off the sofa and out the door past a slightly bemused Tom.

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Andrea sipped at her tea in the messhall, watching the first of the young soldiers arriving for their dinner. It appeared the official part of their duties were over for the day as they smiled and joked while waiting to be served by Nathan and his fellow logistics personnel. She sat alone, but none of the men or women came to sit with her once they had collected their food. Andrea considered it strange how there seemed to be a divide between the sets of people stationed at the base, in particular the rank and file squaddies and the superhumans. They did mix on occasion, such as in the rec. room, but where possible they seemed to like to stick to their “own kind”. Scanning along the queue, she saw Lieutenant Chadwick who caught her eye in return, giving her a dirty look. She wondered what the Major had said to him after the training incident. She hoped he had gotten a good bollocking.

Continuing her sweep of the room, she took in the sight of Tom and Bel arriving together, smiling as they exchanged words. Seeing Andrea they crossed to join her, bypassing the queue for food for the time being.

“If it isn’t Duransay’s very own cupid,” noted Tom jokingly as he sat down on the plastic chair opposite Andrea.

“I take it your little discussion this morning went well then,” said Andrea, casting a quick look at Bel.

“Indeed,” was all Tardelli said in return, though Andrea couldn’t fail to notice the smile on her face. At least someone was happy and in love.

“Yeah, though I can’t believe Bel thought we were an item!” said Tom wagging his finger between himself and Andrea.

Tardelli gave him a playful punch in the arm, obviously not too pleased to be reminded of her mistake.

“Hey it’s not that far-fetched,” remarked Andrea with a laugh, “I am stunningly gorgeous after all. What man could resist?”

“Shame you don’t want a man though,” Tom reminded her, “Though it’s true you could have your pick if you ever decided you wanted to give it a try. Only yesterday I had to tell poor old Doc of your proclivities, when he started asking if I knew if you were single.”

Andrea laughed; she had suspected that Doc had a bit of a soft spot for her and Tom’s information just confirmed that.

“Maybe we can return the compliment,” suggested Tom, looking round the room a few times, “Find you a nice young army woman?”

“That’s all right,” insisted Andrea, “I think I can manage my own love life.”

As he got up to go and get him and Tardelli a drink, Andrea glanced round the room too, taking a bit more interest in the other women this time. Her eyes had almost made a full circuit when they came to the door in time to see Major Jarvis and someone else officious that she didn’t recognise entering. The Major was in a more formal uniform than usual and Andrea couldn’t help her eyes drifting downwards to where a pair of shapely calves extended from the skirt that formed part of it. As if sensing the gaze upon her, the Major eyes flicked briefly to Andrea, the other woman smiling before turning back to her companion.

“See anyone you like?” asked Tardelli.

Andrea almost jumped in her seat, not having realised the dark haired woman had been watching her. “P-pardon?” she stammered.

“You were casing the room, I wondered if anyone had taken your fancy?” clarified Bel.

“Oh...er...no, not really,” replied Andrea with some relief. Tardelli obviously hadn’t seen where her study had ended up, since she had her back to the door. It had just been an offhand comment referring to all the women in the room in general and not a certain redhead by the door.

“Who’s that, with the Major?” Andrea asked, regaining her composure.

Tardelli craned round in her seat. “Oh, that’s Lieutenant Colonel Parsons,” she informed Andrea, “He’s the Major’s commanding officer. He’s actually the one directly responsible for the base, though the Major basically runs it. He only ever comes for flying visits every month or so.”

Andrea watched the older man for a moment as he chatted with Major Jarvis. He was a few inches taller than the Major, and looked more like a kindly father than a hardened military officer. He was about fifty-odd years of age, and had neat white hair and a slightly rotund figure. The most striking thing about him were his bright blue eyes. Suddenly something dawned on Andrea.

“Hang on,” she said, switching her attention back to Tardelli, “Lieutenant Colonel *Parsons*?”

Tardelli nodded, “Yep, he’s Tom’s dad.”

Andrea glanced over to Tom who was returning with his drinks. She saw Tom take in the fact that his father was by the door and then just carrying on walking in Andrea’s, ignoring him.

“I’m guessing there’s some sort of history there?” Andrea whispered quickly to Tardelli before he got there.

“Yeah, I’ll fill you in another time, safe to say they do *not* get on.”

Tom remained silent as he sat back down, resolutely keeping his eyes away from the door. Andrea drained the last of her tea before looking at her watch.

“Oh, I have to go and make a phone call,” she said, pushing back her seat. Though it sounded like a feeble excuse to escape the rather uncomfortable atmosphere, it was actually true – she was meant to be calling her friend Maria.

Tardelli looked suspiciously at her and Andrea offered her an apologetic glance before hurrying out of the messhall for her quarters.

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Kate went over to the drinks cabinet in her office, pulling out two tumblers and the whiskey decanter. As she poured the golden liquid she saw the other occupant of the room taking up a seat on the couch next to her, overlooked by the large window.

Even though it was dark outside, Lieutenant Colonel Parsons took a moment to glance out of it before speaking. “So how are you, Kate?”

“I beg your pardon, sir?” she asked, placing his drink down before him but remaining standing herself for the time being. Though he had used her first name rather than her rank, she wasn’t sure if this was going to be a friendly chat yet.

“Well, we’ve talked about the base, and the superhumans and the other personnel all day,” he outlined, turning from the window to look up at her, “But we’ve not really talked about you and how you’re getting on.”

“There’s not much to report really,” she said evenly, “Everything’s running fine, isn’t it?”

The Colonel eyed her for a moment with his piercing blue eyes. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Kate turned away from him to avoid his gaze. Normally it might have been considered rude to do such a thing to a superior officer but she had a feeling that this conversation wasn’t really from one officer to another. She feared that it was something much more personal. Subconsciously she found her eyes lighting on one particular picture on the wall that she was now facing. It had been taken in Iraq just over a year ago, when her father was still alive.

“It was the anniversary of his death recently wasn’t it?” Parsons noted from behind her.

“Yes it was,” confirmed Kate quietly.

Silence enveloped the room as Kate stared at the smiling faces in the photograph. They almost seemed to mock her with their joy.

Unable to look at it anymore, she turned back to the Colonel who was watching her with concern. She came to sit next to him, offering him a reassuring smile. “Honestly I’m fine,” she insisted, “All those counsellors were good for something. I’m never going to forget what happened, but at least I’ve managed to come to terms with it.”

He simply nodded. “You know if you do ever want to talk to anyone else though, then I am here.”

“Thank you,” said Kate sincerely, “But I think it’s easier with an independent person in a way, someone not so close to me.” She paused for a moment. “And someone who didn’t know him.”

It was Kate’s turn to stare out the window now as the emotions she usually kept so well hidden threatened to break through to the surface. The Colonel didn’t say anything further for a while, leaving her to her contemplative thoughts as she gazed at nothing in particular in the night sky.

“He was a good man,” he said eventually.

“Yes, he was,” she agreed quietly, just about managing to get the words out past the lump in her throat.

“But more than that he was a good friend,” added Parsons, “And a good father.”

Kate bowed her head and closed her eyes for a moment. She knew she had to get a grip of herself, since this was hardly going to be reassuring the Colonel that she was all right as she had maintained. It wasn't like it affected her ability to perform her duties normally, but Parsons presence in particular always seemed to have a way of bringing thoughts of her father to the fore. She resolved that a change of topic was probably in order.

"Anyway, enough wallowing in the past," she said dismissively, "There is something else I've been meaning to ask you about, connected with our new arrival."

"Andrea Hallstrom?" he queried, "Is she still causing you problems?"

Kate had filed regular reports with the Colonel on Andrea's progress, but had stuck to the facts, omitting anything about any personal character clashes. However, he would also have had other general reports from Chadwick and various of the scientists. Kate had little doubt which one of those was his source for thinking that Andrea was difficult.

"Nothing I can't handle," said Kate confidentially, feeling more like herself again now she had steered the discussion away from anything too personal. "No, it was more related to what happened to her before she came here. She wants to know about the accident at the warehouse, where all her the other police officers present were killed but she miraculously survived thanks to her dormant mutated gene. As you know she did manage an impromptu off island sortee to meet one of her other colleagues recently..."

"Indeed," noted the Colonel with a slight edge of disapproval. Kate certainly hadn't enjoyed having to inform him of that one.

"Anyway," she continued, "Said colleague told her that the investigation has been closed to the police and the case papers transferred elsewhere. As you can imagine she's quite keen to know why and what's happening with the investigation. I have admit to being rather interested too."

Kate was surprised when the Colonel didn't immediately respond. Instead he got up from the couch, taking his drink with him and sipping at it as he paced across the room. Eventually he turned round to face her. "I'm afraid I can't tell you what's happening with the investigation, Kate."

She eyed him suspiciously. "But not because you don't know, right?"

The Colonel glanced away, answering her question without words.

"What's going on, Colonel?" she asked, curious.

"I'm sorry, Kate, but this comes right from the top. The details surrounding the accident are on a need to know basis only."

“And I don’t need to know?” she asked with a little annoyance creeping into her tone, “Andrea’s one of my operatives, under my command and my care. If there’s something important I should know about that accident...”

“Major...”

“...then I think you should tell me. It could affect...”

“Major!”

Kate finally stopped at the Colonel’s raised voice.

“I don’t like pulling rank on you,” he continued in a more even but deadly serious tone, “But I’m going to have to on this occasion. I’m telling you as your commanding officer, and as your friend, to leave it. You’re just going to have to take my word that it is being looked into.”

“By who?”

He didn’t answer, merely giving her a stern look to indicate she wasn’t getting any more. When she just fixed him with an equally deathly stare he eventually sighed and came back over to the couch. When he spoke, his voice was softer again.

“Kate, please, trust me, it is being dealt with,” he insisted, “Don’t push this. You really can’t afford to make waves after what happened here six months ago.”

Kate gave him another severe look. “You know I was willing to resign over that,” she stated, “If I’d known it was going to be used to beat me with whenever I questioned anything, then I would have.”

“I’m not beating you with it,” said the Colonel, trying to keep his tone calm, “I’m just trying to give you some friendly advice. If you cause problems over this then I won’t be able to protect you this time.”

Kate weighed up her options for a moment before replying. “Fine. I’ll leave it for now, though I can’t promise anything on Andrea’s behalf.” She didn’t like lying to the Colonel, but she could tell he was too tightly bound by the command structure to actively do anything. Of course, she respected that structure too, she had dedicated her life to it and the army after all. However, that didn’t mean she would blithely accept things when she smelt a rat. She had other avenues she could pursue this through, she would just have to quietly follow those.

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An hour or so later, Kate rubbed at the back of her neck, easing the stiffness, as she waited for the lift to arrive. It was days like this that she felt every one of her thirty-five years. Having finally got rid of the Colonel, she thought that at least he had been suitably content with the way things were going at the base in general. She just wished he would give her a bit more warning when he wanted to pay a visit in the

future. Not to mention the way they always ended up talking about her father whenever the Colonel did come to the base. She supposed it was only natural since they had been best friends, and though she had told the Colonel that she had come to terms with his death, that wasn't entirely true. She still missed him desperately.

As the lift pinged to indicate its arrival, the sound of running footsteps behind her broke her sad thoughts.

“Major!”

She turned to see Lieutenant Chadwick hurrying down the corridor in her direction.

“We’ve got a problem,” he said, panting as he stopped before her.

Kate sighed – this was all she needed. She had been looking forward to a nice relaxing soak in the bath with a glass of whiskey. “What is it?” she asked tersely.

“It’s Andrea...,” he began hesitantly.

Kate felt a small constriction of anxiety in her chest - *what had the young woman done now?*

“Go on...”

“She’s gone off the island again. Flown off under her own steam this time.”

Kate closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. “Great,” she muttered to herself. “When was this?”

“About ten minutes ago. I thought you would want to deal with it personally, since you did last time.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” replied Kate, “Is her tracker still functioning properly?”

“Yes, luckily she only seems to have gone as far as Ayr – the movement’s stopped somewhere just to the south of town. There is another problem, though.”

“Oh good,” noted Kate sarcastically. “Well spit it out then,” she added when Chadwick seemed reluctant to continue.

“It’s the weather, the storm’s too bad to take the chopper, you’ll need to go to the mainland by boat.”

Kate sighed again, the crossing would be a rough one given the conditions. “Well boat it is then. Tell them to get ready, I’ll be down in five minutes.”

As Chadwick dashed off, Kate took a moment to pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration. Just when she thought they were making progress Andrea had to go and do something stupid like this. She was going to be one sorry woman when Kate got hold of her.

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Kate struggled against the biting wind as she crossed the car park, pulling the collar of her coat up around her face in a feeble attempt to ward off the sheets of rain driving over the open ground. She was certainly glad that she'd taken a few extra minutes to change out of the highly impractical skirt she'd been wearing as part of her number two uniform for the Colonel's visit before she'd come out in the vicious weather. She didn't know why the army still insisted that female officers wore them for formal occasions.

She had been annoyed when she had set off in search of Andrea, but now her anger knew no bounds. She'd had to endure the three mile journey from the island to the harbour at Ayr in some of the roughest sea conditions she'd ever witnessed. Normally her sea legs were pretty good, but even she had to admit to feeling a little queasy during the trip. From the harbour she and one of the other soldiers had taken the car they kept waiting there out of town on Andrea's trail. Fortunately the young woman still hadn't moved from her original position, which had turned out to be a remote pub up on the headland south of the town.

The door to the inn clattered noisily against its frame as Kate pushed it open, having to force it closed again against the wind. She took a moment to shake the rain from her coat and hair, which hung limply against her chilled cheeks. Unsurprisingly the low-ceilinged bar was empty save for the barman and Andrea, who sat on a bar stool with her back to Kate, leaning heavily on the bar. The barman shot Kate what she thought was almost a grateful look, the man no doubt guessing she was there for Andrea. He descretely sidled away out a side door, leaving the pair of them alone.

Kate stalked over to the bar, clenching her fists to try and hold back her fury which was threatening to burst forth at any moment. She stopped next to Andrea, staring at her downturned blonde head but not saying anything – she wasn't sure she could be trusted to come out with anything civil. Andrea didn't seem to even realise Kate was there, hunched over the bar, morosely swigging at a pint of beer. Kate noticed that Andrea's power regulating armband was sitting on the bar, the young woman obviously having removed it. That just added to Kate's unease, knowing that Andrea could be so reckless as to remove the only thing that controlled her seizures.

Finally Andrea sensed the presence next to her and her head came round to look at Kate, her eyes blurrily trying to focus. "Oh, hello," she slurred almost incoherently, "Why don't you join me for a drink? Barman!"

Andrea made a grand gesture towards the bar, only then realising there was no one there. She cast her eyes around in drunken confusion. "Hmm, he seems to have gone," she observed with a shrug, "I suppose we could help ourselves."

"I think you've had enough," said Kate through clenched teeth.

Andrea was too inebriated to take in the menacing tone in Kate's voice or the cold look in her eye. "No, no, no, I can take a good few more yet," she said waving her

hand loosely, “I have the consti...conti....constit....,” Andrea stumbled over the long word, “...I can drink lots,” she settled for in the end.

“But not tonight,” stated Kate coolly. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

Kate made to take Andrea’s arm but she shook the hand off almost falling off her seat in the process. “Says who?” she shot back indignantly, “I like it here!”

Kate found her other hand drifting to her coat pocket where she had a strong dose of the inhibitor drug concealed – more than enough to nullify Andrea’s powers and most likely knock her out too.

“What have you got in your pocket, a gun?” queried Andrea, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. Kate deduced that even in her drunken state the young woman’s observant nature had spotted the gesture. “Going to shoot me unless I come back with you?”

Kate decided she may as well be honest. “It’s a strong sedative,” she informed the other woman. “I don’t want to use it, but I will if you leave me no choice,” she added with just enough hint of threat to indicate she meant it.

“Ah I see!” exclaimed Andrea, “Want to pump me full of more drugs do you? As if this isn’t enough!” She picked up the regulator off the bar and slammed it back down onto the wooden surface noisily. Kate thought it was fortunate that it was made of durable material.

“*That* is for your own good,” Kate reminded her, “And you really shouldn’t take it off, unless you want to try and kill yourself.”

“Well maybe I do!” announced Andrea stubbornly, “I might have some control over that at least!”

Kate rolled her eyes and suddenly in that moment Andrea was on her. She was quick and Kate futilely tried to stop the hand that had darted to her pocket, but it was too late. Andrea triumphantly leapt back, clutching the sedative in its dispenser. She tauntingly held it out between them for a moment before she flung it across the room with such force that it shattered against the wall, its contents spraying over the bare stone.

“Ha!” crowed Andrea, dancing from foot to foot, “Let’s see you stop me leaving now!”

She went to walk past Kate and out the door when Kate swiftly stuck out a booted foot. Andrea tripped and fell with no coordination whatsoever, landing heavily face first on the floor.

Snarling angrily, she whirled round on the well-worn carpet. “You fucking bitch!”

Andrea leapt unsteadily to her feet, making a half-hearted swing for Kate with her fist. Kate easily dodged under the flailing arm. Andrea tried again, but Kate just side-

stepped this time, sending the young woman careening past her and clattering into one of the tables, before she crashed to the floor again.

“We can keep doing this all night if you want,” said Kate standing over her with her hands on her hips, “Or we can get out of here?”

Andrea stared up at her balefully, showing no sign of moving from amongst the wreckage of the table.

Kate sighed wearily before reaching down and grabbing the collar of Andrea’s jacket, sticking her face up close to the other woman’s though the smell of alcohol on Andrea’s breath was quite overpowering. “Get up, and get out that door now!” ordered Kate, “Before I decide to put my boot up your arse!”

Kate tugged on Andrea’s jacket and the young woman reluctantly clambered to her feet. Kate shoved her in the direction of the door, before reaching back to the bar and picking up the power regulator. “And put that back on!” she instructed irately.

Andrea took it with a sneer and shoved it in her pocket. Kate couldn’t be bothered to make an issue of it any further, at least they had it should Andrea have a seizure. As soon as the door to the pub was opened the driving rain hit them in the face again, and Kate bowed her head as they crossed silently to the car where Private Thompson was dutifully waiting. Getting in the back, Kate ordered him to take them back to the harbour and he set off slowly through the raging storm, taking it carefully on the twisting cliffside road.

Kate sat for a moment, grinding her teeth, but the short cold walk to the car had done little to subdue her anger. Andrea’s continued sullen obstinace was only fuelling it further, as the young woman sat with her arms crossed in an open show of defiance.

“So here we are again then,” commented Kate icily, “Am I the only one with a sense of déjà vu?”

“It does seem somewhat familiar,” replied Andrea nonchalantly, refusing to look in Kate’s direction.

“Is that it?” demanded Kate, bristling, “No apology no excuses? I cannot believe you! I thought I made it clear last time why you can’t just leave the island, but, oh no, you just have to do what the bloody hell you want don’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right!” Andrea shot back caustically rising to meet Kate’s anger, “You’ve obviously got me all worked out - I don’t give a shit about anyone else!”

“Obviously not!” shouted Kate. “Dragging me out here again after you. You think this is how I like to spend my time, chasing after petulant children?”

“Yes, yes I fucking do!” Andrea’s blue eyes were suddenly sharp again as they shot to Kate to pin her in place. “I think you just love controlling us all like your little pets! I think it gives you a thrill, using your power over us.”

Kate seethed. “You are so...so...”

“What? Obnoxious? Annoying? Selfish? Come on spit it out, let’s have it all!”

“Yes! All those things and more!” agreed Kate furiously, “I don’t know why I waste my time on such and ungrateful bitch!”

“I don’t either,” noted Andrea scornfully, “I’m obviously a hopeless case, you may as well just lock me up when we get back and have it done with. Pump me so full of your drugs that I can’t use my powers. Then I’ll be no threat to you or anyone will I?”

Kate stared back at her, a deep fire in her eyes. “Don’t tempt me.”

The silence pressed in oppressively again as both women maintained their intense regard of each other without speaking. Neither appeared willing to back down and look away. The car suddenly jerked to the side, breaking the still of the moment, before resuming its straight course down the road.

“Careful Thompson,” noted the Major to the man in front of her.

“Sorry, Major,” he called back over his shoulder, “This weather is trecherous.”

Kate turned back to Andrea. “Here I was thinking we had made some progress again,” she noted with an air of resignation, “But every time I think we’ve taken a step forward we seem to end up taking two or more back.” She paused to shake her head. “So was there actually any reason for this latest escapade?”

“I don’t know,” shrugged Andrea insolently, “I fancied a drink?”

“Don’t give me that crap!” yelled Kate. She actually saw Thompson flinch in the driver’s seat at her sudden outburst. “I’ve had just about enough of your rebellious bullshit!” she outlined furiously, “I’ve been lenient on you so far, believe it or not. But this is it, no more nice Major!”

“You were being nice before?” Andrea wondered sarcastically

“Come on,” continued Kate, ignoring the comment, “I want to know what you were doing out here.”

“I’ve told you - I just fancied a drink,” insisted Andrea, jutting her chin out obstinantly. “Can’t I want to get off your fucking island every once in a while? Get away from you and all your fucking cronies?”

Kate gripped her hands together in her lap to resist the urge to lash out. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what you believe!”

Kate felt her blood boiling – no one ever dared talk to her this way. “Were you hoping to meet your friend Maria again, is that it?”

“Ha!” cried Andrea glancing to the ceiling, “You couldn’t be more wrong if you tried.”

“Really?” challenged Kate doubtfully, “I think you’re so desperate to find out about this accident that you’re willing to ignore any rules or regulations that might stand in your way.”

“You know nothing,” seethed Andrea. Her head was bowed slightly as she looked at Kate so that her pupils peered out menacingly from the tops of her eyes.

“Well why don’t you enlighten me?” suggested Kate combatatively.

Andrea kept her mouth tightly shut, breathing heavily through her nose.

“No?” Kate wondered, raising her eyebrows, “Can’t do it? It’s just the same old selfish bollocks as before isn’t it?”

“No!” spat Andrea adamantly. “You want to know do you?” she demanded, leaning closer to Kate. Her face was hovering mere centimetres from Kate’s now but Kate didn’t back down even when the hot breath hit her cheek. “Ok, I’ll tell you why I wasn’t meeting Maria. I wasn’t meeting her because she’s dead! Did you hear me? She’s fucking dead!” she screamed again, just in case Kate had missed the point. “All right? Satisfied now? Now leave me the fuck alone!”

And with that she swung away from Kate to stare at the raindrops sliding down the outside of the window. Kate was momentarily dumbstruck, all the wind taken out of her great fury in one easy blow. Now all she felt was very stupid and insensitive. Though she did consider that she could hardly have known that her friend’s death was what had upset Andrea and caused her to flee the island. It did occur to Kate that Andrea must have heard the news via phone at the base, which meant one of her people would also have heard it. She had a sneaking suspicion that Lieutenant Chadwick was that person and that he had deliberately omitted that crucial piece of information when telling her of Andrea’s departure.

Still, even then she supposed she had hardly given Andrea much of a chance to explain things. She had turned up at the pub bristling for a fight and Andrea had been more than willing to oblige.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” she remarked softly.

“Yeah, sure you are,” replied Andrea, keeping her eyes fixed on the window. “You’re probably happy that I’ve lost my outside contact now.”

“No, of course not,” insisted Kate, dismayed that Andrea could think that, though she also knew it was probably just the grief talking. “I’ve lost people close to me, I would never wish that pain on anyone.”

Andrea didn't reply, but Kate could see her jaw twitching behind her damp blond hair where she was biting her lip.

"What happened?"

Kate thought for a minute that either Andrea hadn't heard or just wasn't going to reply, but finally she started speaking in quiet haunted voice. "It was just so pointless, so stupid," she whispered, "She'd stopped someone for a random search and they...they stabbed her...just like that, out of the blue. One minute she was just going about her job like every other day and the next minute..." Andrea trailed off, her forehead now resting against the glass.

Kate wasn't entirely sure what to do, faced with this new vulnerable Andrea. Though it seemed like scant comfort, she reached out to put a hand on the young woman's shoulder. She was worried that Andrea might shake it off, but she didn't show any sign at having even noticed it sitting lightly there.

"I'm sorry, I truly am," offered Kate feebly. "You two were good friends?" she asked for want of something better to say. She knew from bitter experience that it didn't really matter what she said, it wouldn't help.

Andrea nodded, eyes still away from Kate. "We've known each other for years, we were a right pair at Hendon, couldn't keep us apart..." Andrea's voice caught at her recollections.

Kate found a lump mounting in her own throat in the face of Andrea's sorrow, especially so soon after the memories that had been stirred earlier that afternoon. "I know what it's like, to feel that hollow feeling in your heart when someone you love has been taken from you." Kate hoped she didn't sound trite, it was hard for her trying to draw on her own feelings but she wanted Andrea to know she wasn't alone. "You feel like it's never going to go away, like there's no way that great gaping hole can ever be mended. But it will heal. It's no consolation to you now, and it'll take a while, maybe a long time. But it will heal, with help from others."

Kate didn't want to outright say that she was willing to be one of those ones to help, not so soon after they had been screaming the odds at one another. Andrea might have thought it insincere. She hoped instead that the remark was open enough to interpretation.

Andrea's voice was faltering when she spoke. "I just feel so useless, cut off out here. I should have been there for her."

Andrea went quiet again for a moment and Kate wondered if she was going to say any more. Peering through the gloom Kate suddenly realised why Andrea had stopped talking - she was crying. Ever so quietly, perhaps trying to hide the fact, but she was crying nonetheless. Small, silent sobs that shook her shoulders. Andrea's face finally turned back to Kate and she could see the tears slipping out of her blue eyes and tracking down over her smooth cheeks.

“I should have been there for her...,” repeated Andrea numbly. Her watery blue eyes bored into Kate, pleading with her for help. Kate felt a sympathetic jab in her heart, squeezing the young woman’s shoulder under her hand. It seemed like such an ineffectual gesture. She should do more, hug her...

Without warning there was the sudden sound of screeching followed by a loud bang. Then everything went black.

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Andrea’s eyelids fluttered as droplets beat down against them. Her head was pounding mercilessly and she screwed her eyes shut for a moment, slowly becoming aware of her location. Her left cheek was cold, wet and it was pressed up against something hard. Her other cheek was being pounded by what Andrea’s swimming mind finally gauged was rain. That wasn’t the only thing making her face wet, she groggily realised, there was something warm trickling down from her forehead too.

Andrea let out a groan and slowly peeled herself away from the ground into a kneeling position. Opening her eyes, she blinked a few times as the driving rain battered her. She tentatively reached up to her sore head. As she drew her fingers back, she was just able to see the red stickiness there in the near pitch black of night. Rubbing at her muddled head, she tried to work out how exactly she had come to be lying in a field in the middle of nowhere.

She recalled how she’d been sitting in the car with the Major, talking about Maria. She’d had the distinct impression that the Major was about to hug her when everything had gone crazy. The next thing she knew she was lying on the soggy ground. So if she was there, then where the hell was the car?

Andrea unsteadily staggered to her feet, almost being knocked from them by another foreful gust of wind. She was still feeling the affects of all the alcohol she’d drunk earlier, though a car crash went a long way to sobering you up she grimly thought.

“Hello?” she cried against the lashing storm, “Major?”

There was no reply apart from the sound of the wind whipping the rain across the open ground. Andrea could barely see two feet in front of her and most certainly couldn’t see any sign of either a car or even a road for that matter. She supposed all she could do was pick a direction and hope it was the right one.

She traipsed through the cloying mud of the field while the unceasing rain continued to soak her clothes. The drenched garments clung to her body now, and she let out a shiver as the wind bit through them. She felt so tired, but she had to keep going until she found the car and the Major. All the drink she’d consumed probably didn’t help her fatigue, but she had to push all that aside, and concentrate on the task at hand.

Just when she thought she was going to be stumbling aimlessly around the Scottish countryside forever, Andrea spotted two deep gouges in the muddy earth. They pointed a trail on down a slope to a river that flowed at the foot of it. There she

finally saw the car, or at least half of it. The water obscured the rest of the vehicle, at a level that splashed over the bonnet.

Andrea slithered frantically down the slope, slipping onto her backside several times and almost falling the last few steps. At the bottom she didn't hesitate, plunging straight into the river, gasping at the coldness of it. She waded through the fast flowing waters to the right hand-side of the car where the Major had been sitting, clinging onto the bodywork to stop the river dragging her away. The door had been ripped right away from the frame, exposing the inside of the car, but Andrea could see that the Major was still sitting there, her seatbelt having kept her in place. The bottom half of her body was below the waterline and her eyes were closed, her head lolling back against the headrest.

Though it was dark, Andrea could see the sallow paleness of the Major's face and the rivulets of blood running down her cheek from a gash in her temple. A horrible sick sensation swept through Andrea and she quickly reached out her fingers. As she touched the skin at the other woman's throat Andrea let out a sigh of relief – there was a pulse. Suddenly the Major groaned, causing Andrea to jump and hastily pull back her hand.

The Major's eyes flickered unsteadily open. "Andrea?" she asked uncertainly, seeing the young woman leaning in the door. "What happened?" She tried to shift in her seat, letting out a sharp cry of pain.

"Easy," said Andrea, putting some stilling hands on the Major's shoulders. "We had some sort of accident, I don't really know what happened."

The Major glanced up at her again, seemingly finding it hard to focus. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. "Is Thompson all right?"

Andrea realised she had completely forgotten about the other occupant of the car. "I don't know," she admitted, "Let me just check."

Andrea clawed her way along the side of the car against the current of the river that tugged heavily against her clothes. The young soldier was leaning forward, his head resting in the remnants of the airbag that had erupted from the steering wheel. The window was shattered so Andrea was able to reach in to check for signs of life. As she ascertained that he was indeed breathing, she noticed how the windscreen was fractured too – no doubt how she had ended up being flung from the car.

She came back round to the rear door. "He's alive, beyond that I don't know. I don't really want to move him for now just in case I do more damage."

The Major was grimacing as she reached forward under the water. "No, probably best not too," she agreed, flopping back against the seat in frustration. "Well, it seems my leg is stuck fast, though I can't see a bloody thing."

"Do you want me to try and free it?" offered Andrea, "I could probably break whatever is pinning it in place. I might as well make some use of having these super powers."

She made to delve under the water when the Major shot out a hand. “Hang on, did you put the regulator back on?”

Andrea immediately realised that she hadn’t and fumbled in her pocket for it – the last thing they needed was for her to have a seizure in the middle of the river with no one capable of helping. “Shit!” she cursed after groping in the sodden material, “I’ve lost it. It must have been when I got thrown from the car. Great, it could be bloody anywhere!”

“Never mind,” said the Major, “I’ll just radio for the emergency services. There should be a handset up front somewhere.”

Andrea struggled though the water again to retrieve it and the Major called in the accident. The atrocious weather meant they would have to wait for the regular ground based services, rather than the speedier army helicopter. Having made the call, the Major lay back against the seat, her breathing shallow as if just making the call had been a great effort.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” asked Andrea in concern. She was finding it increasingly hard to stand against the raging torrent and she perched herself on the edge of the Major’s seat instead, bracing her leg against the door frame.

“You mean apart from sitting in a freezing river with a pounding head and a crushed leg?” remarked the Major ruefully.

“Sorry, stupid question,” noted Andrea as she tried to push her soaked hair from her face with numb fingers.

“No, I’m sorry,” said the Major more gently this time, “I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful.”

“Indeed, I thought I was the ‘ungrateful bitch’.”

The Major actually made a small chuckle at Andrea’s attempt at a joke, wincing again as she did and bringing her hand to her head. The blood was still running freely from the wound on her forehead, matting the auburn hair that flopped lankly against her face. Her hand splashed listlessly back into the water as she made another moan.

“How long did you say they were going to be?” asked Andrea, her concern for the Major growing.

When there was no reply, Andrea feared the Major had actually lost consciousness, but eventually the blue-grey eyes struggled open.

“Twenty or thirty minutes,” the Major informed her trying to inject some of her normal steel into her voice. “They’ve got to come from Ayr and as you know the weather’s not the best.”

Andrea nodded. She didn't like just sitting and waiting when the other woman was obviously in pain. For the second time that day she felt completely useless. She had seen plenty of car accidents in her time, of course, but they were always strangers who were injured, not someone you...

Andrea stopped her thoughts abruptly - she had been about to finish with '...someone you care about'.

She frowned to herself as she considered whether it was true, or whether her anxious mind was just playing tricks on her. Fortunately the Major's voice broke in again, before she had to think about it for too long.

"I just wanted to say sorry again," she said, "For leaping down your throat at the pub. I really didn't know about your friend. I just assumed it was you being your usual pain in the arse self."

Andrea laughed, partly to relieve her anxiety. "No, I'm the one who should apologise. I shouldn't have just left the base like that, no matter what happened. All I could think of was getting away, being on my own. And then of course I have these new powers that make it possible for me to go pretty much anywhere - so I did."

"You flew all the way to the mainland then?"

Andrea thought she detected a faint air of admiration in the tone. "Yes, though I have to say there were a few dodgy moments when I almost ended up in the sea thanks to that fierce wind. It was pretty stupid of me really. I only discovered I could fly a couple of days ago and here I am acting like it's a piece of piss, like it's the most natural thing in the world."

Andrea wasn't entirely sure why she was confessing her idiocy to the Major, concluding that it could still be the fading affects of the alcohol clouding her judgement.

The Major seemed impressed with her honesty though. "At least you can admit you don't know it all. And that's what we're here for - to help you understand and master these abilities."

"To help me learn how to be superhuman?"

"Something like that," agreed the Major, offering Andrea a weak smile despite the situation.

Andrea shivered again as the water licked at her chest, and it was then that an alarming thought struck her. Only a couple of moments before it had been licking at her waist. Andrea looked round the car to check she wasn't mistaken. "Helvete!"

"What is it?" asked the Major, alerted by Andrea's cry.

"The water - it's rising!" revealed Andrea frantically.

The Major glanced down at her body to see the choppy surface now lapping just over the swell of her chest. “You’re right,” she concurred grimly.

“We have to get you out of here!” cried Andrea struggling to her feet in the deepening river.

Without waiting for the Major’s consent, she took a deep breath and dipped below the surface, searching out the Major’s leg where it was trapped. Her hands fumbled down over the other woman’s thigh and knee, having to go by touch since she couldn’t see a thing in the murky water. She could feel jagged metal and soft flesh, but it was hard to determine which way to try and pull. If she got it wrong she could wrench the metal right through the Major’s leg by accident. She shot up to the surface momentarily, gasping for air.

“I can’t tell which way to move it to free you, not without being able to see,” she said hopelessly.

The water was rising faster than ever now, reaching up to the Major’s neck. She tilted her chin up slightly to keep it out of the water so she could breathe. “You shouldn’t be trying to use your powers anyway – you could black out under the water!”

“Oh, what? So I’m supposed to just sit by and watch while you drown?” replied Andrea incredulously.

“I’m not going to ask you to risk yourself on my behalf,” said the Major adamantly, having to spit some water from her mouth as she did.

“You don’t have to.”

“Andrea, wait, there’s no need...”

The Major’s words were cut off as Andrea plunged under the water again. The current was yanking at her strongly now but she determinedly planted her feet in the mud, seeking out the bottom of the car. If she couldn’t free the Major, then she’d just have to get her out of the water, car and all.

Straining to balance herself, Andrea hefted the vehicle from the riverbed, lifting it through the water as she rose to a standing position. Accessing her power came completely naturally, like it was perfectly normal to be able to pick up an entire car. Then she pushed off from the ground, breaking up through the surface of the river with a stream of droplets in her wake. She flew up to the crest of the slope before depositing the car back down on the grass with a thump.

Andrea rested her hand on the frame of the broken door, breathing heavily. “See, no problem, nothing to it,” she noted nonchalantly to the Major, though inside her heart was hammering out of control.

The other woman stared up at her in amazement as the last of the river water drained from the car, leaving behind a scummy grime that caked the interior. Andrea bent

down to carefully free the Major's leg, now able to see that fortunately the wound wasn't too deep where the floor had warped and twisted around it.

As she stood again, Andrea just managed to offer the Major a smile before the pain tore through her.

Andrea let out a strangled cry at the suddenness of it, her fingers clawing into the metal of the roof, mangling it in their grip. The jagged edges dug into the palm of her hand, but the pain from that was nothing compared to that sweeping through the rest of her.

Screwing her eyes shut, Andrea tipped her head back and howled to the night sky as excruciating daggers of heat lanced through every muscle of her body. This was worse than any of the other episodes – the unforgiving fire wrenching at her bone and sinew, burning and ripping as it cascaded through her.

Gasping in agony, she staggered backwards, tumbling heavily to the ground. Her face slapped hard against the soggy grass as she hit. Another spasm rocked her shaking body, and she tried to bring her knees up to her chest as if that would help ward off the pain in some way. It was like she was being torn apart from inside and all she could do was lie there and whimper pathetically, praying for it to stop, as the cold rain beat down on her cheek.

Then suddenly there was warmth - strong arms wrapping themselves around her and pulling her close, penetrating through the haze of pain. Struggling to open her eyes Andrea could just make out the Major through the blur of tears and raindrops. She was looking down with concern as she cradled the young woman in her lap.

“Hold on, I'm getting help.” she said softly, reaching for something.

Andrea couldn't respond; it was taking all her strength to fight against the raging fire consuming her body. She closed her eyes again, resting her head limply against the Major's chest. The comforting arms around her tightened as she trembled once more with a fresh wave of twisting pain. The Major's voice drifted down to her over the swirling wind.

“This is Major Jarvis, I need an airlift straight away! We're just off the A719, about 2 miles south of Ayr.” She paused for a moment as she received some sort of response from her radio. “Yes, I know what the weather's like,” she continued angrily, “Just do it!”

Andrea sensed a hand now, stroking her drenched hair soothingly.

“Just hang on, they'll be here soon.”

Andrea desperately wished she could comply with the Major's request, but as another bolt of pain ripped through her she slipped into unconsciousness in the other woman's arms.

CHAPTER 7

The harsh white of the room hurt Andrea's eyes as she prised them open. She blinked a few times, the strip lights on the ceiling coming into focus and alerting her to the fact that she was back at the army base. As consciousness returned, so did the aching soreness in her body, along with the memories of what had caused it. She couldn't help the shudder that passed through her as she recalled the intense, paralysing pain she had experienced out on the muddy field. The last thing she could remember were the blue-grey eyes piercing through the gloom of the night and regarding her with surprising compassion in their depths.

Tentatively Andrea tested to see if she could sit up. It was an effort, but she slowly shifted herself up the bed so she was leaning against the metal headrest. As she had guessed, she was in the sickbay at the base. She could see the bald head of Doc Whitman in the corner, the flickering light from his monitor reflecting off the lenses of his glasses. He was the only other occupant of the room and Andrea found she was faintly disappointed at that. Had she really expected to see those same eyes gazing down on her when she woke though?

Doc must have sensed her stirring, as he swung round in his seat at that moment.

"Ah, good, you're awake at last," he noted, getting up from his computer to come to her bedside, "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been trampled by a herd of elephants," she replied sardonically.

"You're lucky it was just elephants then," he remarked with an air of chastisement, while checking the monitors by the bed, "And not a bunch of hippos and rhinos too."

Andrea made a small frown at him. "Great bedside manner as always, Doc."

"Well, you will go and do such stupid things as using your powers when you don't have your regulator on," he continued in the manner of a teacher telling off an unruly pupil, "Are you trying to make it difficult for us to keep you alive?"

"No, but it wasn't my fault this time," she insisted, before catching herself, "Well, not entirely anyway. I shouldn't have taken the regulator off, I know, but...I had my reasons. But once I lost it I was hardly going to sit by and let the Major drown just in case I had a seizure."

"Just in case?" repeated Doc incredulously, "You make it sound like a small trifle. One of these seizures could kill you. In fact this one very nearly did. You were lucky the Major was there with you."

"Really?" Andrea was intrigued to find out what had happened after she had passed out.

“Yes, she was bawling Chadwick out for dithering about sending the helicopter out to your aid. Even when you got back here she was barking out the orders, not to mention getting completely in our way.”

Andrea’s brow furrowed once more, she wasn’t sure what he meant.

Doc noticed the puzzled look. “She insisted on hanging round the sickbay to make sure you were all right,” he explained, “In the end I had to practically order her to go to bed herself. You can imagine how that went down.”

Despite the dull pain that still wracked her body Andrea couldn’t help the small smile that crossed her face as she tried to picture Doc ordering the Major around.

“So what time is it now?” she asked, noting that she wasn’t wearing her watch or any other of the clothes she had been when she went to the pub on the mainland. Instead she wore a medical gown, the draft up her spine noticeable. She didn’t know why they insisted on making the things so impractical.

“It’s two in the afternoon, you’ve been out of it for about half a day,” he informed her.

Andrea started to swing her legs off the bed. “Well, if you’ve finished prodding me, can I go back to my quarters now?” She still felt as rough as hell, but she didn’t want to stay on public view in her weakened state.

“Hold on!” he cried trying to stop her exit by ineffectually putting his hands up.

She had made it up off the bed and was wobbling unsteadily on her feet past him when the doors to the medical bay swung open. Andrea just had time to see it was the Major before her knees started to give way and she staggered forwards. The Major was quick though, catching her before she hit the hard floor. The Major arms were surprisingly strong, and Andrea had a momentary flashback to the night before and lying in those same arms as they cradled her and comforted her through the pain. Coming back to the present, Andrea suddenly felt the Major’s fingers grazing across the bare skin of her back where her gown gaped open as she tried to get a better hold to keep Andrea up. Andrea found her feet, pulling away and trying to pull her gown around herself as best she could.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” asked the Major. The voice was stern, but with an underlying current of concern.

“To my room,” Andrea replied matter-of-factly.

“Not in that condition you’re not,” the Major replied, “Doc, what are you doing letting her leave?”

“Like I could stop her,” he replied rolling his eyes, “But be my guest, you have a go.”

The Major's eyes narrowed at him. It appeared she hadn't forgotten the night before and didn't welcome his sarcasm now. "Can you give us a moment then?" she said, staring at him the whole time.

He glanced between the two women before sighing and going back to the far corner of the room, out of earshot.

As soon as he was gone Andrea started for the door once more. "Right, well, I'll be going then," she said.

The Major's hand shot out, though it's grip of Andrea's arm was gentle. "You don't have to pretend you're all right for me," she said quietly.

Andrea almost fired back a response that she was perfectly fine but bit it back. She could see the soft look in the Major's eyes and realised there *was* little point in putting on a façade for the older woman. She had already seen Andrea at her most weak and vulnerable anyway. Plus Andrea didn't think she could actually make it back upstairs without help, and collapsing in the corridor would be infinitely more embarrassing than backing down at this point. So she stumbled back over to the bed and plonked herself down. Not only did her gown have a huge slit up the back, she noted, but it was also rather short, sitting just above her knees as she waited on the edge of the bed for the Major to join her.

Andrea glanced over as the Major lowered herself onto the covers, the colour of her uniform trousers matching that of the blankets. "Have you come to tell me off too then?" asked Andrea.

"No, I came to thank you."

Andrea was confused - this was not been what she had been expecting. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said I came to thank you," the Major repeated, "For saving my life."

Andrea found herself at a loss for words for a change. "Er...you're welcome," she managed eventually and rather stupidly.

"Not that hard is it," the Major commented cryptically.

Andrea looked at her curiously, her fingers fidgeting distractedly with the hem of her gown, trying to pull it down to maintain some modesty. Not that she was usually bothered about such things, but for some reason it seemed appropriate in front of the Major.

"Being civil," the Major outlined, "It's so much easier than all that bickering isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," conceded Andrea.

The major waited for her to continue, and before she knew it Andrea's next words seemed to work their way out of their own accord. "Actually, I wanted to thank you

too.” Now she had said it, Andrea supposed she had better put it in context some way. “You know for...helping me out...when I...” she tried to explain before trailing off, finding it hard to admit to her weakness even though the Major had been there.

“It’s all right you can say it, I won’t think any the less of you,” the Major disclosed, “You’re seizures are a fact of your mutation; you don’t have to be ashamed. It was very brave of you to use your powers like that, knowing the risks.”

“Brave or stupid,” suggested Andrea.

“Why are you trying to put yourself down?” the Major asked, shaking her head, “Don’t you want anyone to know you might help someone else for no other reason than simple compassion or kindness?”

“And what makes you think that’s why I did it? Maybe I just didn’t want to chance getting blamed for killing you?”

“I don’t believe that for a moment,” the Major claimed. “How are you feeling anyway?”

“I’m all right.”

“And really?” the Major pressed, not taking her eyes off Andrea.

Andrea wondered why it was she now found it impossible to lie to the other woman, at least convincingly. She supposed a shared near-death experience was the sort of thing to tear down a few barriers. “Like crap,” she admitted eventually, giving in under the Major’s intense gaze.

The Major nodded sympathetically. “Well, take your time recovering. You won’t be bothered down here, in case you’re worried about that.”

“But everyone knows what happened?”

“Not all the details, no. They know you went off base, they know I brought you back and that you had a bit of a problem with your powers but that’s it.”

Andrea digested the answer. “So they don’t know why I left?”

“No,” the Major replied simply, “That was your private business, hardly something I was going to share with everyone.”

“Thank you,” said Andrea genuinely.

Andrea hadn’t really thought about Maria until now, but now the reasons behind her behaviour of the night before came crashing back in on her. She went quiet as recollection of her friend filled her mind. The tears that started to well up were hard to hold back and she had to take a couple of shuddering breaths as she did. It was then that she felt the warm hand on her shoulder, stroking gently.

“I know I didn’t really know Maria,” the Major said softly, “But I wanted to say sorry again, and if there’s anything I can do...”

Andrea didn’t register the words immediately. She was too busy concentrating on the calming effect of the simple stroking gesture and suddenly remembering how the Major had so nearly made a much more profound one back in the car. Andrea found herself wishing for the Major to hug her now. She supposed she just needed any comfort she could get at that moment.

“Actually, there is...” she said slowly.

She almost expressed her wish of a moment before out loud, but knew that the Major was hardly going to go around hugging the people under her command. That dark night in the back of the car had been a split second in time; one when anything had seemed possible. They were back in the harsh light of day now.

“Go on,” prompted the Major.

Andrea asked the other thing on her mind instead. “Would I be allowed off the base for something, officially this time?”

The major sucked in her breath. Andrea knew she was most likely pushing it, and that this would prove a stern test of just how far the Major was willing to bend. It would show if she really was as approachable and considerate as Tom kept making out she was or whether she would stick hard and fast to rules and regulations.

“That depends on what it is,” the Major responded warily.

Andrea gathered hope from the fact she hadn’t been shot down straight away. “I was hoping I could go to Maria’s funeral. I mean, obviously I don’t know when or where it is yet, but I would like to go. Since I couldn’t be there for her when she died, the least I could do is be at her funeral.”

The Major looked away for a second as she considered her answer. Andrea’s heart was actually beating that little bit faster, as she hung, waiting for the response.

The Major looked back up, fixing Andrea with her eyes before she answered. “Yes, I think that could be arranged,” she said.

Andrea couldn’t help the small sigh of relief that escaped her lips. “Thank you.”

“Though there is one condition,” the Major quickly added.

Andrea regarded the Major suspiciously. “What do I have to do?”

“It’s nothing like that,” the Major reassured her, “All I ask is that someone goes with you.”

“Oh great,” said Andrea sarcastically, “One of your heavy-handed squaddies gets to come with me. Very sensitive they are, I’m sure. I suppose you want me to be handcuffed to them too, like some common criminal, just in case I leg it?”

“If you’d let me finish,” the Major interrupted, having to raise her voice slightly.

Andrea stopped her tirade, staring unflinchingly at the other woman.

“I was going to suggest that *I* come with you, unless there’s someone else from my staff you’d prefer.”

Andrea was totally blindsided by the offer.

“I understand what you’re saying about my people,” the Major continued, as Andrea sat dumbstruck, “But they are soldiers after all, not counsellors. Hopefully I might be able to be a bit more inconspicuous and inoffensive. But as I said, if you’d rather someone else...”

“No, you’ll be fine,” Andrea interjected, maybe a little too quickly.

“Good,” commented the Major with a smile.

Andrea hardly heard the rest of the Major’s words as she continued speaking, checking on Andrea and reassuring her that there was no rush to get back to work. She was far too preoccupied by the thought of a trip off the island with the other woman, even if it was for a sombre occasion.

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It took little under a week for Maria’s funeral to be arranged and, as promised, the Major allowed Andrea the necessary time off for it. Come the day of the funeral Andrea dressed in her smartest black suit and made her way out to the helicopter pad early in the morning. The pad lay on the open ground outside the main complex building and the wind whipped keenly across the concrete, though for once it wasn’t raining.

As she neared the military aircraft that sat waiting for her, the back door opened and the Major hopped out to greet her. The wind caught her hair as soon as she did, pushing the ends of her auburn bob across her cheeks. Andrea was quite surprised to that the Major was out of uniform, sporting a plain black suit, not dissimilar to Andrea’s own, though with one prominent difference. Whereas Andrea wore trousers on her bottom half, the Major wore a form-fitting skirt, cut just below her knee. Still that was more than enough to give Andrea a sight of the Major’s toned calves for the second time. Andrea hadn’t realised until that moment that she had been keeping count.

Getting into the helicopter, the pair exchanged a cursory greeting but Andrea wasn’t really in the mood for a long conversation. It was taking all her willpower to maintain her calm exterior and not submit to her sorrow completely. She had done that in private, but she liked to maintain the illusion of control at least in front of others.

She tried to concentrate on the details of the landscape as they flew south as a means of distraction, noting the changes from mountainous rocks to rolling hills to urban sprawl as they went. The Major for her part remained unobtrusive as she had suggested she would and Andrea was grateful. It could have been awkward, sitting in silence, but it wasn't. All she got from the Major was the sense that she was happy to leave Andrea to her private thoughts and not intrude.

Andrea recognised the suburbs of London from the air as they neared the closest military airfield to the crematorium. The copter slowly descended and once on the ground they exited the craft to transfer to an unmarked black car to take them the rest of the way. Andrea was surprised by the small nervous pang that skittered through her stomach on clambering into the back as the Major got in the other side. The reminder of the night of their accident was just a little too obvious. Glancing at the Major, Andrea could see a slight pensive look on her features too. She had been so caught up in her own feelings about Maria that she had to remind herself that the other woman had also had a bad experience that night – she had nearly died too after all. Andrea wondered if the Major had talked to anyone about it, or if she was so supremely confident and together that she didn't need to. She made a mental note to ask her about it at a more opportune moment.

After a winding journey through the typically heaving traffic of outer London, the gates of the crematorium loomed in front of them. Andrea swallowed nervously as they drew up in front of the doors; it was getting harder and harder to maintain her composure. Steeling herself once more she opened the door.

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Some time later, Andrea read the platitudes on the numerous bouquets of flowers that littered the ground, though they didn't really do the woman that had been Maria justice. Not that there was anything that could really do justice to someone who had been so vibrant and full of life she considered.

The rest of the congregation had moved off by now, and she was one of the last stragglers, having waited until now so she could come and have some time alone with her thoughts, without being bothered by people asking where she had been and what she had been doing for the last month or so. She didn't want such things to distract from what was supposed to be Maria's day.

Of course she had spotted a fair few eyes turning to note her presence at the start of the ceremony, even though she and the Major had taken up a position in the back row of the crematorium's chapel. The chapel was packed and quite a few of the attendees were fellow police officers who knew who Andrea was, if only in passing. During the service, Andrea had avoided the stares, keeping her eyes resolutely trained on the ground, attempting her best to hold back her grief. Most of the ceremony had washed over her - the hymns, the readings, the succession of friends and colleagues getting up to pay their respects and share their reminiscences of Maria. Andrea knew they all meant well, and there had been a few times when the words had hit just that little too close too home. At those times she had felt the tears threatening to spill again as they had done at intervals over the past week.

The Major had remained silently by her side throughout, leaving Andrea to her mourning on her own until near the very end. Then Maria's partner in the force had gotten up to speak. Andrea knew him - they had been out for drinks and meals together, Mike, Maria and her on several occasions. He was a good man, and Andrea knew Maria thought the world of him. So when his voice caught during the middle of his speech, Andrea could feel his pain. Here at last was someone who really knew Maria, not just one of her bosses who had been sent to give the official line. Finally Andrea was undone and she allowed the tears to slip down her cheeks though she still never looked up. Sniffing quietly to herself, she suddenly found a hand on her shoulder – squeezing, reassuring. The Major hadn't said anything; she didn't need to. It was enough to just know she was there.

Now they were outside, she had shown similar compassion by moving off somewhere while Andrea read the cards on the flowers. Andrea heard some steps behind her and assumed it was the Major come to tell her it was time to go. When she swung round she was momentarily stymied.

The woman in front of her raised her eyebrows. “Not the kind of response I normally expect from you.”

Andrea gathered her wits again to reply. “Sorry, I didn't expect to see you here,” she explained, before realising some sort of greeting was in order. “Hello, Meg,” she added, leaning forwards to quickly kiss her former girlfriend on the cheek.

“Hello to you too, Andi,” said Meg using the shortened name that a lot of Andrea's friends did, “It's good to see you, despite the circumstances.”

“You too,” replied Andrea automatically, though she wasn't sure if it was true. She was off-balance and unprepared for seeing Meg. She found herself staring for a moment, noting that the other woman had gotten her hair cut since they had split up some six months previously. Her near-black hair was now in a trendy jagged cut, revealing more of her face and her fine features.

“I can't believe it happened,” remarked Meg, her dark eyes drifting down to the flowers, absently scanning them.

“No,” replied Andrea distantly. Maybe Meg wouldn't press her on anything else if she kept her responses short. And maybe pigs would fly.

“Where have you been, Andi?”

“Meg, please, not now,” said Andrea quietly, “We're here to remember Maria.”

“And I have. We all have for the past week, but where have you been?”

“I've been busy.”

“Too busy for your friends?”

“That’s not fair, it’s complicated.”

“Really, and how complicated can something be that you’re not even around when your best friend dies.”

“I really can’t talk about it.”

“Now that’s convenient. You disappear off the face of the earth for weeks then suddenly just swan back down here when it suits you?”

“Look, Meg, I don’t really know why I should have to answer to you - you’re not my girlfriend any more!”

The hurt look on Meg’s face confirmed to Andrea what she had already suspected – Meg was still hoping for some sort of reconciliation between the two of them. It was never going to happen from Andrea’s point of view, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t at least be kind to the woman she had shared her life with for over two years.

“I’m sorry,” said Andrea, more gently now, “I didn’t mean to snap. Believe me, I wish I could have been here. I’ve played it over and over in my mind, thinking perhaps I could have done something to save her if I’d been around. But…things have happened. Things I’m not at liberty to explain.”

Andrea supposed she could try and explain the situation to Meg, since for once she didn’t have anyone listening in. In fact this was probably the perfect opportunity to let someone else know where she was and what was going on. Yet something held her back. The Major had been kind enough to trust her on her own and it wouldn’t be right to betray that trust. Not to mention the fact that Meg was notoriously bad at keeping secrets. It would be round the other nurses at the hospital before you could say superbug.

“It all sounds very mysterious,” Meg noted, “Though it also sounds like I’m not going to get anything else out of you on the subject.”

“I’m afraid not,” confirmed Andrea. “So, how have you been?” she asked for want of a better way of getting off the current topic.

“Fine, working hard as usual,” replied Meg.

“And outside work?” Andrea pressed on receiving the non-committal response.

“Are you asking if I’ve got a new girlfriend?”

Andrea shrugged as an answer; Meg knew full well that was indeed what she was asking. Even if she didn’t want to be with Meg anymore, Andrea couldn’t help but be curious.

Eventually Meg shook her head, “No, there’s no one new. And how about you? Was that woman with you…?”

The question trailed off and a look of confusion passed across Andrea's face, the young woman having to think for a minute to deduce what Meg was referring to.

"Oh, you mean the M..." she finally realised, stopping herself before she revealed the Major's identity, or at least her rank and the fact that she was in the army. "No," she added, holding back a smile, "I can safely say she is not my girlfriend."

Meg didn't look convinced though. "Really? You looked very close during the service."

"What are you talking about?" Andrea asked, puzzled.

"When she was stroking your shoulder."

"She wasn't 'stroking' it," stated Andrea adamantly, "It was purely a comforting gesture. She's just a colleague, that's all."

"If you say so," said Meg, "No need to get all defensive about it."

"I'm not..." Andrea stopped, seeing immediately how she was proving Meg's point. "Look can we stop talking about her."

"If you want, but is there anything you can talk about? How about how you've been. I did hear about what happened with your colleagues in the force."

"You did, how?"

"From Maria of course."

Andrea sighed. "Of course." She didn't know how could she have forgotten that Maria was Meg's friend even before they had been. It was Maria who'd introduced the pair of them.

"I'm sorry, Andi, it must have been awful. Is that why you've been away all this time?"

"Partly," allowed Andrea. It was funny how times changed. Once upon a time she would have been baring her soul to Meg, or at least as much as she would allow herself to. Andrea had always held something back, even then, unwilling to trust someone just that final step, to allow them to see the very depths of her feelings.

"You can talk to me, you know," said Meg, as if reading her mind, "If you want to."

"I know, and maybe I will, just not right now. Everything's still too raw, and what with Maria as well..."

Meg nodded. "I understand, just give me a call when or if you change your mind."

"Thanks, Meg," said Andrea, reaching out to touch Meg on the arm. "It does mean a lot to me, to know I do still have some friends, out..."

Meg caught the abrupt cut-off of the sentence. "Out where?"

"It doesn't matter," said Andrea evasively.

"Ok," said Meg, having worked out by then that there were some things Andrea just couldn't discuss. "By the way, I thought you might like to know, I've got Gerry."

"Oh my god!" cried Andrea, slapping her forehead as she remembered her cat. Maria had been looking after him. "I'd completely forgotten about him."

"Hmm, lucky for you some of us aren't so forgetful," Meg remarked, though it was a friendly admonishment, "Whenever you're ready you can have him back."

"Looks like I owe you again," said Andrea with a smile, patting Meg's arm once more.

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The Major paced across the car park, wondering how much longer she should give Andrea. She checked her watch for what must have been the twentieth time and decided she'd probably had long enough. They were already much later than they were supposed to have been, but since she was the boss no one was going to be complaining. As she made her way round to the side of the building, she considered that probably wasn't strictly true. No doubt Chadwick would grumble as usual. Sometimes she thought he forgot exactly who held the higher rank. Or maybe he just forgot that he had been demoted prior to being moved to the island base, and held higher notions of his importance than he had in reality.

Rounding the corner the Major got a slight shock when she saw that Andrea was talking to someone. She had thought all the other mourners had left, which was one of the reasons she'd agreed to let the young woman go off on her own for a while. Neither of the them had seen the Major yet and she studied the woman talking to Andrea for minute, wondering who she was. She was markedly different in appearance to Andrea, shorter with cropped black hair. The pair of them seemed to be sharing a joke as Andrea smiled and then started stroking the other woman's arm.

The Major had seen enough and approached to speak to them.

"Andrea," she said as she came near, drawing both of their attention, "It's time to go."

Andrea looked a bit surprised to find the Major there, while the other woman had an entirely different expression. She was regarding the Major with a mixture of suspicion and something else unidentifiable but not favourable.

"Right, yes, of course," said Andrea, recovering. "I'll give you a call," she quickly said to the dark-haired woman, giving her a peck on the cheek before she joined the Major.

As they walked back to the car, the Major could swear the mystery woman's eyes were boring into her back the whole way. She didn't press Andrea on who she was; it was hardly an appropriate time for searching questions. Though she had to admit she was keen to know, if for no other reason than to check she wasn't a security risk.

They sat in silence on the way to the airfield; the Major supposing Andrea was lost in her grieving thoughts once more as she gazed out the window. The Major found her own eyes drifting to the countryside rushing by.

"You're not going to ask who that was then?"

Andrea had surprised her by being the first to talk, and the Major turned to face her across the back seat. Andrea had both eyebrows raised as she regarded the Major inquisitively.

"I didn't like to pry," the Major answered diplomatically.

"But you wanted to?" Andrea seemed more interested than anything else.

"She *was* giving me a rather strange look," the Major noted by means of an excuse for her curiosity.

Andrea actually laughed at that. "Yes, I noticed that too."

The Major waited for further explanation.

"That was Meg," Andrea clarified, "My ex-girlfriend."

"Right," remarked the Major. She'd heard rumours about Andrea's sexuality not to mention the strange snippet of conversation with Tom and Harry in the messhall some weeks ago regarding lesbians. Of course, she didn't like to engage in idle gossip herself, though it seemed the gossip was true in this case. "That doesn't explain the dirty looks though," she pondered.

"It doesn't?" queried Andrea. The Major stared back at her blankly and Andrea rolled her eyes. "Do I have to spell it out? I think she thought that perhaps you were my new girlfriend."

"What?" exclaimed the Major, shocked.

"It's all right, I set her straight, so to speak," Andrea reassured her.

"Well, good," said the Major, slightly unsure where to take the conversation at that point.

"You make it sound like a bad thing, being confused for a lesbian."

"What...er...no. Of course there's nothing wrong with it..." the Major offered hurriedly. She didn't know what was wrong with her, it wasn't as if she was a prude, but it was all she could do not to blush talking about such things with Andrea.

“I’m teasing you,” Andrea suddenly revealed with a wry grin, “To try and lighten the mood.”

“Oh, right, good one,” the Major remarked with a nervous smile. She wondered if she could sound more like an idiot if she tried. She needed to try and regain some control on the conversation. “She was a friend of Maria’s too then, I presume?”

“Yes, they’d known each other since school. It was Maria who introduced the two of us actually. I think she was almost more upset than us when it didn’t work out.” Andrea made a rueful laugh at the recollection before turning her head away to gaze out the window once more.

Though all she had was the view of the back of her blond head, The Major could hear Andrea’s shallow breathing, guessing the memory had brought thoughts of her friend to the fore again.

After a few moments of silence, Andrea swivelled back round. “It probably seems silly to you, being so affected by a friend’s death,” she remarked.

The Major frowned. “What do you take me for, some sort of heartless military robot? I am human being; I do have some understanding of grief.”

“Sorry, of course you do,” said Andrea apologetically, “I didn’t mean to be rude, that came out a bit wrong. I meant it more from the point of view that you must have lost people a few times in your line of work; they must prepare you for it.”

“The same could be said of the police force. And believe me, no amount of knowing it might happen and preparation can ready you for the harsh reality of losing someone you care about or someone under your command. It hits you just as hard every time, all those feelings of regret, guilt and remorse.”

Andrea was regarding her with interest, her pale blue eyes searching the Major’s face. The Major suspected she had let the tone of her voice reveal her own recently rekindled emotions regarding her father’s death. She tried to rein it in as she continued.

“What I’m saying is you don’t need to pretend it didn’t happen. If you need any more time, or someone to talk to, just let me know.” The Major suspected that Andrea would turn down the offer but she wanted to make it anyway. The young woman still hadn’t sought any help over the death of her other colleagues and that had been over a month ago. The Major considered that she would just have to keep gently pressing until Andrea was ready.

“I will, but not right now, ok.”

“Ok.”

“What I really need is a holiday,” commented Andrea with a shake of the head, “Some time away from all of this.” The Major didn’t think it was a serious comment, more just an outward expression of frustration.

“Well, I can’t make any promises about holidays, but how about a day trip off the island?”

The Major wasn’t quite sure why she was making the offer, but now she had she could see that Andrea looked interested and not a little taken aback that it had been made.

“Not on your own, obviously,” clarified the Major.

“Obviously,” agreed Andrea, “*Someone* would need to come with me.”

They both knew what she meant, though the Major hadn’t necessarily intended that it be her originally. Now Andrea had assumed that it was, though, she could see the sense in it and an idea was already forming in her mind.

“How do you feel about sailing?”

Andrea looked bemused. “Sailing?”

“Yes, boat, sea, wind – sailing.”

“Well, I’ve never been,” confessed Andrea, “But I’m up for new experiences. You have a boat don’t you?”

“Indeed I do, and I’m sure Mr Parsons has filled you in on all its details,” noted the Major with a small smile.

“He might have mentioned it,” revealed Andrea cagily, “So when do we set sail?”

“How about next Saturday?”

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Andrea hurried down the steps to the ground floor lobby. She was late. She had been running on time but then had come the troubling decision over what to wear. Andrea had never have been sailing before and didn’t want to make a faux pas by wearing something unsuitable – she hated to make mistakes. Of course she could have asked the Major, but that would have been admitting defeat, so instead she’d used her powers of deduction and reasoning. She was pretty sure that getting wet was most likely part of the deal, in which case something practical was definitely in order. In the end she’d settled for a pair of navy combat style trousers – they would dry reasonably quickly unlike any of her jeans. On top she wore a plain white t-shirt and a fleece jumper for warmth. Though it was a sunny day, it was still only April and once they were out on the water it would no doubt be chilly. Finally she wore a waterproof and windproof Karrimor jacket over the top. The jacket was probably the

most practical item of clothing she possessed. She'd bought it on a whim when Meg had suggested a short break at a cottage in Wales, which included walking the hills. Andrea had never been much of the outdoors type – she was too much of a city girl - but everyone made compromises when they were in love. The driving Welsh rain that had battered them most of the weekend had only served to reaffirm Andrea's belief that the countryside should be left to the cows and sheep.

Leaping down the last couple of steps, Andrea thought for a moment that she'd beaten the Major there after all. It took a couple of seconds for her to register that the casually dressed figure by the main door was indeed the older woman. Andrea actually found herself stopping in her tracks as she regarded the other woman, who hadn't yet noticed Andrea's presence. The Major looked more relaxed than Andrea had ever seen her, even her bobbed hair seemed more carefree than usual. The spring sunlight streamed through the large windows at the front of the building, flickering off the red strands. The Major must have sensed the silent perusal as she swung round at that moment. Andrea was completely unprepared for the broad smile that crossed the Major's face – she had been expecting a rebuke for her tardiness. It was only when the Major's expression changed to one of bemusement that Andrea realised she was still staring.

“Is everything all right?” queried the Major.

“Yes, fine,” replied Andrea, crossing the last few steps to the Major, “Sorry I'm a bit late,” she added, trying to regain her composure. Andrea noted that the Major wore similar clothes to her own – some hard wearing cotton trousers plus a red and black waterproof jacket. She was pleased that it appeared she had picked her attire correctly.

“No problem,” said the Major, “It's meant to be a day off, so there's no need for schedules and timetables today. But if you're ready, the boat's waiting to take us to the mainland.”

“Great, though I do have to warn you I know nothing about sailing,” Andrea told her as they made for the door.

“That's ok, I'm sure I can whip you into shape in no time.”

Andrea quickly dampened down the meandering thoughts the offhand remark generated, following the Major out the door and turning for the dock. “Before we go, I'd just like to thank you again, Major, for inviting me. It's good to get off the island for a break.”

“It's my pleasure,” the other woman replied, “But we should get one thing straight before we go.”

“Oh?”

“Since I'm off duty and this is meant to be a relaxing day out, I can hardly have you calling me Major all day – Kate will be fine.”

“It will?” asked Andrea, too taken aback to stop the words spilling out of her mouth.

“Is there a problem with that?”

Andrea found herself flummoxed for the second time that morning. She didn't know where her normal composure had disappeared to, but it was most disconcerting. “Er, no, of course not...” she had to pause to get the name right, “...Kate.” It seemed strange referring to the Major that way – it was so...personal.

The Major actually laughed at Andrea's stuttering reply. “There you go, not so difficult. You know, sometimes I forget I have a first name with everyone calling me Major all day.”

Andrea wondered if the Major had ever allowed any of the other superhumans to call her by her first name. Somehow she suspected not, since from what she had garnered from Tom she was the first to be invited anywhere off base by the Major. The young man had practically fainted when Andrea had told him about her planned trip on the Dorset Flyer. He had been angling for a ride on the boat for months without success and now Andrea had come along and in a few weeks had succeeded where he had failed. Tom hadn't been able to resist making some jibes about Andrea being the Major's new favourite that Andrea had ignored. At least she had ignored them at the time. Now she couldn't help replaying them in her mind and wondering if they were true. The idea that they might be gave her a certain warm, smug sensation.

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Forty-five minutes later they were in Troon, making their way along a wooden jetty past a long procession of expensive look yachts that bobbed gently in the calm waters of the harbour. Andrea did wonder exactly how an army Major could afford one of them. However, she didn't think she was quite friendly enough with the other woman yet for it not to be considered rude if she asked. Finally the major stopped at the back of a sleek white yacht.

“Here she is, the Dorset Flyer,” said the Major with no small degree of pride as she gestured to the boat.

“She?” queried Andrea, looking at the inanimate yacht.

The Major made a small laugh. “I know it's not very politically correct these days, but boats will always be female in my mind and those of most other sailors too. They're far too temperamental to be anything else.”

Now it was Andrea's turn to laugh at the comparison. She glanced at the boat again, taking a moment to study it. It was about thirty-five feet long, with a tall mast towering out from the centre of the boat. The sail was down at the moment, and Andrea assumed it got unfurled once they were out in the clear water. There were lots of ropes and wires running from the mast to various points of the deck, and she guessed she would be finding out what they were all used for in due course. At the rear there was a sunken cockpit area that had a wheel in the centre and a seating area arranged around this. A couple of steps descended from there to the cabin below

deck. Right at the back of the ship the boat's name was emblazoned on the fibre glass hull, below which was the word "Weymouth". Andrea's knowledge of boats just about extended to knowing that this was the port where the boat would have been registered. She wondered if it held any particular significance, but again held back from asking what could be considered too personal a question. The Major certainly seemed to be showing all the signs of extending the hand of friendship, if her relaxed demeanour was anything to go by, and Andrea guessed she would just see how things developed over the course of the day. Maybe there would be a chance for more probing questions later.

Ironically, the Major was now literally offering Andrea her hand, having already stepped aboard. Andrea tentatively put a foot on the gangplank and instinctively took the hand without thinking. The Major's fingers were surprisingly delicate, the skin warm and soft in Andrea's grasp. Having stepped onto the rear decking area, Andrea suddenly realised she had been holding on far too long and quickly let go, trying to hide the fact by making a throwaway comment.

"She certainly is impressive," she said, casting her eyes along the boat.

The Major showed no signs of thinking anything untoward about Andrea's clutching of her hand moments before. "Thank you," she replied with a smile, "Now, are you ready to work?"

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It wasn't long before Andrea knew why the Major had made the comment. She had thought sailing would just involve a bit of sitting around on a boat, soaking up the sun while you pottered slowly across the sea having a nice, relaxing time. She had been unprepared for the reality of all the ropes and levers she'd been required to pull, tighten and wind. They'd only been out of the harbour for twenty minutes but the palms of her hands were already starting to ache, unused to the physical work.

"Can't I have some gloves?" asked Andrea, securing a main sail rope around a capstan. Of course, she hadn't known that was the name of the things the ropes went around until the Major had told her, but since leaving port Andrea had received a crash course in all things nautical. Her mind was now awash with a gamut of sailing terminology from port and starboard bows, through to jibs, main sails and tacking.

"I'm afraid not," answered the Major from her position at the wheel, "They might get caught in the winding mechanism and then it would be goodbye fingers."

Andrea made a small grunt of disapproval, noting the smile that twitched at the Major's lips as she did. She made her way carefully back along the top of the boat, hopping down into the cockpit. "When do I get a chance to drive?" she asked, looking eagerly at the wheel.

"Maybe in a little while," allowed the Major, "Once the Captain's satisfied you're an able seaman."

Andrea could swear the Major had actually winked as she'd said the words.

“For now I need you to go and tighten that flapping jib,” continued the Major.

Andrea stood up straight, making a theatrical salute. “Aye, aye, Captain!”

The Major’s laugh was just audible over the wind as Andrea clambered to the bow of the boat to carry out the order. Though Andrea was normally the first to challenge authority, she also knew when to defer to someone of greater experience and knowledge.

Despite her earlier moaning, Andrea had to admit that sailing was proving to be much more exciting than she might have imagined. She had only really agreed to come along to spend some time away from the base, but now she was there she was beginning to see the appeal of sailing. It was certainly exhilarating – that sense of freedom as you sliced effortlessly through the waves was a powerful and uplifting feeling. Even the cold wind whipping past her cheeks and tugging at her hair, along with the salty spray in her face only seemed to add to the ambience of it.

As she reached the appropriate rope she cast a quick glance back down the boat. The contented look on the Major’s face as she looked out to sea seemed to suggest she was experiencing similarly calming sensations. Andrea couldn’t make out her eyes, since the other woman wore sunglasses to protect from the glare of the sun off the waves, but her smile as her auburn hair flapped freely about her face was unmistakable. Andrea knew she was staring again and turned her attention to the handle she needed to wind. With her enhanced strength it was easy to overcome the resistance of the sail. She was concentrating so hard on doing it right that she didn’t hear the first shout, only glancing up as the second, more frantic one came.

“Andrea! Look Out!”

It was too late for Andrea to avoid the swinging boom. She caught a brief flash of white out of the corner of her eye before the metal pole thumped into her head. She was catapulted straight over the guardrail, landing with a loud splash in the sea. It was freezing. Absolutely, bone-bitingly freezing.

Andrea flapped about frantically, trying to right herself as her lifejacket carried her to the surface. Then she came to her senses, realising there really was no need to panic. Not only was she a more than competent swimmer but, of course, she could fly too. She flew easily out of the water, swooping over to the Flyer, which the Major was in the process of bringing about in order to pick her up. The Major looked stunned for a moment as Andrea landed lightly next to her, as if she too had forgotten Andrea’s powers. Then she was glancing anxiously around, scanning the horizon, before letting out a sigh of relief.

“What’s up?” asked Andrea, dripping water all over the boards of the cockpit floor from her drenched clothes.

“I was just checking there was no one around to catch that little display. You really shouldn’t use your powers in public like that.”

“You would rather I had floated around in the cold sea?” Andrea replied with a hint of annoyance.

“No, of course not. I would have come back and got you, if you’d just waited.”

“Well, pardon me for wanting to get out of that freezing water as quick as possible,” said Andrea tetchily. She couldn’t stop the shiver that shot through her at that moment. Now she was on the exposed deck the wind was cutting through her sodden clothes as if they weren’t there.

The Major’s face softened as she caught the involuntary movement. “Sorry, you’re cold,” she said, “You should get out of those wet things.”

The Major pressed some buttons on the control panel in front of the wheel, before letting go and gesturing Andrea towards the steps to the cabin. “I just get a little anxious about any eye witnesses to our activities,” she explained as she pushed open the door.

“It’s all right,” Andrea found herself saying, “I should be more careful.” She puzzled at her own words – a few weeks ago she would have been continuing the argument, maybe just for the hell of it. Perhaps she was getting tired of being obdurate for no reason.

As she ducked inside, Andrea saw that the main cabin was surprisingly spacious and actually quite luxurious. At the foot of the steps there was a small l-shaped kitchen area off to the right, while on the opposite side there was an area of electronic equipment for charting and navigation. Beyond this, the cabin opened out into a seating area with comfy blue-cushioned sofas built into the walls on either side while a wooden table sat in the centre. It was polished so that the wood reflected the light from the small windows above the sofa backs and the large skylight in the ceiling. The latter gave her a view of the billowing sail outside. Matching wood also adorned the floor and the walls until about halfway up where it gave way to plain white. The wood was a dark orange colour and Andrea thought it might have been teak, but she was hardly an expert on yacht interiors. At the far end was a door that Andrea assumed led to a bedroom. The Major was heading that way now and Andrea caught a glimpse of some blue bedding as she opened the door. Unsure whether to follow or not, Andrea just stood in the centre of the dining area. She didn’t really want to sit down and make the sofas wet.

The Major returned shortly, handing a towel and some clothes to Andrea. “I know I’m not quite your size, but it’s better than sitting in cold things.”

Andrea accepted the garments, regarding the Major curiously when she didn’t move away. Was she expecting Andrea to change in front of her? Andrea wasn’t normally bashful, but she found herself nervous at that prospect. Before Andrea had to conquer her uncharacteristic shyness, the Major suddenly started as if realising her own mistake.

“Oh, sorry, I’ll leave you to it for a minute,” she said hurriedly, “Feel free to use the bedroom or the bathroom,” she added, almost tripping up the steps as she exited the cabin.

Andrea watched in bemusement for a moment, before starting to strip off. She resisted the temptation to go and nose round the rest of the boat, though it went against her natural instincts. For one the Major might come back in and catch her rooting through the drawers and secondly it was hardly polite when she was the other woman’s guest. A couple of minutes later she had changed into the dry clothes, noting that the Major had been right – the fit wasn’t exactly great, especially in the trouser department. The hem of those sat somewhere just above Andrea’s ankle bone. She was slipping a soft, woollen jumper over her head when the Major came back in. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the too-short trousers and Andrea could see her desperately trying to stifle a snigger. Andrea put her hands on her hips and tried to look annoyed, though she had to admit she did look pretty silly.

“Sorry, sorry,” said the Major with her best attempt at a straight face, “You look fine, just like a proper sailor in fact.”

Andrea sighed and ran her hands through her damp hair, securing it back into a ponytail once more. “It’s your fault anyway,” she noted, “Sending that boom in my direction.”

“Yes, sorry about that,” agreed the Major, “But jibes like that just happen sometimes.”

“Jibes?”

“Uncontrolled boom movements, usually when the wind suddenly changes direction. Why don’t you sit down so I can check your head, you took quite a whack there.”

Andrea perched herself on the left-hand sofa, the Major sitting down next to her. Andrea had to turn her head to allow the Major access to her forehead. Andrea suddenly found herself looking directly into the other woman’s eyes. She had never been close enough to study them before but she couldn’t help doing so now. She could see that they were a pale blue, almost shading to grey and Andrea felt herself drawn into their mesmerising depths, her breathing becoming shallower as she almost forgot to continue the normally subconscious activity. It was a good job the Major was busy scanning Andrea’s forehead or she might have noticed the hypnotic effect she was having on the young woman.

Andrea got a shock when one of the Major’s hands went up to gently brush the skin above her left eye. She realised she must have taken an audible intake of breath at the sudden contact when the Major’s eyes flicked down to meet hers.

“Does it hurt?” she asked with concern.

“Only a little,” replied Andrea, playing along with the Major’s assumption that it was the pain that had caused her to flinch, “I’ll be fine, really.”

“If you’re sure?” checked the Major, pulling back her hand and regarding Andrea. When Andrea nodded the Major rose off the sofa, heading over to the galley area. “How about I make you a drink then, to warm you up?” she suggested, reaching into the cupboards, “It was tea wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right, milk one sugar” replied Andrea, surprised the Major remembered from the one time they had shared a cup.

The Major busied herself making the drinks. Before Andrea knew what she was doing she was gently feeling her own forehead where the Major’s fingers had grazed it moments earlier, as if there would be some trace of the other woman’s touch. When the Major started talking over her shoulder, Andrea quickly dropped her hand.

“You know, you’re not a proper sailor until you’ve been knocked overboard by the boom.”

“Does that mean you have?”

The Major laughed. “Countless times!” she confessed.

“You do a lot of sailing then?” queried Andrea.

“I try to get out most weekends. I don’t like to leave the old girl all tied up with nowhere to go for too long, she starts to get antsy.”

Andrea smiled once more at the likening of the boat to a woman, and one with moods at that. The Major brought the finished drinks back over to the sofa, handing Andrea her tea and placing her own coffee on the table.

“Thank you, Major...Kate.” Andrea corrected herself instantly, though it still didn’t seem quite right to use the informal name. To her the other woman was still the Major.

The Major smiled slightly at the unease with which Andrea used her name. She undid her sturdy jacket and cast it off onto the other sofa, running her hands through her windswept hair. The light from above played over the auburn strands as they drifted through the Major’s fingers and Andrea wondered how anyone’s hair could look so good when it had been battered mercilessly by the elements. The Major’s eyes shifted down to the couch and Andrea quickly busied herself with examining her cup, hoping the other woman hadn’t caught her staring yet again. Andrea didn’t know why her eyes kept ending up on the other woman all the time; it was like she held some magnetic power over them.

The Major sat down next to her and Andrea had to practically force herself to remain looking at the drink rather than immediately turning. Andrea took a sip of the tea, her brow creasing slightly as it passed down her throat with an unusual but pleasant warming sensation. She peered up inquisitively at the Major.

“I took the liberty of adding a little something for a bit of extra warmth,” the Major explained.

“It’s...different,” Andrea noted, taking another tentative sip.

“Different bad, or different good?”

Andrea savoured the taste for a minute. “Definitely good,” she finally concluded, “Rum is it?”

The Major grinned and picked up her own drink. “Of course,” she confirmed, “See, you’re well on the way to being a real sailor now, we’ll have you splicing the main brace before you know it.”

Andrea didn’t know what that was, but the way the Major said it, it certainly sounded appealing. Mind you the Major seemed to have the knack of making most things sound appealing when she employed her soft, husky voice as she was doing now. She could have been asking Andrea to run into a brick wall and she would probably have obliged.

Mentally shaking herself, Andrea tried to focus on the conversation. “Did you ever think you chose the wrong career?” she asked half-jokingly, “Surely you would have been better off in the navy.”

“No, this is my hobby, something to enjoy when I want to unwind and get away from the pressures of my job,” explained the Major, “Not that I don’t enjoy my job,” she added.

“You seemed a bit quick to add that on there,” noted Andrea, “Like you were almost trying to convince yourself.” Andrea found it hard to curb her natural tendency to probe and question. Luckily for once the Major didn’t seem to be perturbed by it. Andrea supposed that maybe she was still feeling guilty about the boom incident.

In fact the Major merely shrugged at the remark. “Like all jobs it can be difficult sometimes,” she confessed honestly, “Trying to juggle differing responsibilities and demands, but equally the challenge is what makes it exciting. Of course things are always trickier when we get troublesome new arrivals.”

Andrea met the pale blue eyes, seeing the hint of humour in them. It really was amazing the transformation that had occurred in their relationship, with just a bit of give from both of them. Who would have thought they would be able to joke about it like this when they had first met nearly six weeks previously.

“Ok, I’m willing to admit I may have been a touch obstinate when I first arrived,” conceded Andrea.

The Major lifted her brows. “A touch?” she asked sceptically.

“All right, a lot!” Andrea allowed with a roll of the eyes, “But you try watching a load of your friends being killed and then being told you’re a mutant with super powers that has to stay locked up on some island.”

The Major's face fell immediately and Andrea could have kicked herself. She hadn't meant to be so scathing, especially when they seemed to be getting on so well. The words had escaped before she'd time to think properly. It was just another indication of how being so close to the other woman seemed to have a disarming effect on her.

"Not that I hold you responsible," Andrea added to try and explain her words, "I know you're just doing your job, and I can appreciate why you and the powers that be thought it necessary, now I've had more time to think about it. Who knows what would happen if this was public knowledge not to mention what you told me about those underground groups."

The Major looked like she was about to say something, as if Andrea had got the wrong end of the stick and she was going to correct her, but she held back. Andrea was curious, but felt unable to press too far in what was still a fledgling friendship, especially after her initial tactless remarks.

Even as they crossed her mind she had to digest those thoughts of friendship. She realised that not only did she regard her relationship with the Major as one, but that she was actually bothered about how it progressed too. To avoid any more uncomfortable subjects, Andrea decided to try and segway into a different topic.

"So, how long have you been in the army anyway?" she asked amiably, drinking some more of the alcohol tinged tea.

"Fifteen years."

"Blimey!" cried Andrea, "So you joined up when you were what...eighteen?"

A small smile curved the Major's lips. "Are you fishing for my age or just trying to flatter me?"

"Just curious," replied Andrea innocently.

The Major eyed her with friendly suspicion for a moment before answering. "I signed up when I was twenty-one," she said, "Which makes me thirty-five, thirty-six this July, to save you doing the arithmetic," she added with a sly grin.

Andrea hadn't been about to attempt any complex maths anyway. Her mind was far too preoccupied with watching the way the Major's lips made the crooked grin. Andrea was beginning to realise that this one was the genuine article, not one she might employ when trying to be nice to someone for the sake of it.

"That's a long time to be in the army," noted Andrea, "You must be dedicated."

"You could say that, though some people might just think I was crazy. I know it's not very fashionable to be seen as patriotic, but I always wanted to serve my country, do my duty, ever since I was a young girl."

Andrea was finding it more and more difficult to actually listen to the words of the conversation with all the other external stimuli she was receiving just watching the

Major. Now she was taking the time to observe the other woman up close, she saw that she was blessed with a host of different mannerisms that Andrea had never noticed before. Or maybe it was just that they came out when the Major was relaxed. Yet none of them were annoying, quite the reverse, in fact. They made her seem more open, more human. Andrea admitted that some of them could even be regarded as “cute”. Take the way the Major’s fingers were currently toying absently with the rim of her mug. Andrea didn’t know how she was supposed to make intelligent conversation in the face of such distractions; finally she kick-started her mouth once more.

“Did you have family in the army?”

The Major’s brow knitted together, puzzling at the shift in the questioning. “What makes you say that?”

“Nothing in particular,” Andrea explained, “But it sounds like you were quite passionate about it, and that often stems from a desire to emulate someone.”

“In which case, I have to say it’s very perceptive of you,” conceded the Major, “My father was in the army.”

Andrea was pleased to be classed as perceptive by the Major, particularly when it had been more a random remark on her part in the first place. She had only really made it while enraptured with studying the Major’s hands. She knew she shouldn’t have thought about them again now when her eyes started sweeping downwards once more. She forced herself to look up.

“He must be very proud of you and what you’ve accomplished,” she managed to say, surprised she could even remember what they were talking about.

The silence that filled the cabin was noticeable, only the sound of the waves lapping against the hull breaking it. The Major had glanced away, looking distant.

“Did I say something wrong?” queried Andrea, concerned. She knew she should have paid more attention to the discussion and not let her mind wander so. She steeled herself to concentrate from now on.

“No,” said the Major quietly at first, still studying the wooden boards of the floor intently. “You weren’t to know,” she said with more conviction, taking a deep breath before she continued. “He’s dead now, he died just over a year ago.”

“I’m sorry,” said Andrea. She didn’t really know the Major, but she knew enough to be able to tell his death had obviously hit her hard. “I’m sure he was proud of you when he was alive.”

Andrea cringed inwardly, thinking the words sounded hollow coming from a near stranger but the Major seemed to take some comfort in them. Andrea was glad – the Major had helped her at Maria’s funeral, just by being there more than anything else, so if she could repay her kindness in some small way then that was better than nothing.

“I hope he was,” noted the Major softly, still adrift on her thoughts somewhere. Andrea didn’t interrupt just waiting until the other woman was ready to continue. “This was our boat,” remarked the Major, casting her eyes wistfully round the cabin, “My father was the one who taught me to sail and it was always his dream to actually own a boat. So when we finally saved up enough we bought the Flyer here. We’d only had her a couple of years when he died.”

Andrea just nodded understandingly, not really sure what else to say considering she didn’t know the man or the Major come to that. Though she was learning much more about her that day than she had learnt from the previous weeks. She was finally getting a glimpse behind the military exterior to the woman underneath, and she was surprised at the softness that lay there.

“Anyway,” continued the Major, “Enough about me, I’m sure your family are equally as proud of you, what with your academic record and then your career in the police force.”

Andrea couldn’t prevent the scornful laugh that tumbled out. “Hardly. I don’t think they really care what I do.”

“Is that why you never speak to them?”

Andrea’s eyes narrowed. “Been monitoring my calls again have you?”

“You know we do, it’s no secret,” the Major reasoned, “Though in your case it’s the lack of calls that’s more obvious.”

The conversation was getting dangerously close to areas Andrea would rather not talk about – with anyone. “I haven’t spoken to my parents for five years,” she informed the Major succinctly, “And that’s fine by me.”

The Major looked like she wanted to press further since Andrea’s tone suggested she was far from ‘fine’ about it, but in the end it seemed she thought better of it.

“Well, if you do ever want to contact them, just let me know. They might be concerned over your whereabouts at least.”

“That’s fairly unlikely, believe me. So you don’t need to worry about me blabbing anything to them. I’m quite happy with just my friends, at least I can choose them.”

As she said it, Andrea realised that she didn’t actually have that many back in London now - what with Maria being killed so soon after her other friends and colleagues. She had other acquaintances, but no one as close as Maria had been. Her desire to get back to London certainly didn’t burn as intensely as it had when she first arrived at the island base. She was coming to realise that maybe that part of her life was over, that she had new challenges to face now. Though one of those was still finding the answers to how and why her workmates had been killed.

“Talking of friends,” she said, neatly getting off the subject of her family in the same stroke, “I wondered if you’d found out anything more about the warehouse incident. You were going to ask your commanding officer weren’t you, and he was here last week as I recall.”

The Major shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Yes he was,” was all she said in response to begin with.

“Why do I get the impression it wasn’t good news,” Andrea said warily. She was starting to feel on more comfortable ground now it seemed she had the Major on the backfoot. The disconcerting feelings the Major had evoked when they had first sat down were thankfully subsiding.

“I’m sorry, I did ask, but he wasn’t very forthcoming,” the Major revealed.

Andrea could recognise evasion when she saw it. “There was more wasn’t there? What’s going on, why is it all so secret?”

“Honestly, I really don’t know any more than you do.” The frustration was evident in the Major’s tone.

“The Colonel must have said something to get you so nerved,” pressed Andrea, the bit between her teeth now.

The Major pursed her lips together, watching Andrea as she did. “I really shouldn’t be telling you this, in fact I don’t know why I am. I suppose it’s not really revealing anything confidential…”

“Go on.”

“He told me that it *is* being investigated but that I wasn’t to pursue it.”

“That’s it?” cried Andrea leaping up off the sofa and whirling round to face the Major who remained seated, “And you left it at that? I had you pegged as someone who cared about the truth, who wouldn’t meekly follow orders.”

The Major’s eyes narrowed, though her tone remained even in the face of Andrea’s disparaging remarks. “Sometimes that’s what we have to do, even if we don’t like them.”

“And you don’t like these ones,” deduced Andrea.

“Not really, no.”

“Then do something about it! I’m sure you must have resources, connections – you could find out what’s really going on.”

“I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job,” the Major replied coolly as Andrea continued to call her character into question. She slowly rose from her seat, so she

could meet Andrea's eye, "Surprisingly I managed quite well before you ever came along. Sometimes I think you forget who's in command here."

"Don't take it out on me because you don't like your superior's orders," shot back Andrea, "And here I was thinking we were on first name terms today, but you're still pulling rank. Would you like me to go back to calling you 'Major'?"

The Major held her jaw firmly shut. It appeared they just couldn't seem to help butting heads, even on a supposed relaxing day out. The tension in the air was palpable as they merely stared back at one another, though even this was different to when they had previously argued, Andrea thought. There was an extra something underlying the tension, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Finally Andrea sighed, recognising that she was hardly going to get the Major to help her by being obstinate. "I don't mean to tell you how to do your job," she conceded, taking her seat again to try and ease the confrontational atmosphere, "But what have you got to lose by asking a few questions? I'm sure they're not about to throw you out of the army, even if they are ones they don't want asked."

The Major glanced away, watching the clouds out one of the small windows.

"What?" pressed Andrea, "You think they would?" She continued to try and fathom what the Major was thinking from her inscrutable expression. "Wait, did the Colonel intimate as much?"

"Not in so many words," the Major said slowly, "But there have been a couple of other 'incidents' during my career, so I'm not really in the position to start rocking the boat."

Andrea thought that was an interesting piece of information and one she was surprised the Major had revealed. Here she thought the Major was an upstanding, by-the-book officer, whereas it seemed she actually had a few skeletons in her closet. Andrea filed the information away for another time.

"So that's it?" she asked with a snort of derision, "I'm just supposed to sit back and forget it ever happened?"

"No, of course not, that's the last thing you should do. But it's not like you've been looking at your own reaction to it, is it?"

Andrea rolled her eyes. "You're still banging on about the counselling then?"

"Yes I am, until you see sense and have some!"

"Maybe I don't need any; maybe I'm fine!"

"And is that why you've been having nightmares?"

Andrea was taken aback, wondering how the hell the Major knew. Then she remembered the incident in her quarters a couple of weeks previously when the Major

had walked in on her having one of them. While Andrea remained quiet the Major sat back down again too, fixing Andrea keenly with her eyes. Andrea glanced away from the penetrating stare. When the Major spoke she had lowered her voice to a softer tone.

“I’m only suggesting it for your own good. How long are you going to try and struggle on by yourself? Why can’t you admit you might need help? It’s nothing to feel ashamed about - I’ve had counselling myself you know.”

Andrea’s eyes shot up – this really was a day for revelations regarding the Major. “You have? For what?”

The Major seemed unsure whether to answer the exceedingly personal question.

“Sorry, you don’t have to answer,” Andrea quickly added.

“No, it’s all right - it was to do with my father’s death and the circumstances around it,” she disclosed.

Andrea was desperate to know more, this being the second time the Major’s father had cropped up in conversation. However, it seemed that was all the Major was willing to offer up for now. Still it was more than she needed to have done.

“It surprises you to hear me admit to having had counselling?” the Major prompted, still studying Andrea’s face to gauge her reaction.

Andrea felt the intense scrutiny, the disconcerting feelings of earlier beginning to stir again. “Yes,” she replied honestly.

“Well, I don’t broadcast it around to everyone,” conceded the Major, “Though I said there’s nothing wrong with admitting you need help, the average soldier under my command isn’t the most intelligent of people. They’re loyal, honest, hard workers but they’re not known for their brains. So you can imagine what they might start saying if they knew that I had been in counselling for a couple of months prior to my posting here.”

“Right, a sure fire way to start having them doubting your command.”

“Precisely, which is not something I can afford in my position.”

“Then why did you tell me? You realise I could blab it around the base and then you’d be scuppered.”

“Yes, you could,” said the Major, dipping her head in acknowledgement, “I guess I’m going to have to trust you not to say anything aren’t I?”

Andrea could see what the Major had done. She had offered up the personal information about herself, entrusted Andrea with her secret in the hope that the young woman would reciprocate.

“All right,” said Andrea with a sigh, “I’ll go for the counselling.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

Andrea found she was glad too, not something she usually felt when she deferred to someone else.

The Major hadn’t quite finished. “It often takes more courage to swallow your pride and examine your feelings,” she remarked.

As Andrea looked back into the soft blue eyes of the other woman, she wondered exactly what feelings it was she needed to examine.

CHAPTER 8

The air whistled past Andrea's face as she hurtled down towards the ground, the coldness stinging her cheeks. Anyone watching might have thought that she was plunging to her doom as she tumbled through the blue sky, if it weren't for the broad smile on her face. After a couple of weeks, she was really starting to get the hang of being able to fly.

The soul-clutching exhilaration of soaring free in the air still affected her every time, causing a giddy rush of excitement to fill her every pore. It was hard to compare it to anything else. There was nothing else like it. It was simply amazing.

She was particularly savouring the sensation at that moment since she didn't have much chance to completely cut loose like she was doing now. The military and scientific staff were always very cautious about outside training activities, having to verify that they wouldn't be observed by members of the public before giving the go-ahead. All it took was one stray fishing boat and the purpose of the base would be exposed.

It was hard to curb her enthusiasm though, and not soar off amongst the clouds or down over the seas. She was still hundreds of feet above the water now, and the vista that stretched out below her was simply breath-taking. Even a hardened cynic like Andrea couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder at the impressiveness of nature when viewed from so high. It was also profoundly humbling, making her realise just how small she and everyone else was when compared to the vastness of the ocean or the mountains the loomed on the horizon of the Scottish mainland. It was a sight that no human being was ever meant to see in this way, and yet here she was, blessed with this very special view on the world. She recognised that it was indeed a blessing, and not something to be feared or wary of as she had been initially. She was privileged to have this opportunity and she was going to grab it with both hands and savour the experience to the full.

However, as she zoomed downwards at greater and greater speed she found it increasingly difficult to see with the chill air bringing tears to her eyes. Wiping them away, she resolved that she would have to ask about getting some sort of eye protection in the future. The clothes she wore weren't particularly suitable either, she considered, the combat outfit being tugged at viciously by the wind. She really needed something more stream-lined.

Andrea?

The Major's voice crackled over the small earpiece she wore. For a moment she considered ignoring it, pretending the communications link was broken. She was still

interested to see how they might stop her if she refused to come down, but decided she wouldn't try and find out today.

“Yes, I'm here.”

If you've finished having fun, we're ready to go when you are.

“I'll get into position,” she informed the Major.

Andrea glided through the air to hover a few hundred metres above the target area in readiness. She knew that somewhere below they would be observing her every move, not to mention the monitoring sensors she wore dotted about her body under her clothes, feeding back telemetry on her energy usage amongst other things. She also wore her power regulator as always. Following the car accident, the army had conducted a finger tip search of the field to find it – they couldn't chance someone stumbling across it and discovering what it was.

“Ok, I'm ready, just give the word,” Andrea said over the small microphone that snaked across her cheek.

On the count of three then, the Major said, before launching into the countdown. *3...2...1... Go!*

Andrea launched herself downwards at the signal, flying as fast as she could to the target. As she got closer she could see the red of the material flapping in the wind. She could also see the blur of movement sweeping across the open ground in its direction, intent on beating her to it. Seeing that she didn't slow, though she knew it would take a fine judgement to get her descent right, to pull up in time and not splat herself all over the heather.

She was about twenty metres away now, still going hard at it. Ten...five...

Her fingers closed over the material and she whipped the flag away, straining to alter her direction as she did. She just managed to angle herself parallel to the ground, actually feeling the slight brush of the heather across her body, she was so close. Having managed to stabilise her flight she slowed and set her feet down on the ground again, clutching the flag triumphantly as Tom whizzed round to come to a halt beside her.

“Too slow!” she taunted, waving the flag at him.

He made a disgusted face at her. “I'm sure you went before the 'go'”, he suggested petulantly

“You are such a poor loser,” she said, still with a grin on her face, “I'm afraid it looks like I'm quicker than you are.”

Suddenly Tom moved. At least Andrea thought he had, though he was standing back in front of her again already. He looked rather smug now, though, and glancing down at her hand she saw that she no longer held the flag.

“Ha! Who’s slow now?” teased Tom, holding up the red material that was in his possession.

“You cheat! That wasn’t part of the deal!” Andrea lunged for his hand, but he easily whipped it out the way, laughing as he did.

As they danced around in circles, a voice disturbed their game. “Now, now, children.”

It was the Major, heading over the grass in their direction. She strode confidently over the open ground of the island in her combat gear of camouflage trousers and jacket, with her sturdy boots leaving imprints in the mud as she went.

“Nice try, Mr Parsons,” she said as she reached them, “But I’m afraid that round goes to Andrea.” She turned to Andrea now. “Well done, she said, smiling up at the young woman, That was some neat flying, though I have to admit my heart was in my mouth there for a minute. I really thought you were going to hit the ground.”

“Thanks,” replied Andrea, returning the smile, strangely warmed that the Major seemed so concerned for her wellbeing. “If I’m honest I wasn’t entirely sure I wasn’t going to hit it either.”

“That’s reassuring,” noted the Major with a wry laugh.

“I couldn’t let Tom win, could I?” added Andrea

“Indeed not,” agreed the Major, smiling at the young man who still looked rather miffed. “I think that’s enough for today. Let’s head back over to the monitoring truck to download the readings and then we can get back inside for some dinner.”

“Last one there’s a stinky Chaddy sock!” cried Tom, before sprinting off in a blur.

Andrea let him go, since to pursue would leave the Major to make the walk back to the road on her own. “I think I’ll let him win one today,” she remarked to the Major.

They naturally fell in step side by side as they turned to make the short walk. It wasn’t long before the Major broke the silence.

“I thought you might like to know that Dr Todd thinks your ability to fly is the result of the conversion into kinetic energy of the of the energy you absorb from light and store in your body as chemical energy.”

Andrea raised her eyebrows. “Really? Are you sure Dr Todd doesn’t just make some of this technobabble up sometimes, to cover up what he doesn’t know.”

The Major let out a laugh. “You know, I do wonder myself sometimes, but the readings seem to support his theory. How are you doing with your powers anyway, starting to get used to them a bit more?”

“Well, I don’t know if I’m still entirely comfortable with the idea of being a mutant, but I have to say it does have its compensations.”

“The flying?” offered the Major, though it was more a statement than a question.

“Yes, I wish I could explain it, it’s just so...so...”

The Major came up with a few suggestions. “Breath-taking? Uplifting? Awe-inspiring?”

Andrea glanced to her side where the Major was regarding her keenly. “Something like that, and so much more. Perhaps I should take you up for a spin sometime to give you some idea?”

The Major looked like she didn’t know quite how to respond to the offer and Andrea mentally kicked herself for making it. Sailing was one thing, an intimate experience like flying together was something else entirely. For a start Andrea would have to have hold the Major in her arms the whole time.

Just as Andrea was starting to form a not unpleasant mental picture of that, the Major finally replied. “Thank you,” she said, “Though I might have to be convinced you won’t plough us into the ground by accident first, considering your admission about the earlier exercise.”

“I wouldn’t be so reckless if you were with me,” insisted Andrea.

Andrea was bewildered by her own words, wondering what in the hell she was doing. The Major had given her an out and here Andrea was still pressing the issue.

“Well, maybe we will go up, one day,” allowed the Major.

Andrea just about stopped her conspiratorial mouth from asking when exactly that might be. “The offer’s always open,” she said instead, thinking that was almost as bad. The only thing that might have made it worse was if she’d winked while saying it. She really hoped she hadn’t by accident.

The Major merely smiled back, before changing the topic, much to Andrea’s relief. “I’ve arranged your first counselling session too, by the way. With Dr Shah tomorrow after training. She’s an independent counsellor, in case you were worried, not directly part of the military though we have used her services in the past. She’s very good by all accounts.”

“I guess I’ll find out soon enough,” remarked Andrea, still a little wary of discussing her innermost feelings with a stranger, “But thank you for setting it up.”

“No problem, it’s what I’m here for.”

Andrea smiled in response as they made it to the road where Tom was waiting for them by the truck. Andrea could see him eyeing the pair of them suspiciously and he

hung around while Andrea removed the small electronic monitoring device from her waistband and waited for Dr Todd to verify he had what he wanted.

“Are the two of you riding back with us?” asked the Major as Dr Todd tapped away at his keyboard in the back of the vehicle.

“I think I’ll walk back with Tom,” said Andrea, “Give you two a chance to pour over your readings.” She could see Tom was itching to talk to her about something, not to mention that allowing the Major to ride back separately would stop Andrea’s mouth making any more stupid suggestions without her brain’s permission.

“Ok, see you later then.”

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The Major watched Tom and Andrea heading off over the open heath in the direction of the base. She could see that Tom had started talking enthusiastically to Andrea who looked a bit disgruntled by whatever line of questioning he was pursuing. The spring sunshine emerged from behind the clouds at that moment, sweeping across the vast grassy field. As it crossed Tom and Andrea’s location the Major couldn’t help but notice the way the sunlight dappled across Andrea’s hair, bringing out the brilliant golden colour of it.

“Thinking about our new recruit?”

“Yes,” replied the Major honestly in response to Dr Todd’s question, though she realised that he probably didn’t think those thoughts extended to the qualities of her hair in the sun.

“I have to say there’s been a marked improvement in her behaviour, ever since that second unscheduled trip off the base,” he noted.

“There has, hasn’t there,” she agreed distractedly, still watching the ever smaller figures. Finally they disappeared over the crest of the hill and she turned her full attention to Dr Todd.

“What *did* you say to her that night?” he asked.

The Major laughed at his inscrutable expression. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” she joked, “I can’t go around giving away all my secrets can I, especially not in my line of work.”

“Whatever it was, I have to congratulate you. It’s almost like she’s a whole different person. Suddenly she’s eager, keen to impress. Though there’s still all those questions about every little thing.”

The Major considered his words for a moment, glancing off to where Andrea had recently disappeared. “I don’t think she’s changed that much, not deep down. I think that what we saw when she first got here was partly a front, a defensive barrier. Now

she's seen we're not a threat, she's started to drop it a bit. Not that she can't still be bolshie, arrogant and cocky," she allowed.

"Indeed," agreed Dr Todd, "Though for a while I thought we might be heading for some serious problems, at least in terms of security. It seems you were right all along though, believing that she would turn a corner."

"Oh, I had my doubts too, believe me," admitted the Major.

"I guess we're lucky you managed to contain the second incident as you did."

"Yes, I even managed to keep a few select details out of my report to the Colonel. Oh, he was displeased, but not as displeased as he would have been if he knew how Andrea had gotten drunk, used her powers and then nearly died."

Dr Todd was one of the few people who knew the full details of that night; Doc Whitman, the Major and Andrea herself being the others. The Major's mind drifted back to it now as they journeyed back to the base in the truck. She had to admit that when Andrea had collapsed after pulling the car from the water, the degree of anxiety that had swept through her had been surprising. She'd managed to contain it at the time, as her command training took over and she was swept up in organising help and making sure Andrea was all right. It had seemed entirely natural to sweep the younger woman up in her arms and hold her in an attempt to comfort her. In fact she realised that in a strange way it had made her feel better too. To sense the warmth of Andrea's body, the rhythm of her heartbeat and know that she was still alive had been a powerful feeling.

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Andrea and Tom had just about made it out of earshot of the Major and Dr Todd back in the truck, when Tom swung his head towards her.

"Well, well, well, who's the new favourite then?"

Andrea had thought this was coming, but played dumb anyway. "What *are* you talking about?"

"Oh come on," he said rolling his eyes, "'Well done, that was some neat flying'" he continued, doing a passable impression of the Major, "my heart was in my mouth..."

Andrea quickly cut him off before he continued any further. "And she's never paid you a compliment before?"

"Not like that!"

"Like what?"

"With that sort of soft, pleased expression on her face."

Andrea looked at him as if he were crazy. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head while training, because I’d swear you were hallucinating.”

“Try and deny it if you like, but you got to go on the Dorset Flyer for god’s sake! Plus you looked very chummy walking over here. Face it, you’re the new teacher’s pet! And don’t tell me you don’t like it – the way you were beaming when she was praising you.”

Andrea realised that things must be getting obvious if Tom had noticed. She would be losing her hard won reputation as a rebellious troublemaker at this rate. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to think she was a conformist pushover. She’d made a career out of getting up the nose of the establishment, though it was hard to carry on doing that when the establishment persisted in being so nice. In fact, nice didn’t really cover it at all. The Major seemed to be going out of her way for Andrea more and more. Now they had started down the path of a friendly relationship it appeared there was no turning back. Not that Andrea would have wanted to turn back if she could, now she realised how much more pleasant this route was to the antagonistic one. Anyway, she considered that she still had Lieutenant Chadwick for a good old bit of authority baiting. He still showed absolutely no signs of warming to her at all.

Andrea realised Tom was waiting for her to respond to his accusation. “I may have been smiling,” she allowed, “But that was only polite. I was not ‘beaming’”

“Yeah right!” cried Tom, “Your grin was practically splitting your cheeks. I almost wish for the a return to ‘Icy-bitch Andrea’ if the other prospect is ‘Whatever-you-say-Major Andrea’. What exactly did the Major do to you that night when you ran off, was it some kind of secret military brainwashing?”

Andrea had to remember that the others didn’t know the exact details of the night of the accident. They certainly didn’t know that she had saved the Major’s life, or how the Major had subsequently comforted Andrea through her seizure. She had let it be known about Maria’s death. Not so everyone would feel sorry for her, she couldn’t really care less what they thought the cause of her actions might be, but more to quash some of the rumours that had been spreading round the base about her and the Major in the wake of their trip to the funeral and their boat trip together. These ranged from the absurd – that they were testing some secret weapon that required Andrea’s powers – to the ridiculous – that they were in the midst of some torrid affair.

Thinking she didn’t want to encourage them, Andrea hadn’t revealed any other details of that night or anything else for that matter. That was between her and the Major and she certainly didn’t want anyone else knowing of her weakness.

Andrea decided to go on the offensive instead to deflect Tom from his line of questioning.

“You were the one who kept telling me to give her a chance and now you’re complaining? Anyway, maybe the Major appreciates someone who can be serious and professional?”

Tom looked hurt. “The rest of us can be professional, we just don’t need to kiss-arse while we’re doing it.”

“I’ll do more than kiss your arse in a minute!”

Andrea just managed to catch him with a glancing slap on the backside before he was off sprinting at unimaginable speed across the grass in the direction of the base. Andrea didn’t even bother giving chase, knowing she had no chance of catching him. Though she had been taunting him before about being quicker, that was only because they made Tom start from so far away from the target. In reality he could run much faster than she could fly. Instead she made her way back at her own pace, passing a group of soldiers on their way out to do some of their own training as she entered the main complex building.

During the walk back Tom’s words had played over in her mind. Was she really the Major’s favourite? She was sure the Major didn’t have such things; she was interested in the welfare of all her operatives. It was only because Andrea was new and the recent trauma of Maria’s death that she was getting special attention, if indeed that was the case.

When she got to the second floor Andrea was turning for her quarters when she heard voices round the corner. It was the Major and Doc Whitman. Andrea had identified the Major’s voice immediately; it was funny how it seemed to stand out even when Andrea wasn’t actively listening for it. She supposed she had walked back to the base slower than she’d realised if the other woman had beat her back. Andrea was going to ignore them, though she had to admit she was tempted to eavesdrop, when something caught her interest and she found herself listening anyway.

“...I really wish you would give me these reports without me having to chase after you.”

The thing that piqued Andrea’s curiosity was that it was Doc speaking. She was surprised at him addressing the Major in quite such an annoyed tone.

The Major sounded equally tetchy when she replied. “You know I’m busy, without having to do something so unnecessary as extra reporting.”

Andrea wondered what the extra reporting was, or more precisely who it was about. Considering she was the only new operative and that there was already something highly suspicious going on where she was concerned, she thought she had a fair idea who they were talking about.

Doc was continuing now. “Unnecessary in your eyes maybe, but the Colonel likes to be kept informed. Far be it for me to tell him otherwise.”

Whatever extra information the Major was supposed to be supplying she didn’t sound pleased about it. “Fine, I’ll have it for you in the morning, all right?”

“Thank you.”

When there was no more words, Andrea suddenly realised that they must have finished and that Doc would be rounding the corner any second and running straight into her. She glanced around - there was nowhere to hide. Apart from...

As Doc came round the corner he walked straight past Andrea and on down the corridor without batting an eyelid. Once he had rounded another corner Andrea floated down from the ceiling where she had been pressed flat and holding her breath. She allowed herself a sigh of relief. That would teach her to listen to other people's conversations.

Andrea walked off down the corridor to her room, looking forward to a nice long spell under the pounding jets of the shower. Even with superpowers, all the training they were doing was tiring and she'd often find herself worn out by the end of the day. It seemed that the sessions were getting more and more intense and she wondered if there was anything behind that. She still found it hard to believe that there wasn't some ulterior purpose to their presence on the base, besides research.

It occurred to her that she could just ask the Major outright. However, where once she wouldn't have cared about offending her superiors, she actually found herself holding back her more rebellious instincts where the Major was concerned. She decided that if it came up in conversation then she would ask, otherwise she would leave it for now.

Entering her quarters she peeled off the combat jacket and flung it on the couch. It was then that something struck her. She cast her eyes around suspiciously. Something wasn't right. She looked round the shelves and surfaces. The more she did, the more she became convinced that some of her things had been moved. She crossed to the coffee table, picking up the biochemistry journal that sat on top of the wood, turning it over in her hands before glancing back at the tabletop. There had definitely been another magazine on the table when she had left that morning.

Suddenly her bedroom door opened, causing her to nearly jump out of her skin. Lieutenant Chadwick came out, a nonchalant look on his dark features

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" demanded Andrea angrily, slapping the journal back down on the table.

"I was just waiting for you, to get a sample for Doc," he responded evenly, waving a syringe in the air.

"So you thought you'd have a good look through my things while you were at it?"

"No, I was just using the bathroom."

"There's another door to the bathroom that doesn't require you to go through my bedroom," she reasoned pointing it out. "Or did you want to have a good sift through my underwear drawer too?"

That caused a faint twitch of annoyance in his jaw. "I don't think I like your tone or the implication."

“And I don’t think I like you coming into my quarters without permission, looking at my things and moving them around.”

“I told you, I just needed the bathroom, or are you calling me a liar?”

“Yes I am! You’re an asshole, Chadwick. I better not catch you in here again without me.”

“Or what, you’ll tell your new little friend the Major?” he sneered.

Andrea didn’t like the obvious lack of respect he was showing for the Major. “Yes, if I have to,” she stated.

Chadwick was suddenly up in front of her, trying to intimidate her with his bulk. She thought it was laughable, considering she could probably flick him across the room with her little finger if she wanted to.

“Going to grass me up are you?” he spat, his face mere inches from hers now, “Well, just try it and see how far you get. You think the Major actually cares what you think? She’s just using the lot of you. She just needs to keep you sweet until you’re ready.”

Andrea couldn’t help biting. “Ready for what?”

“Oh, has your good friend not told you then?” Chadwick was smiling nastily at her.

Andrea stared balefully back. “Maybe because there’s nothing to tell,” she proposed. “You’re full of shit, Chadwick. I’ve got your number – you just want to stir things up, make it difficult for the Major. Want her job do you? Like you could do any better. You couldn’t organise a piss-up in a brewery even if someone got out all the bottles out for you.”

Chadwick was bristling with barely concealed rage now. “You think you’re so bloody superior don’t you,” he seethed, trying to pull himself up even taller so he could tower over her, “Just because you have these super powers. Well, you’re not. You’re just some freak.”

“Better than being a wanker!”

Andrea wasn’t expecting Chadwick to risk any kind of physical confrontation with her, so she was caught completely off-guard when he grabbed for her left arm pulling off her power-regulator in one swift movement.

“Hey, give that back!” she demanded, lunging for it.

He dodged back from her and around the sofa. “Come and get it then,” he taunted, dangling it out at arm’s length.

“You are an utter prick, you know that,” she said scornfully, walking round after him.

He continued to evade her, the pair of them circling the sofa. “Come on, why don’t you fly over here and get me?” he teased once more.

“Because that’s what you want,” replied Andrea, “You actually want me to have a seizure don’t you? Jesus, you are one sick bastard.”

“Afraid to use your powers are you?”

“No,” she stated. She reached out her hand impatiently and thrust her other hand on her hip. “Now just give it back before I lose my temper.”

“I don’t know,” he said, ignoring the upturned palm, “You have these powers and you won’t even use them. Couldn’t even use them to help your friends could you?”

Andrea was shocked; feeling like her breath had been knocked from her body. “What do you know about that?”

“It’s true isn’t it?” challenged Chadwick, “There was your other friend too, wasn’t there? Maria was it? Shame you couldn’t save her either.”

“Don’t you talk about her!”

“Aw, hit a nerve did I?”

“Shut up!”

“I bet she could have used someone swooping in to her rescue...”

Andrea leapt over the sofa, picking Chadwick up by the scruff of the neck and hurling him across the room to crash against the bedroom wall. Rather than looking hurt, he was actually laughing as he staggered back to his feet. Andrea clenched her fingers tightly into fists.

“Is that the best you can do?” he sneered, wiping away a small trickle of blood from his lip with the back of his hand.

“Fuck you!”

Andrea went to jump at him again when a paralysing jolt of pain stabbed in her chest. She cried out in agony, stumbling against the back of the sofa before she hit the carpeted floor. She screwed her eyes shut as another spasm hit, burning her muscles. Through the haze of pain she could sense Chadwick approaching her prone form. She forced her eyes open, to see him looming over her.

“Oops, need a hand do you?” He was practically laughing at her predicament.

“The...regulator...” she managed, forcing the words out between her clenched teeth, “...give...it...to...me.”

“You mean this?” he asked, dangling it above her, out of reach. Not that she could have moved her arm to go for it anyway. “Why don’t you get it?” he suggested, flinging it to the far side of the room.

Andrea gasped again as she tried to move her head to see where it had gone. The slightest movement brought further agonising bolts of pain.

Chadwick knelt down menacingly by her. “And don’t think about saying anything about this to the Major, or you’ll look even more of a fool than you do now.”

Chadwick produced the syringe from amongst his uniform and jabbed it sharply into Andrea’s arm. Despite the agony she was already in she felt the harsh stab of the needle as he took no care whatsoever in how he injected it. Having drawn out a sample of blood he got to his feet.

“Thanks,” he said before leaving her lying where she was and exiting the room.

Andrea now allowed a sob to escape her lips, since there was no one to witness it. The pain just kept coming in wave after wave. Gritting her teeth she tried to turn her head again. It was pure agony but she managed to crane it round enough to see the regulator sitting on the carpet about ten feet away. Steeling herself she attempted to move her arm to flip herself over onto her front.

Fire shot through her limb and it shook as she placed her hand down on the carpet. She had to lie there, panting heavily before she could go any further. After a couple of seconds she started to haul herself across the floor, clawing at the carpet to crawl the short distance to the object that would relieve her torment.

She was a couple of feet away when another lightning bolt of pain juddered through every sinew of her body. She flopped to the floor, groaning into the pile of the carpet. Her fingers snaked out, searching out the band. It was so close, so tantalisingly close, but just out of reach of her grasping fingers. Then a final wave of pain crashed over her and the blackness shortly followed.

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When Andrea finally drifted back into consciousness, the first thing she did was grab the regulator and fasten it round her arm. Once it was in place she allowed herself a small sigh of relief as she sat on the floor, leaning against the sofa back. She ran her trembling fingers through her blonde hair, trying to compose herself before she attempted to stand.

She couldn’t believe she had let Chadwick goad her like that. It was obvious that it was what he’d wanted all along and she had played right into his hands. He had known just what buttons to push to get her to react. She would be more careful next time, thinking that there would no doubt be a next time. She knew she could report the incident to the Major, but she hardly wanted to look like she couldn’t handle an idiot like Chadwick. It was embarrassing that she’d let him get the better of her. Resolving that she would deal with it herself, she pulled herself up using the sofa to rest against. She tested that she could walk all right before she made for the bedroom.

Thirty minutes later she had showered and changed and was heading down to the rec room. After the confrontation with Chadwick she felt like a bit of company, rather than sitting in her room mulling it over. She also had the strong desire for some chocolate. The lack of it in her cupboards had been most disturbing, so now she was on a mission to find some of the comforting food.

Luckily there were some vending machines just outside the rec room and she selected a huge bar of Galaxy ^[11]. She had already peeled off the wrapper and eaten a couple of chunks when she made her way into the common room. It was reasonably busy, with both pool tables occupied by soldiers having some fun on their off hours. At the snooker table she spied Lieutenant Chadwick. He had caught her entry too, and was now looking at her with an unmistakable smug expression on his face. A brief flash of anger shot through Andrea and she had to consciously stop herself going over there and having it out with him in front of everyone. However, she realised that it probably wasn't the most appropriate time and place. She merely returned his look with an equally disparaging one, before turning for the seating area in front of the large television.

Tom was in his usual position on the largest of the sofas, shifting his feet off it when he saw Andrea approaching. "Hey there, you're just in time for the big match," he noted with a grin.

"Sorry?" said Andrea distractedly, unable to stop herself from glancing over at Chadwick again. He had returned to his game now, but she had the strangest sense that the laughter he was sharing with his opponent was about her.

"Don't tell me you didn't know!" cried Tom in amazement.

Andrea turned her full attention to the sandy-haired young man.

He rolled his eyes at her continued bemusement. "It's Liverpool versus Man Utd ^[12] of course! That's why I thought you'd come down here."

"It is?" she asked in surprise, "I guess I must just have lost track of the fixtures with everything else that's been going on."

Tom looked abashed at his enthusiasm over a mere football match now that Andrea had reminded him of her recent travails. "Right, yes, of course," he said awkwardly. "Actually, now you come to mention it, you do look like shit," he remarked, eyeing her up and down, "Are you all right?"

Andrea made a rueful laugh. "You certainly know how to make a girl feel good about herself."

Tom laughed too, perhaps more in relief that she had taken his comment lightly. "Oops, sorry, you know us men, sensitive as ever. But seriously is everything ok?"

“Yes, fine,” she replied dismissively, not wanting to get into her Chadwick problems at that moment, “I’m just a bit tired. I’m sure I’ll wake up when we start whipping your butts,” she added more light-heartedly.

“Oh, listen to the confidence!” crowed Tom to no one in particular, “You are in for a world of hurt! There’s no way your bunch of second rate losers is going to beat us.”

“We’ll just watch and see shall we?” she remarked with a sly grin, noting that up on the screen the teams were just exiting the tunnel onto the green grass of Anfield. ^[13]

“Care to put your money where your mouth is?” pondered Tom by her side.

“Are you trying to tempt an officer of the law into gambling?”

“Come on, it’s just a little wager between friends. Or maybe you’re scared? I would be too given the recent form of your lot.”

“Right, that’s it!” she said with pretend indignation, “I’m not having anyone cast aspersions on Rafa’s men - you’re on! How much do you want to lose?”

“How about twenty quid? And *you* should be the one preparing to lose it.”

“Twenty it is then,” she agreed offering up her hand for him to shake it to seal the wager.

He had just grabbed it when another voice broke their banter.

“What’s going on here then?”

Andrea’s eyes shot round to see the Major standing behind the sofa, regarding them with friendly suspicion.

“Erm, nothing,” replied Andrea, swiftly dropping Tom’s hand. She suddenly felt like a schoolkid, caught doing something they shouldn’t behind the bikesheds. It was a similar disarming sensation to the one she had felt on the boat. She wondered if the Major had the same effect on everyone. There was just something about her that radiated power and authority, certainly strongly enough to effect someone with Andrea’s normally steely resolve.

It seemed that Tom wasn’t affected, though, since he was laughing at Andrea’s embarrassment. “I’m sure the Major’s not going to be bothered about a spot of small-time gambling. Are you?” he asked using his best puppy eyes on the woman standing behind them.

The Major laughed and uncrossed her arms. “That depends on who you’re betting on,” she remarked, “Though I think I already know the answer in your case Mr Parsons. Which must mean you’ve gone for Liverpool, Andrea.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Andrea couldn’t really think of anything more intelligent to say immediately, finally managing to engage her brain once her eyes had stopped staring

at the Major's open necked uniformed shirt and the skin beneath it. "You know who's playing then?" she eventually said.

"The small score display in the corner of the screen was a bit of a giveaway," noted the Major, flicking her eyes at the television, "But, yes, I did know anyway. I thought I might come down here and watch, if you don't mind me joining you?"

Andrea stuttered ineffectually to formulate a response, the concept of the Major wanting to watch football far too incongruous to allow her to think properly. Luckily for her Tom wasn't so tardy.

"Sure, pull up a chair," he said, "Unless you want to squeeze on with us?"

Andrea looked in alarm at the small space left next to her on the sofa. It was designed for three, but it would be a bit of a squash. She let out an inaudible sigh of relief when she saw the Major was making for one of the armchairs instead.

"So who are you going to be rooting for?" asked Tom as she lowered herself into it, neatly crossing her pressed trousers.

"Liverpool, of course."

"Oh god, not another Liverpool fan!" he exclaimed.

Andrea found it hard to hide her surprise. "You actually support Liverpool? I mean you follow football?"

"Don't look too shocked," commented the major with amusement, "Did you think the likes of football was too common for army officers?"

"No," said Andrea to begin with, before she assessed her thoughts. "Well, yes, maybe a little," she allowed.

The Major shook her head as she chuckled. "I guess you would be right in the case of some officers. They do like to try and maintain that stuffy image, and a nice civilised game of golf is probably more their cup of tea. But most of us are normal people, we like a bit of football as much as the next person."

"I don't know," interjected Tom, "I'm starting to doubt your sincerity if you claim to be a football fan but at the same time support Liverpool."

The Major smiled at the gentle punch in the arm Tom received from Andrea for his sarcastic comment.

"I've actually supported Liverpool for years," the Major informed him.

"Ok, so what's your excuse then?" wondered Tom, "I mean Andrea here has some justification, having been born there. Though I have to say, he continued glancing sideways at the young woman, That it's a pretty poor reason given that you only

stayed there for six months. Mind you, who wouldn't want to leave as soon as they could?"

Andrea was tempted to deliver him another blow, which he must have sensed as he moved quickly on. "Anyway, I hope you're not going to tell me you're a secret scouser too?" he said to the Major.

"Not me, but my father was from Liverpool originally," she admitted, "It was him who got me interested in the team, even though he'd long since moved on from the city by then. Once a scouser, always a scouser I guess."

Tom muttered to himself for a moment. "I suppose it's allowed in your case too then," he said grudgingly.

A sudden increase in excitement from the match commentator caused all three of them to glance at the screen at that moment, though it wasn't a goal, merely some other incident. Having been diverted to the television they settled down to watch the match.

Since the Major was sitting just ahead of them, Andrea was able to steal a few surreptitious glances in her direction as the game progressed. She seemed enthralled in the match, her lips pursing and releasing in time with the action. Andrea suspected she didn't even realise she was doing it, that it was just another quirky mannerism to add to the ever growing list in Andrea's head.

Andrea was still curious about the Major's Liverpool connection. She couldn't quite believe the coincidence of them supporting the same team, though obviously there were lots of people who claimed a passing allegiance. Eventually she leaned forward in her seat so she could speak to the other woman without disturbing Tom.

"You think we've got a chance?" she asked to open the conversation.

The Major regarded her for a moment, weighing up her answer. "I'd like to think so," she replied, keeping her voice low too. "Who knows with Liverpool this season, though. We could win 3-0 or lose by the same score, it's anyone's guess."

Andrea nodded. "Indeed, it's certainly been a bit of a topsy turvy season, though there's always Europe still."

"True. Wouldn't that be fantastic to win the European Cup after so long? Or the Champions League as it is, though it'll always be the European Cup to me. I wonder if I can get a temporary posting in Istanbul if we get to the final?"

Andrea thought it not a little weird to be discussing the merits of Liverpool football club with the Major. She would never have imagined the other woman would be the sort to be interested in football, but it was obvious she knew what she was talking about. It just went to show that you never should judge by first impressions. She decided to verify if the Major really was the die-hard fan Andrea already suspected she was or just a casual supporter. "How long have you followed them for?" she asked.

“Too many years to count!” replied the Major, “I actually used to go and watch some games at Anfield with my father when I was a girl. When he wasn’t busy off on some exercise or other.”

Andrea could see a slight faraway look crossing the Major’s face, as she no doubt recalled some of those trips. They looked like fond memories. “That must have been exciting,” said Andrea, “To experience the atmosphere of the Kop^[14] firsthand.”

“It certainly was, especially when you’re a wide-eyed ten-year-old. Needless to say I learnt the lyrics of ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ pretty quickly.”

Andrea didn’t comment straight away – she was still having trouble picturing a wide-eyed Major as a girl. It was a hard image to conjure given that the other woman was one of the most confident and sure people Andrea had ever met.

“You’ve never been then?” the Major asked while Andrea was thinking.

“No, I’ve always meant to go, but you know how things are - you have all these ideas and then life and work get in the way. I just never seemed to get around to it.”

“Maybe I’ll take you some time?” offered the Major.

Andrea’s breath caught in her throat and she had to take an inelegant gulp to clear it. “Thanks, that would be good,” she managed quickly to hide her momentary surprise. She wasn’t sure if it had just been a casual offer, or if the Major really meant it. Maybe she was just responding in kind to Andrea’s earlier offer of a flight.

Tom’s voice rang out in their direction, relieving the need for Andrea to enquire further.

“Oi, Sherlock, stop nattering! Some of us are trying to watch the game.”

Andrea turned and pouted at him before swinging back to the Major.

“Sherlock?” queried the other woman in bemusement.

Andrea sighed. “It’s Tom’s not very inventive nickname for me.”

“I see,” said the Major, trying unsuccessfully to hide her smile, “At least that means you must be one of the gang now, if he’s blessed you with your own nickname.”

“Do you have one?”

“Not that I know of,” disclosed the Major, “Though I’m sure I’m the last person Mr Parsons would tell if he did have some other name for me!”

“For what it’s worth, I’ve not heard him call you anything else other than ‘The Major’. I think he has quite a lot of respect for you.”

A smile flashed briefly across The Major's face. "It's nice to know someone does."

"I think most people round here do."

"Does that include you?"

Andrea wondered why the Major was concerned about what she thought, and yet the other woman seemed to be hanging, waiting expectantly for the answer.

"I would say you've started to win me round," said Andrea, not wanting to make things too easy for the Major.

The Major's lips turned ever so slightly upwards at the corners of her mouth as she recognised Andrea's evasive answer. "At least that's some progress," she noted with a tilt of the head, "I guess I'll just have to try that bit harder."

Again Andrea wondered why the Major was so bothered, why she would feel the need to try harder. She supposed that the Major felt similarly about everyone under her command. That she felt the need to gain their trust. It probably made them easier to command, to have them on your side and believing whole-heartedly in your abilities, rather than going for the other tactic of purely bossing everyone around and making them follow orders just because that was just the way things were.

A small bleep from the Major's wrist indicated that someone was trying to get hold of her.

"Damn, looks like duty calls," she said, glancing down at the communicator. "I'm counting on you to uphold the Liverpool side of things in my absence," she added as she got up from her chair.

"Before you go," said Andrea waylaying her, "I meant to ask if I could make a phone call this evening."

"Yes, that's fine," replied the Major, "In fact you don't need to ask in future, we'll get you permanently connected up. Though of course we will still be monitoring communications."

"Of course," agreed Andrea, "But thank you."

The Major smiled and made her leave from the rec room. It was only when Andrea turned back and noticed Tom studying her that she realised she had been tracking the other woman out the door.

"See," he said, "It's like I told you before - you're the new favourite."

Andrea blessed him with a withering look. "Just shut up and watch the match!"

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The Major glanced at her watch in annoyance. She'd been hoping to get back and at least see the end of the game, but the conversation with Colonel Parsons had dragged on much longer than she would have hoped or wanted. Sometimes she did wonder if he trusted her as much as he made out, since he felt the need to check in quite so often.

Or maybe he was just particularly interested in Andrea's progress, since she had been one of the main topics of conversation. That only served to make her more suspicious about the warehouse incident and more tempted to look into it, even though the Colonel had expressly ordered her not to.

It was now just after ten and the Major supposed there was little point heading back up to the rec room now, she may as well turn in for the night. The Colonel's persistent questioning had a way of draining her anyway and her bed was looking increasingly attractive.

She was heading for the door to leave the secure communications centre, when she decided she may as well check in on the men carrying out monitoring next door. It could be a tedious job, stuck in that underground room for hours on end, and a good word from their commanding officer might not go amiss.

As she entered the Major noted the two soldiers sat at the main desk area in the room, one man and one woman. In front of them sat a bank of security monitors, displaying pictures of various locations round the base. Both of them wore headphones and were oblivious to her presence. A third soldier was doing some maintenance on the surveillance and electronic equipment that was stacked in racks around the other walls. He had one box open, wires sprawling all over the place. Hearing the click of the door his eyes flicked up and he quickly leapt to his feet.

"Major," he said, standing to attention.

She managed to hold back a smile. "At ease, Private Hawkins, before you sprain something."

"Is there something wrong, Major?" he asked.

"No, just thought I'd pop in to see how you were doing," she explained. "Having a few problems with the equipment were you?" she asked, indicating the exposed wires with her eyes.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he informed her, "Just a bit of routine maintenance. All cameras and devices are working as expected round the base."

"Good, and nothing else to report?"

"No, a quiet night, just how we like it."

He reached over to tap the other soldiers on the shoulder and they swivelled round, almost falling off their seats when they saw who was in the room. They quickly removed their headphones, unplugging them so they could hear anything that

happened on the speakers. For the moment all that filled the room was the sound of static. Both of them then shot up from their chairs, standing stiffly.

“At ease,” the Major ordered for the second time, “I just came in to see how you were doing, it’s not an official inspection.”

They visibly relaxed. “We’re good thanks, Major,” answered the man.

The Major glanced oddly at the female soldier who was staring back like a deer caught in the headlights. “And are you all right, Private Ramis? You look rather flushed.”

The woman managed to stutter out her answer. “Y-yes, I’m fine, thank you, Major.”

Suddenly there was a crackle from the speakers and a familiar voice resounded round the room. It was Andrea. She was obviously just starting a phone conversation.

“Sorry, I’ll put it on the headphones,” said Ramis, diving for them.

“No, it’s all right,” the Major said, stopping her, “It was only a flying visit, I’ll leave you to it since you’re busy.”

“Right you are, ma’am.”

The Major just about prevented herself from rolling her eyes at the terminology. Having wished them goodnight, she made for the door but found herself stopping for a moment to listen to the broadcast conversation. She told herself that it was just to make sure that Andrea didn’t abuse her newfound freedom, and nothing to do with being nosy. Andrea had actually stopped speaking now and another woman’s voice filled the room. It took a couple of seconds for the Major to place it as that of Meg, Andrea’s former girlfriend who she had met briefly at Maria’s funeral.

“Gerry’s fine, though I think he hates having to stay in for hours while I’m at work”

“Well, you could always leave him out, I’m sure he can fend for himself. He should be acclimatised to his new surroundings by now,” replied Andrea.

“Maybe, but I don’t want to lose your cat for you. I want to keep him safe and sound until you get back here, whenever that might be. Any idea when you’re going to be finished doing whatever it is you’re doing?”

There was the minutest of pauses before Andrea answered. *“No, I’m afraid not. Hopefully I’ll be back to London at some point soon.”*

“Is there any chance we can meet up before then? Just for a chat or a drink or something. I don’t want to lose touch.”

“I’m not sure if that’s really possible,” replied Andrea evasively.

“Bloody hell, it sounds like you’re in prison or something...you’re not are you?”

Andrea's laugh was detectable over the speakers. *"No, I'm not in prison! I'm just doing something for the government which is why I can't really talk about it, the Official Secrets' Act and all that."*

"Ok, I just hope it's finished soon..." there was a pause in the conversation, and the Major thought for a moment that the line had gone dead. *"I miss you, you know,"* added Meg eventually. The Major thought she heard a sigh from Andrea's end. *"Sometimes I just wonder if we were too hasty in breaking up, just because..."*

"Meg..." Andrea was quick to intervene in a wary tone, no doubt to cut Meg off before she revealed something Andrea didn't want those listening to know.

"I know, I know, raking over old ground," said Meg, an air of resignation in her tone, *"It's all right, you don't have to say anything, it's just me being maudlin."*

The Major was starting to feel increasingly uncomfortable listening to the personal conversation. She had monitored lots of calls in the past, yet for some reason this particular one was making her uneasy. She decided that the best way to relieve that was to leave the room, though another part of her was desperate to stay and listen to the rest of the call. She almost had to force herself out the door and into the quiet corridor.

CHAPTER 9

“Walker, you’re with me!”

Somewhere at the back of her mind Andrea knew she had been here a dozen or more times before, yet she seemed unable to divert from the course of action that was prescribed for her. She and Walker dashed over to the far side of the warehouse to look for a means of exit, Andrea knowing the whole time that they would find none.

Constable Walker was searching desperately along the wall now, as he did every time, his fingers clawing at the corrugated steel. Andrea forced herself to look away to break the repetitive cycle. Instead she looked up, for the first time noticing something that had never been apparent to her before. Watching from a gantry above the warehouse floor was another figure. They were hidden in the shadows, their face obscured from view, but Andrea got the sense they were watching the unfolding events with interest rather than panic like those on the ground floor.

Leaving Walker, Andrea hurried for the ladder to the upper level, suddenly having the urge to find out who the mysterious watcher was. The sound of her shoes on the rungs echoed round the cavernous room as she frantically clambered up. Reaching the top she could see the figure was still there.

“Hey!” she yelled to get their attention.

The shadowy face swung towards her but she still couldn’t make out their features in the gloom. All she could discern was that they were of a reasonably large build, making her think it was a man. Then they were off and running in the opposite direction, Andrea giving chase along the narrow walkway.

“Wait! Who are you?” she called after the person.

She was getting close now, almost within touching distance when suddenly the metal gantry gave way beneath Andrea and she was falling, hitting the concrete floor of the warehouse with a hefty thump.

Groaning she lifted her sore head, experiencing a profound sense of déjà vu when she saw what was in front of her - a pair of shiny black boots. Andrea realised she wasn’t in the warehouse anymore, the whiteness of the corridor where she lay in stark contrast to its oppressive gloom. She started to slowly track her eyes up the olive green trousers, taking her time since she had yet to find out what lay above.

Then suddenly her eyes opened and she was back in her bed, none the wiser. Warily casting the duvet aside, Andrea padded across the room and out into the dark lounge. This was becoming an all-too familiar ritual now, she considered as she crossed to the kitchen to retrieve a drink of water. Though she pondered that the shadowy figure

had never featured in her nightmares before. She deliberated over whom the person represented – had they in fact been there in the warehouse at the time, or were they some figment of her nightmare’s imagination?

Swigging the cold water, Andrea wondered if the counselling she was undertaking would eventually help resolve things. She’d only had the first session with Dr Shah a few days previously, and they hadn’t even got onto the recurrent nightmares during that. Thinking she would find it hard to get back to sleep again any time soon, she decided to complete her usual routine with a late-night walk round the corridors to try and calm her racing thoughts. She pulled on some jeans and a t-shirt, quickly doing her hair up in a ponytail before she left the room. She knew she probably looked rather dishevelled, but it wasn’t like she ever saw anyone while wandering the halls after hours, at least not anyone important.

She followed the carpeted corridor round and out of the section that was for the superhuman’s quarters, continuing on her loop of the second floor. As usual the halls were deserted, her only companions the cameras that tracked her movements. Sometimes Andrea got the perverse urge to wave up at them. If nothing else it might give those watching a small smile during their mundane work. She was heading past the Major’s office now, the desk outside where her secretary normally sat empty, the Major no doubt long ago tucked up in bed. Andrea was just turning to continue her circuit when she noticed something different from all the previous occasions she’d passed this way. There was a door open just to the side of the Major’s office, through which a set of stairs was clearly visible.

Unable to resist the urge to investigate, Andrea went through and up the metal steps, finding herself out on the flat roof of the building when she opened the door at the top. She shivered as the chill crispness of the night air hit her immediately, bringing goosebumps to her exposed arms. It might have been early May, but up in Scotland that didn’t stop it being rather cold come one in the morning. Glancing up she could see that it was a clear night for a change, the moon bright against the blackness speckled with stars. As she took a moment to gaze at the impressive vastness of the vista viewable from the roof, she suddenly realised she was not alone.

Standing near the edge with her back to Andrea was the Major. Or more precisely the other woman was bending forwards, her hands on her knees, looking into the eyepiece of a telescope that pointed at the heavens. She still wore her uniform, though more sensibly than Andrea she had a thick camouflage jacket on her top half to protect from the cold. She appeared engrossed in whatever she was looking at, though every so often she would have to reach up and brush her auburn hair back round behind her ears as it flopped in the way.

Andrea was just wondering whether it was polite to announce herself in some way or disappear back the way she had come, when the Major suddenly swung round and spotted her.

“Sorry,” I didn’t mean to disturb you, said Andrea quickly, “I just saw the open door and, well....”

“You couldn’t resist taking a peek?” finished the Major. The leading question was delivered with an obvious edge of amusement.

Andrea shrugged. “I’ve never seen it open before,” she explained, walking across the roof, since it seemed the Major wasn’t adverse to her presence.

“You often walk past late at night then do you?” queried the Major.

As the Major’s eyes narrowed slightly, Andrea realised she had been caught out. “Sometimes,” she said evasively. She didn’t know what it was about the Major, but Andrea found she seemed to have a tendency of speaking without always calculating her responses when the other woman was around, not something she was usually guilty of.

The Major raised both eyebrows, fixing Andrea inquisitively with her blue eyes. The moonlight glinted off them, almost making them twinkle as the white light caught the grey shade that underlay the blue. Trying to avoid the questioning stare, Andrea shifted her gaze ever so slightly away from direct eye contact. Now though, she couldn’t help noticing the way the moon lit up and defined the features of the Major’s face, playing across her cheekbones.

Looking for a way to avoid the implied question and distract her wandering eyes, Andrea decided to switch the focus to the other woman. “So, what are you looking at?” she asked, glancing at the telescope.

The Major eyed her for a moment, seemingly deciding she would allow the change in topic. “I was having a look at the Mare Tranquillitatis, also known as the Sea of Tranquillity,” she said, “Would you like to see?”

Andrea tipped her head in acknowledgement. “Sure why not?”

The Major moved aside to allow Andrea access to the sleek black tube set on a tripod. Andrea closed one eye and squinted down the eyepiece, trying to focus on the mass of white visible to her. She took a few moments before straightening up. “Er...what exactly am I looking for?”

The Major let out a low throaty laugh and Andrea found herself shivering again unsure whether it was the night air or the laugh that had caused the prickle down her spine. “You might need to focus it, for the specifics of your eyes,” suggested the Major. “Here, turn this knob.”

The Major leaned over and indicated the one she meant on the far side of the telescope, accidentally brushing up against Andrea’s arm as she did. It was purely accidental, but Andrea was surprised at the small tingle that danced up along her arm and down to settle somewhere in her stomach. In its wake Andrea just about managed to fumble her fingers onto the knob and turn the dial. Suddenly the mass of white became defined, a landscape of plunging craters and soaring peaks coming into focus. She let out a small gasp of wonder at the breath-taking view of something that she would normally have taken for granted.

“Do you see it now?” asked the Major. “It’s the largest crater.”

“Yes,” Andrea said, still studying the details, “That’s it by the Sea of Serenity.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Andrea glanced up from her perusal. “Was I incorrect?”

“No, you were absolutely right,” said the Major with no small degree of surprise. “You know about astronomy do you?”

“Not really,” said Andrea with a shrug, “I must have read it in a book at some point. I have quite a good memory.”

“I’d say,” agreed the Major, still sounding impressed.

“It’s an amazing sight,” commented Andrea, peering down once more.

“Yes, it is,” agreed the Major. Andrea could see her out of the corner of her eye, turning her face skywards and staring up at the sphere with the naked eye. “Of course a lot of astronomers forget about the beauty of the moon when they’re chasing after all those exciting stars, but I always like to come back to it every now and then.”

As the other woman glanced her way again, Andrea swiftly fixed her eyes on the telescope, pretending she had been looking at that the whole time. Though she didn’t want to go back in just yet, Andrea couldn’t help shivering again and had to rub her arms to get some life into them.

“Would you like a little something to warm you up?” offered the Major.

Andrea’s eyes shot up in shock until she saw the Major was holding up a metal flask, its silver surface reflecting the moonlight. *Of course she had meant a drink*; Andrea didn’t know what she had been thinking.

“Is it like your drinks on the boat?” asked Andrea suspiciously.

The Major’s lips curved into a knowing smile. “How did you guess? I only have coffee though I’m afraid.”

“I’m sure I can make an exception for once,” said Andrea accepting the proffered cup.

She wouldn’t normally touch the stuff, but she thought it would be rude to decline the offer. The Major had now perched herself on the low wall that ran along the edge of the roof and Andrea naturally joined her, taking a tentative sip of her drink. As she expected it wasn’t really to her taste, but she tried not to let that fact show on her face.

“You carried the telescope up here from your office then?” noted Andrea conversationally, “Hence the open door.”

“Yes, as you’ve probably noticed the weather up here in Scotland isn’t exactly great,” replied the Major having paused to take a sip of her drink, “But when we do get a clear night it’s perfect stargazing weather, what with the lack of background light.”

Andrea realised that was her cue to do or say something. She had been distracted again, watching the way the Major liked to play with her mug, running her fingers along the rim in a most teasing fashion. Kicking the sensible parts of her mind into gear, Andrea swept her eyes round the view from the rooftop instead. Apart from those of the base, there wasn’t an artificial light in sight. The building sat at the foot of a slight slope so that it wasn’t visible from the mainland and conversely the coast wasn’t visible from there. Not that those lights would have been close enough to interfere with using the telescope anyway. In the other directions, beyond the trees and undulating grass-covered ground of the island, stretched the vastness of the sea, the light from the moon playing off the swell. Andrea completed her circle, coming back to the Major. “You do a lot of stargazing then do you?”

The Major nodded. “I’ve always had a fascination for the stars, maybe something to do with my birthday.”

Andrea narrowed her eyes into a quizzical look.

“I was born on July 20th 1969,” clarified the Major.

The date rang a bell in Andrea’s mind and she quickly identified the connection. “The day of the Apollo 11 moon landing,” she noted, nodding her head in understanding.

“Spot on,” said a surprised Major, “You do know your astronomy.”

“No, as I said...”

“You just read it in a book,” finished the Major quickly.

“Now *you’re* spot on.”

The Major broke into a spontaneous laugh, the sound echoing across the roof. Andrea noticed that that strange chill was back again, surmising that it really must be getting cold at that point. Still she was reluctant to say anything, especially when she looked at the smile on the Major’s face and found that she was starting to feel warmer anyway.

Meanwhile the Major was continuing with her explanation for her astronomy hobby. “I don’t know if it was just some weird coincidence but I can always remember going out in the back garden as a child, and gazing up at the stars, wishing I could be out there too.”

“It sounds like you wanted to be an astronaut.”

“I did!” agreed the Major, “But unfortunately I soon found out I was too short. So then I settled for more earth-bound ambitions, though it didn’t stop me studying physics at university.”

Andrea nearly choked on her coffee. “You went to university? And did physics?”

Luckily the Major seemed to think Andrea’s slightly insulting comments were funny, or maybe it was just the stunned expression on Andrea’s face that was causing the half smile on her face. Andrea recognised this smile as the one that said ‘ah-ha, I’ve caught you out and now I’m going to tease you mercilessly.’

“You thought I was some stupid squaddie?” asked the Major. “That an army officer couldn’t be educated?”

“No...er...it’s just...” Andrea searched for something more tactful to fill the gap, “...unusual.”

“No more than a police officer with a degree in Biochemisty from Oxford.”

Andrea realised there was no sense in prolonging her own squirming agony. “Touche,” she said, with a nod. Now she had conceded she decided to press for some details. “So what did you get?”

“Ever the competitor, eh?” The smile was still on the Major’s face, but now it had changed to one that indicated she found the question amusing. Andrea wondered at how many slightly different smiles the Major had, each one signified with varying curving of the lips and accompanied by a shift in the expression held in her eyes too.

“I got a first,” the Major informed her, “From Birmingham University.”

Now Andrea really was interested. “You went to the university at Birmingham? When were you there?”

The Major seemed to think nothing of Andrea’s brash questions. In fact she appeared happy to share these personal details with Andrea. “From 1987 to 1990.”

Andrea let out a small snorting laughing, shaking her head.

“What’s so funny?” asked the Major, bemused by Andrea’s reaction.

Andrea was still shaking her head incredulously. “Just another strange coincidence,” she said.

The Major remained perplexed by Andrea’s obtuse remarks, while Andrea was perversely satisfied to see she could still catch the other woman off-guard on occasion. Deciding to take pity, Andrea clarified what she meant. “Do you remember the school next to the university?”

“The posh girls’ school? The King Edward something or other?”

“The King Edward VI High School For Girls to be precise.”

The Major studied the patient expression on Andrea’s face for a moment, before the light went on in her head. “You didn’t go there?” she asked incredulously, not believing her own question.

Andrea nodded. “From 1988 to 1995. I’m surprised you didn’t already know, since you have that dossier on me.”

“That’s not as detailed as you seem to think it is,” said the Major, with a roll of the eyes, “It’s not like we had someone following you around from when you were born, noting your every move, just in case. No, it only contains a summary of your adult life – university, work that sort of thing. And then only the superficial details – academic records, various work reports.”

“So you don’t know me as well as you thought you did?”

“I never claimed to know you at all,” insisted the Major. “I realise that what’s written on a piece of paper is hardly going to reveal much about how a person thinks, what they’re like in real life. I like to get to know someone to judge for myself.”

Andrea got the distinct impression that the way the Major was watching her now was all part of the way she formed that judgement. The Major always seemed to have a look of quiet assessment about her when she wasn’t speaking, like every word and gesture from the other person was being noted down for future reference. Andrea could see how it would be unnerving to less strong willed individuals. It was unnerving to her.

Maybe the Major sensed that the moment had gotten too tense and let out a small chuckle to herself. “I can’t believe you would have been one of those posh kids in a boater and blazer,” she said, recalling what they had originally been discussing, “The ones that always looked down their noses at us students.”

“And you would have been one of those drunken students falling in the gutter, stealing traffic cones and singing rude songs at 2am.” Though she had said it, Andrea couldn’t quite picture it - the respectable Major drunk.

The other woman managed to confound her again though. “Guilty as charged!” confessed the Major. “Though now you’re making me feel old, considering you were still at school when I left university.”

“I wish I could have been leaving school at that point too!” Andrea could have kicked herself; she didn’t know why she had admitted what she had. Just another case of being unable to control her mouth in front of the Major she supposed.

The Major wasn’t slow to pick up on her outburst either. “You didn’t like it there? It’s one of the best independent schools in the country isn’t it? And it must have cost a pretty penny to send you.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure it did,” agreed Andrea, unable to keep the bitterness out of her tone, “Only the best money could buy for my parents.”

“That’s not the first time I’ve heard you mention them in less than stellar tones,” noted the Major, “Pardon the pun given the current setting. You can tell me to mind my own business if you like, but it seems they must have cared about you once if they were so bothered about your education.”

Andrea realised she had disclosed far too much by her tone and words. Now she could either attempt to avoid revealing any more by changing the subject or else she could answer the Major’s probing honestly. For some reason she was more inclined to the latter.

“Is this part of your ‘getting to know someone’ strategy?” queried Andrea, at least trying to stall for a moment.

“There’s no strategy, I’m just curious,” insisted the Major, “But if you’d rather not talk about it…”

Andrea exhaled slowly. She’d spent most of her life not talking about it, and she guessed it wouldn’t hurt to for once. The way the Major’s eyes had softened seemed to be inviting her to speak. It was all very subtle yet persuasive, and Andrea was powerless to resist.

“My parents were actually at the university in Birmingham too,” she began, “They still are in fact. Professor Magnus and Dr Erin Hallstrom of the Department of Medical and Molecular Genetics. As you might imagine when you have two eminent scientists for parents the pressure was on to live up to some pretty big expectations. It seemed like everyone that ever came round our house while I was growing up wanted to know how me and my brother were getting on at school, if we’d decided what university we were going to go to yet. My parents certainly didn’t want to disappoint them so they drove us on - books, tutors, schools, anything they could buy or finance to further our education.”

“So you decided to rebel?”

“Not really, at least not back then. Sure I played up at school, but what child doesn’t? And that was more because I was bored than because I didn’t want to do the work. In fact you couldn’t tear me away from my books when I did settle down to it - I wanted to impress my parents as much as they wanted me to get good marks. It seemed like the only way to get their attention, to win their love.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” offered the Major, “I’m sure they loved you no matter your performance at school.”

Andrea let out a rueful laugh. “You don’t know them. Everything was measured in terms of intellectual achievement. So I followed the route set out for me, went to university, did my degree in Biochemistry so I could follow in their footsteps. But then…”

Too late Andrea realised that not only had she confessed about the problems with her parents, but also that she was now leading the Major into other difficult areas of her life. Andrea had no idea why she felt willing or able to unburden herself to the other woman like she was doing - she hardly knew her really. She'd had other friends for years that she'd never talked to about this sort of thing. Yet at the same time she felt she could trust the Major with this information.

“But then...?” prompted the Major gently.

Andrea shrugged. “Then they wanted me to go on and do a phd.”

“And you didn't?”

“No, I'd finally had enough,” declared Andrea bitterly, “It got to the point when I realised that no matter what I did it would never be enough, especially not with Marcus being the apple of their eye.”

“Marcus?”

“My older brother. He was always the favourite, maybe because he was older, I don't know.” Andrea paused for a moment as she thought back over her childhood.

“That's another thing I remember from growing up – Marcus can do this, Marcus can do that, Marcus, Marcus, Marcus. Why can't you be more like Marcus?”

“Sounds like it was tough to live up to,” agreed the Major, “And what made you come to this realisation that you wanted to stop trying to do what they wanted?”

It seemed the other woman was still interested in that particular aspect of the story, even if Andrea had tried to distract her. “It was a gradual thing,” explained Andrea, “Most of the time I was at university I was thinking about it, since it was my first chance to live away from them. In the end we had a disagreement over something else and it all kind of came to a head.”

Andrea paused unsure if she wanted to admit this to the Major. Still it was rather late to back out now.

Sensing Andrea's reluctance the Major stepped in. “It's all right, if you don't want to tell me,” she insisted.

“I've told you everything else,” replied Andrea, “I may as well finish the rest of this whole sorry story.” She still paused before revealing the main reason for the falling out with her family. “I told them I'd met someone, a woman.”

“Ah.”

“Exactly, 'ah'” agreed Andrea, “To say they weren't impressed is an understatement.”

The Major had a thoughtful look on her face as if she were trying to work something out. “Was this Meg? The woman at university that you fell for?”

Andrea was confused for a second. “What? Oh, no, that was much later,” she clarified, “No, Susie was her name. It only lasted a few months, but you know when you’re that age - it’s the next great love.”

The Major nodded and Andrea couldn’t help wondering who the Major’s first great love had been. “So you told your parents and they reacted badly?”

“Indeed, telling me how unnatural it was, how I just hadn’t met the right man, how university had corrupted me and so on and so forth. They wanted me to come back and live with them, while studying for a phd, so they could keep an eye on me.”

“And you didn’t want to have anyone spying on you?”

“No, as you might have realised by now, I like my privacy. So I basically told them where to stick it and I’ve not spoken to them in over five years.”

The Major seemed surprised at that. “Not once?”

“There were a couple of phone calls near the beginning,” revealed Andrea, “Including one where I told them I’d joined the police force. That went down like a lead balloon too – they thought I was wasting my talents.”

“I suppose that was quite a departure,” noted the Major diplomatically. “What made you pick the police?”

“I don’t know,” said Andrea quickly, “I fancied a change?”

Andrea could see the Major eyeing her suspiciously – her answer had been just that bit too glib. However, Andrea didn’t want to reveal the real reason behind her decision - she would rather have the Major thinking it was just chance than have to admit that. “Does there have to be some great noble reason?” she asked, turning the question back on the other woman. “Like ‘I wanted to help others’ or some such bollocks? No, there was no grand plan. It was just something I fell into once I was down in London.”

The Major still didn’t look convinced; perhaps thinking correctly that Andrea wasn’t the sort to do anything without some sort of reason. She didn’t pursue it though. “And you’ve never thought about contacting your parents since? They might have mellowed or realised they made a mistake pushing you away.”

“I have thought about it,” confessed Andrea, “But they’re stubborn and I just know the reception I’m going to get. I can almost see the disapproving expression on my mother’s face when she asks if I’ve found a nice young man yet and I have to tell her that I’m still a lesbian.”

“It’s sad to hear you’re so estranged from them, that they couldn’t accept you for who you are.”

“Yeah, well their loss,” commented Andrea dismissively. She was tired of talking about it now. Discussing it with the Major had made her realise that it was still

painful to think about the rejection she had felt at the time, and still felt to some extent. “How about you family?” she asked, wanting to get off the depressing subject.

“My family?”

“Well, I shared my life story, it seems only fair that you share in return.”

“There’s really not that much to tell,” said the Major, “You already know about my father.”

Andrea considered that she didn’t know *that* much beyond the fact that he came from Liverpool, had been in the army, had a love of sailing and had died a year ago. However, she knew enough to know that the last point was still a touchy subject for the Major, so she decided not to press for further details right now. “And your mother? Siblings?”

The Major’s eyes narrowed, though they still carried a friendly glint to them. “It’s my turn for the interrogation now is it? Have you got the tape recorder out too?”

“It’s hidden in my sock.”

The Major chuckled at Andrea’s deadpan joke, and Andrea couldn’t help smiling in return rather pleased at having the ability to make the other woman laugh.

“Well, the brief version is that I had a fairly ‘normal’ upbringing,” outlined the Major, “If you count being shipped round to various different army bases to follow my father’s postings normal.”

“You could have based yourself in one place though,” pondered Andrea, “Let him go off and do the soldier thing.”

“And break up the family unit? Oh no, neither my mother or my father would ever have stood for that.”

“It must be difficult for a child though,” continued Andrea, “A new place to get used to, new friends to make on a regular basis.”

“It was a bit I suppose,” allowed the Major, “But you get used to it. And it certainly makes you outgoing, all those fresh starts.”

Andrea studied the Major doubtfully. “I can’t imagine you *ever* being a shy child.”

The Major laughed again, a warm throaty one this time. “No, I wasn’t. I soon learnt to stand on my own two feet. And there was always Penny to keep me occupied too.”

“A pet?”

“My younger sister!” The Major was chuckling to herself now and Andrea thought she could get used to seeing this relaxed side of the other woman on a regular basis.

“Though I did treat her like my little pet sometimes I suppose.” The Major leaned in closer to Andrea on the ledge. “Just don’t ever tell her I told you so,” she added in a conspiratorial whisper despite the fact there was no one else on the roof.

Andrea wondered when she would get the chance to do so; it was hardly likely she would be introduced to the Major’s sister at any point. Having sidled closer, the Major had maintained her close position, and Andrea was convinced she could feel the warmth radiating off the other woman’s body. Though she considered it could equally be the proximity that had caused Andrea’s own body to heat up in response. At least she didn’t feel cold now. “You got on though,” she managed to say, “Despite your tendency to treat your sister like a pet?”

“Yes, we were pretty close, still are,” agreed the Major, “Though we couldn’t have been more different growing up. She was always the mummy’s girl, wanting to try on her clothes wear her make-up, whereas I was always much more interested in the details of the latest tank my father was testing.”

“Sounds like you were a real tomboy.”

The Major made a low chuckle as she obviously thought back on it. “I was terrible,” she agreed, “I think my mother despaired of ever getting me to wear a skirt sometimes, other than to school. I don’t think they were too surprised when I followed my father into the army.”

“Though you did have that pit-stop in academia,” recalled Andrea.

“Yes, well, I knew my mother was rather concerned about my plans for joining the army, she already had one person to worry about where that was concerned. So I made a deal with her that I would go to university first and if at the end of that I still wanted to join then I could. I think she hoped the experience might broaden my horizons a bit.”

“But it didn’t?”

The Major pursed her lips for a moment before replying. “I have to say I was tempted to pursue another career...”

“Besides being an astronaut,” commented Andrea jokingly.

“Yes, besides that!” said the Major, “But my heart had always been set on the army. So when I left it was straight to Sandhurst and the rest is history.”

The Major had gone quiet for a minute, glancing back up at the night sky again now. Andrea noted how the other woman had glossed over her entire military career, but at the same time supposed she had gotten quite a lot out of her already and wouldn’t press her for details of that for the time being. Yet Andrea did want to know; she wanted to know everything she could about the Major.

Andrea turned her eyes to the stars too, feeling the faint breeze whispering across the rooftop. She tried to hold back the shiver that threatened, not wanting to alert the

Major to the fact that she was cold and risk her suggesting that they go back in. Andrea was enjoying this chance to spend some time alone and find out more about the Major beyond just work. At the same time, she couldn't quite believe the things she had confessed herself. Why she had felt the need to unburden herself about her parents she didn't know, but it surprised her to find that it felt good to have confided in someone.

The Major's voice eventually broke the still of the night. "You never did say why you were wandering around the base at this time of night. Having trouble sleeping were you?"

"Maybe I'm just a late night person," replied Andrea.

"And are you?"

Andrea looked over at the Major who was regarding her keenly. "Ok, maybe I was having a bit of trouble sleeping. I just thought I'd come for a walk to clear my head."

"Nightmares again?"

Despite the fact that she had already confided in the Major that night, this was a little bit too sensitive a subject. "I do already have one counsellor you know, I don't need another."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

Andrea quirked an eyebrow. "Really? You could have fooled me."

The Major made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "I was just interested, maybe a little concerned, but it doesn't matter."

Andrea was touched that the Major would be worried about her. "Sorry, I'm just a bit touchy on that subject," she said more gently.

"So how is the counselling's going? You had your first session with Dr Shah last Friday didn't you?"

"You didn't get a full report then?"

The Major merely raised both her eyebrows, deciding she really didn't need to answer the question.

"Just checking," noted Andrea, "Yes, it was fine, more of a 'getting to know you' session rather than anything else. She seems nice enough though, certainly a lot more sensitive than other people around here."

"Oh?" said the Major, seemingly wanting to know what Andrea was referring to.

"It doesn't matter," said Andrea quickly. She had resolved to deal with Chadwick on her own. For one she thought she should be able to handle the big oaf herself, and for

another she wasn't yet sure how loyal the Major was to the people under her command. Andrea suspected that the Major would defend them with all her might. In that case Andrea wasn't convinced the other woman would believe her even if she did tell her about the incident in Andrea's quarters the week before. It wasn't as if Andrea had any proof – it would just be her word against his, since he would no doubt deny it.

However, the Major didn't seem like she was going to let it go that easily. "No, it does matter. If you're having trouble with someone I want to know about it."

"It's no one in particular," said Andrea, "Just the attitude of certain of the military personnel leaves a bit to be desired sometimes." She hoped the answer was evasive enough.

"Well, if there is something specific you'll let me know?" the Major continued.

"Yes," agreed Andrea. She didn't like lying to the Major, but she did have some pride.

"Because I take my responsibility as commander of this base seriously, that means looking out for the soldiers, the scientists and you superhumans too."

Andrea decided it was best to try and change tack, to avoid the need for further untruths. "I've been wondering, how comes you're in command of the base?"

The Major's brows crinkled together in a frown. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean it quite like that," Andrea tried to explain, realising the question could have come across as rather rude, "What I meant was you're a Major, and a major wouldn't normally be in command of a whole base like this."

"Been doing some research have you?"

Andrea shrugged. "I like to know what I'm dealing with. You must be good if they've given you such a responsibility above what would normally be entrusted to someone of your rank."

"I do have to report to Colonel Parsons, he's the overall commander," the Major outlined, "But I suppose they must believe in my ability to run it in his absence, yes."

"I guess they must since he's not here that often is he? I've only seen him that once in the couple of months I've been here."

"He spends most of his time at Chicksands," answered the Major, "That's the corps' headquarters. Though I do report to him on a near daily basis."

This was something else that had been bugging Andrea, so she seized the opportunity to question the Major on it. "Wants to know how training's going does he?"

"Yes, he is the overall commander of this unit."

“And how is training going?”

“Good,” replied the Major, seemingly not wanting to give anything else away. Andrea got the feeling the other woman sensed she was being probed for something specific.

Andrea carried on anyway. “And are we ready yet?”

“Sorry, you’ve lost me.”

Andrea doubted that. She thought the Major knew exactly what Andrea was getting at. “Are we ready for whatever it is you’re grooming us for. I mean all this training can’t just be for our health can it. More and more we seem to be learning military related information, tactics and the like.”

“That’s just because this is a military base,” the Major reasoned, “It’s only sensible for you to have some understanding of the sort of thing the other people here are trained in. And we have to do something with you in between the lab work!”

Andrea thought there could be some truth in what the Major was saying, but suspected there was more to it. “Then why is the Colonel so interested in how it’s going?”

“Why indeed?” agreed the Major.

“You don’t know?” asked Andrea, unable to hide her surprise.

“As you said before, I’m just a major, I’m not always privy to the workings of my superior’s minds. But you’re right he does keep very close tabs on the base.”

Something in the Major’s tone alerted Andrea. “You don’t sound overly happy about it.”

The Major regarded her for a moment; her blue eyes studying Andrea intensely. Andrea got the feeling she was being silently assessed, to see how much the Major could reveal. It was all Andrea could do to maintain her own gaze and not glance away from the piercing look. “In the main it’s great running the base,” the Major finally said, “I just wish I had a slightly freer hand sometimes without these added requirements to produce constant results and reports.”

“Sounds like you’re under a bit of pressure,” noted Andrea.

“Does it?” said the Major with a small shrug before bringing her hand up to her temple and rubbing it, “I don’t know, it’s late, I’m tired, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Andrea was surprised, not for the first time that night. For some reason she had thought of the other woman as indestructible, but here she was confessing to normal human failings just like everyone else.

“Anyway, at least I do have good things to report at the moment,” continued the Major, “You seem to be doing rather well in particular.”

Andrea hadn't been expecting the compliment so out of the blue and she couldn't help blushing. Especially when the words had been coupled with a soft look from the Major, her eyes still fixed on Andrea now.

“I've been most impressed by your change in attitude the past few weeks,” the Major said, “And you seem to be getting to grips with your powers too. And I'm not the only one who's noticed, Dr Todd's had lots of good things to say too.”

“Thanks,” managed Andrea, still slightly abashed. She was also rather concerned about the strange warm, tickling sensation in her stomach as she received the praise from the other woman. “I suppose I eventually saw the benefit of cooperating, it's in my interests to know how my powers work after all.”

The Major shook her head, though Andrea could see she was actually smiling as she did. “It's all right you don't need to justify it, I'm not complaining in the slightest. But it's all right; I won't blow your rebellious cover with the others if you don't want me to.”

Andrea smiled at the Major's assessment of her. It was true that she did tend to cultivate her difficult persona more as a way of disarming other people. “Well I don't want to lose my confrontational reputation completely, so I may as well ask if you've found anything more out about the accident at the warehouse.”

The Major eyed her curiously. “What makes you think I've been looking into it? I thought I told you on the boat trip that I couldn't be seen to be making waves.”

“True, you can't be seen,” agreed Andrea, now the one to study the Major's face for signs that she had been correct in her assumption. Apart from the slightly narrowed eyes, though, the Major really wasn't giving anything away, her face set in its usual implacable expression. Andrea pressed on anyway. “That doesn't stop you doing something below the surface. I just got the feeling that you wouldn't be able to resist the mystery.”

“I'm not sure I'm happy being that easy to read,” noted the Major.

Andrea felt a small sense of triumph. “So you *are* looking into it?”

“This is strictly between us all right?” said the Major, waiting for Andrea to nod her understanding before continuing. “Yes, I have put a few feelers out, but I've not heard anything back yet.”

“I'm just grateful that someone is looking into it,” said Andrea honestly, offering the Major a smile of thanks.

“The Colonel did say that *someone* was anyway.”

“I mean someone I can trust,” clarified Andrea. The words had come out before she’d really thought about them, but even if she’d thought for longer she realised they wouldn’t have been any different.

It was slightly disturbing to her to discover that she felt the ability to trust the Major after having only known her for a couple of months. The Major herself had a small half-smile on her face, as if she was pleased at Andrea’s comment. Andrea found her own eyes drifting up the Major’s face, and as she got caught in the other woman’s gaze, she wondered at her change in attitude over those two months. When Andrea had first arrived she’d been so adamant that she wouldn’t cooperate and would get out of there as soon as possible, yet now she found herself experiencing a certain degree of trepidation at the thought of leaving. She tried to maintain that the reason for her more compliant attitude was that cooperating gave her a better chance to find out about the warehouse accident, and that it served her own interests to know how her powers worked. However, deep down she knew they weren’t the only reasons. Looking into those pale blue eyes, those other factors seemed inconsequential when compared to the sense of satisfaction Andrea got from pleasing the Major.

As they simply stared at one another the moment seemed to stretch on in Andrea’s mind though quite possibly it was only a couple of seconds. Neither of them looked away, in fact Andrea got the sense that it would be more noticeable to do so and so she held the piercing gaze. Yet she also knew she couldn’t just sit there staring like an idiot. She was opening her mouth to break the awkward silence when something beat her to it, the sound of breaking glass shattering the calm of the night.

“What the hell?” The Major was up and looking over the edge in a flash.

Andrea swiftly followed, noticing flames licking from a window on the ground floor. The Major meanwhile was already on her communicator.

“Activate the fire alarm, now! There’s a fire in the kitchen!”

Then she was running for the door to the stairs, and leaping down them two at a time, Andrea hurrying after her. The sound of the alarm resounded round the corridors as they sped along the hall and down the stairs to the lower floor. As they reached the corridor that contained the kitchen Andrea could see that a gaggle of soldiers were already there, a couple of them attempting to douse the flames spitting out the door with some fire extinguishers.

“Why haven’t the sprinklers activated?” asked the Major as she got to them.

“I don’t know ma’am,” said one of the soldiers, “We only just got here too.”

“Well, we’re never going to put it out with those,” she said indicating the extinguishers. “Tardelli,” she barked into her communicator. There was no immediate response to her hail. She tried again, but there was still nothing. “Patel!” She called to the nearest soldier.

“Yes, ma’am?” he replied standing to attention in front of her.

“Go and find Tardelli and bring her back down here.”

He gave a nod and dashed off to find the young woman. The Major meanwhile was instructing a couple of other soldiers to go and fetch the fire truck, in case Patel couldn't locate Tardelli quickly enough. Andrea was impressed by the way the Major had completely taken charge in a few seconds.

The Major was now shielding her eyes as she tried to look in the room in the face of the fierce blaze. Andrea tried to peer in too, though the heat was intense. In amongst the fiery glow there was form lying on the floor.

“There's someone in there!” cried Andrea, pointing for the Major to see.

“Shit!” exclaimed the Major, glancing down the corridor where the soldiers had been dispatched. “Come on Tardelli,” she muttered under her breath.

Andrea didn't think they could wait for the woman with the icy powers to arrive though. The inferno was already growing and whoever it was might not have long. Without waiting for approval she leapt into the room.

She heard the Major's surprised cry before a flash of flame shot out at her, causing her to stumble and fall to the floor. The flames rolled over just above her head, almost singeing her hair in the process. The heat was searing, much hotter than she could ever have imagined and a thought crossed her mind that maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all. Ignoring that, she turned to start crawling across the floor to the slumped figure, quickly breaking out in a sweat as she did. The smoke was thick and black, clogging up her lungs and making it hard for her to see her target as she felt her way along the tiles. All around her there was the sound of cracking and popping as the flames swept through the kitchen, destroying the fixtures and fittings. Reaching the person she saw it was the cook, Corporal Lister, and that he was thankfully still alive. Hefting him over her shoulder, she faced the thick wall of fire that now completely blocked her exit via the door. A few hacking coughs rattled through her as she sized up her options, the smoke now stinging her eyes and the flames getting dangerously close. Then it suddenly dawned on her – if she couldn't leave by the door then she would just have to make her own exit.

Balling her fist, her eyes flicked uncertainly from her hand to the wall next to her that was still untouched by the fire. *Could she really do it?* Summoning her courage and pushing away the logical thoughts that said it was impossible, Andrea hammered her fist into the wall next to her. There was a loud cracking as a jagged split shot along the paintwork. Andrea looked at the damage she had inflicted, relieved that she hadn't broken every bone in her hand with the punch. Dr Todd had informed her that she now had denser bones than the average person and thankfully it seemed he was right. Andrea drew back her arm once again, this time putting all her force behind the blow. The wall exploded outwards in a shower of bricks and mortar and Andrea vaulted through the new opening into the cool messhall that lay on the other side. She was just laying Lister down at a safe distance from the fire, when the Major came hurtling into the room, no doubt having heard Andrea's escape.

She hurried over, bending down by them. “Are you all right?” she asked, her voice carrying a definite hint of anxiety.

Andrea turned her head from where she was kneeling. “Yes, fine, though I think Lister might have inhaled a fair bit of smoke.”

Suddenly there was a loud bang from the kitchen and Andrea just caught sight of an object hurtling through the hole in the wall.

“Get down!” cried the Major, flinging herself at Andrea and knocking her to the floor as a canister whizzed past their heads.

The Major watched as it impacted into one of the tables splintering it into several pieces. Andrea didn’t follow her gaze; she was far too preoccupied with thinking about the warm body now lying on top of her. The other woman was light, but still heavy enough to press down on Andrea, her breasts rubbing lightly against Andrea’s own through her thin and now exceedingly grubby t-shirt. Andrea’s mouth was suddenly dry and she didn’t think it had anything to do with the heat of the fire - at least not the one in the kitchen.

“That was close,” noted the Major, turning her eyes back down to Andrea, her hair flopping down across her cheek.

Andrea could only nod dumbly in response. The Major looked at her quizzically, but before she could ask anything further there was a sudden icy blast shooting out of the hole to the kitchen. Tardelli had arrived. The fire was extinguished in no time as the young woman put her power to produce ice to good use. Now instead of raging heat there was just a cold cloud emanating from the other room, tumbling out into the messhall through the ugly gash in the wall.

The Major was staring at that now, not seeming in a hurry to move from her current position. Andrea certainly wasn’t about to point out that their bodies were still squeezed together if she hadn’t noticed. A sound at the door appeared to break the Major out of her study and she quickly clambered up off Andrea as if suddenly realising her inappropriate position. Andrea followed her up, dusting herself down as a way to avoid eye contact. Marching over to them were some more soldiers, including Lieutenant Chadwick.

“What’s going on?” he asked as he joined them.

Some of the other men were hoisting Lister onto a stretcher as the Major replied in steely tones, perhaps not appreciating the way Chadwick had practically demanded an answer. “That’s what I’d like to know,” she commented. “For a start the fire alarm and sprinklers should have gone off at the first sign of fire. I want a full investigation into this.”

Chadwick looked perplexed. “You don’t think it was an accident?”

“I’m not ruling anything out at this stage,” the Major informed him, “Get the room sealed off, just in case there’s any sort of evidence. We don’t want everyone traipsing through there in their size tens.”

As the Major and Chadwick continued talking, Andrea felt a bit like a spare wheel and started to drift away from them. Now the excitement was over she suddenly felt tired and decided to leave the military personnel to it. They seemed engrossed with the aftermath of the fire anyway, and didn’t even notice her departure from the room. She had just turned a corner, heading for the stairs to her quarters, when she felt a hand on her arm, pulling her round.

“Where are you going?” demanded the Major, an edge of annoyance in her voice.

Andrea found herself rising to meet the bristling tone. “To bed. Unless you have a problem with that?”

“I do as it happens,” replied the Major fixing Andrea with one of her deathly stares, her hands now firmly thrust upon her hips, “I want to know what you were thinking - leaping into the fire like that!”

“I was thinking about saving Lister’s life!” shot back Andrea.

“And what about your life? You may have super powers, but that doesn’t mean you’re indestructible!”

“Someone had to do something!”

“And Tardelli did!”

“When she finally got here! Lister might not have lasted that long. Christ, you thought I might get a pat on the back for saving him, not a full-on dressing down.”

They stared balefully at one another, the fiery look being exchanged almost more intense than anything that had been burning in the kitchen minutes earlier. The Major was clenching her teeth now, to rein in her anger. Andrea could tell by the way the small muscle in the other woman’s cheek was fluttering just under the skin.

Finally the Major sighed, taking a step back, since she had subconsciously imposed herself in Andrea’s personal space. She pinched the bridge of her nose as her expression softened. “Sorry,” she said, resignedly, “Of course I’m grateful you saved him. I just wish you’d think before you acted sometimes, and considered your own safety a bit more.”

Andrea wondered at the Major’s concern and the way she had dashed after Andrea - it seemed a bit of a delayed overreaction. Or maybe it was her tiredness causing her to act somewhat out of character. Andrea could see that the other woman was rubbing at her nose again as she had a tendency to do when she was weary. It was nearly two in the morning after all.

“All right,” conceded Andrea eventually, “I’ll check before I act next time, ok?”

“Thank you,” said the Major with a dip of the head, “And I’d also like you to go to the medical bay and get checked out before you go to bed.”

Andrea opened her mouth to argue the point, but was cut off by a no-nonsense look from the Major. In the end she just sighed and nodded.

“Good, well I best get back,” the Major said, making a small subconscious pat of Andrea’s arm before she turned to go.

Andrea watched the Major disappearing towards the kitchen, still musing over her behaviour before she turned for the lift to take her downstairs.

CHAPTER 10

Andrea swooped low along the floor as a small disc flew at her from above. Increasing her speed slightly it narrowly missed her booted foot, smashing harmlessly against the concrete. Then there was another, arcing in at her body, and she twisted round so that one shot past her combat trousers, grazing the material on its course into the nearest wall. She only just caught the last one aimed directly at her head, having to resort to swatting that one away with her hand at the last minute. She used a bit more force than she intended and it spun right across the room, shattering into tiny pieces of the far wall.

Realising the projectile was indeed the final one, Andrea glided down to land on the floor of the underground training room. Now her run was finished, Dr Todd entered the room, his eyes focussed on a small computer terminal in his hand, still assessing the latest results he'd gathered. Andrea took a moment to brush a few loose strands of hair back behind her ears while she waited for him, also checking that the regulator on her left arm was still properly attached. Though it was secured tightly as always, she still got a bit nervous about it getting damaged, knowing it was the only thing between her and a seizure. She did wonder why they hadn't given her something a bit less conspicuous, since the armband was rather exposed around her bicep, especially when she was wearing a t-shirt as now. She guessed it was because it needed to be able to be easily detached for periodic refilling.

"Good, good," noted Dr Todd, eventually glancing up from his screen, "Your flying is coming on in leaps and bounds, much more considered and controlled than your initial attempts."

"Thanks," said Andrea, looking behind him to see if there was anyone else coming into the room. "No Major today?" she asked as nonchalantly as she could manage.

His eyes flicked to her, maybe surprised at the question, though it was hard to tell with Dr Todd since his expression varied little. "No," he replied, "She's still quite busy with the aftermath of the fire last week, so she hasn't had as much time to devote to training as normal."

"Right," noted Andrea, keeping her answer short to avoid displaying any disappointment in her tone.

Dr Todd looked down at his watch. "I think we can take a break," he said, "I have a fair bit of analysis to do, I'll see you back here at two."

Andrea left the scientist to it, heading for the lift to take her to the upper sections of the base. While she was waiting a brief thought crossed her mind that she should ride it to the second floor and go and see the Major, to see how the fire investigation was going. She told herself that it was just curiosity that had prompted the thought.

Before she could consider any other reasons for her desire to visit the Major's office, she heard some other booted feet walking down the corridor and turned to see Tom and Harry heading her way. They were dressed for training like her, in their military gear, and she presumed they had similarly been let out early.

"Hey, Sherlock," greeted Tom amiably as usual, "What're you up to?"

"Hello *Tom*," she replied, emphasising the use of his real name, "I was just going upstairs for something to eat." She offered Harry a smile of greeting too.

He smiled back before speaking. "We were thinking of going to the rec room for a quick game of pool, since it'll probably be quiet. Do you fancy joining us?"

"Why not," said Andrea as the lift arrived, thinking she could always get something to eat afterwards.

As the three of them got in, Tom turned to Andrea. "So have you heard anything more about the fire last Wednesday?"

"Nothing you don't know already I'm sure," she replied, before something struck her, "Why would you think I would know anything extra?"

Tom raised his eyebrows suggestively. "I thought the Major might have told you something privately."

Andrea looked at him with a perplexed expression. "Why on earth would you think that?"

She glanced between the two men who were exchanging a knowing look, both of them smiling and winking at one another.

"What?" demanded Andrea, snapping them out of it.

"Nothing," said Harry putting up his hands, though he was still smiling.

"It's obviously something," noted Andrea pinning them in place with her eyes, "For you two to be grinning at each other like a pair of idiots."

"Well," said Tom slowly, "It's just you two seem to be quite...friendly all of a sudden."

"Yeah," chipped in Harry, "And don't think we haven't seen how you're always showing off whenever she's observing training."

"I do not show off!" stated Andrea indignantly, "I just like to do a good job."

"Ah, of course," said Tom sarcastically, "That must be what it is, how could we have thought anything else."

Andrea couldn't fail to notice him winking at Harry again. She knew she should probably let it drop, but found herself pressing them anyway. "What else could it be?"

Tom shrugged. "You tell us."

"There's nothing to tell," insisted Andrea. "Yes, we might be friendlier than when I first got here, but that wouldn't be hard would it? And as for all that other stuff...well, I think the pair of you have far too much time on your hands to think about things."

"If you say so," said Harry, though his tone implied he didn't believe her at all.

"I do," said Andrea, crossing her arms across her chest and facing the doors to indicate this particular topic was closed.

When they reached the ground floor, the two men continued talking amongst themselves as they walked down the corridor with Andrea striding on ahead.

"What have *you* heard about the fire then?" Harry asked Tom.

"Nothing much, though it's the main topic of conversation round the base. Speculation's rife that it wasn't an accident, that it was some sort of sabotage."

Harry sucked in a breath. "Why sabotage the kitchen though? And who would do such a thing?"

"Good questions," agreed Tom. "But one thing's for sure, it doesn't exactly reflect well on the Major. I even heard that the Colonel's paying an impromptu visit some time this week."

"You think she's really in trouble, the Major? That she might even get sacked or transferred?"

Andrea swung round to them again. "She wouldn't be would she?" she asked, trying to keep her tone even, despite the fact that a strange anxiety was filling her. "That's hardly fair, it's not as if it was the Major's fault."

"But she is in overall command, the base is her responsibility," Tom offered by means of explanation, "And ultimately she carries the can for any cock ups."

Andrea creased her brow at that worrying prospect.

"Why, not concerned are you?" queried Tom, having noted the look.

Andrea schooled her features into a more neutral expression. "Only because she's a good commander, and we could end up with Chadwick if she left."

"Urgh," said Harry, "Now that doesn't bear thinking about."

They had reached the rec room now and Andrea pushed open the doors, seeing that it was indeed as quiet as Harry had supposed it would be. Apart from the soldier behind the bar cleaning glasses there was no one else in the room. They went over to the nearest pool table, Harry proceeding to rack the balls on the green baize.

“Where’s Bel, by the way?” Andrea asked Tom, leaning on a cue while they waited for the other man to finish.

“She’s got a session with Dr Thomas,” Tom replied.

“Ah, right,” nodded Andrea. “So...um...how have you two been getting along?”

Tom actually blushed at the question. “Good, thanks.”

“Just good?” Andrea asked, glad to have Tom on the spot for once.

“Ok, great, fantastic,” he admitted, “She’s...amazing.”

Andrea laughed to hear Tom speak so fondly of her. It would ruin his reputation as a jack-the-lad if anyone else heard it. Harry had finally finished assembling the balls to his satisfaction and Tom duly broke off. They had already played a few games, sharing general chit-chat as they did, when the doors to the rec room opened and Doc and Corporal Lister walked in conversing with one another.

“Hey, Lister!” said Tom pulling up from his shot to greet the cook, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, thanks,” replied Lister, walking over to the table, “Doc says I have a clean bill of health. It could have been a lot worse if it hadn’t been for Andrea here, though.”

Andrea felt all eyes turning to her and just about resisted the urge to blush. “It was nothing, really,” she said dismissively, “Anyone would have done the same.”

Lister made a small chuckle. “I doubt that! I can’t see anyone else here smashing a hole in my kitchen wall to rescue me.” The squat man came over to Andrea, patting her gently on the arm, “I just wanted to say thanks again,” he said with genuine warmth in his tone.

“If we’ve all had enough of this mutual appreciation,” interjected Tom, “How about we play some pool? Fancy a game Lister, Doc?”

“Yeah, I’m up for it,” said Lister with a grin, “Though we could make it more interesting.”

Tom smiled, knowing exactly what he meant. “You want to play for money?”

Andrea saw that Doc was rolling his eyes. “You two are as bad as each other,” remarked the bald man, “I think I’ll just watch.”

“That’s because you’re crap anyway,” said Tom, laughing at the indignant look that garnered. “So what do you say, tenner per game, winner stays on?”

“Or we could play doubles?” suggested Lister, “You and Harry against me and Andrea, since Doc doesn’t seem so keen.”

“Oh, I see,” said Tom, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, “Pick the best player for yourself.”

Lister held up his hands. “Hey, I’ve never seen Andrea play before.”

“Like you couldn’t have guessed she could play anyway,” said Tom suspiciously, “They have to pass their pool playing test you know, to get into the club.”

“What club?” asked Lister, confused.

“The lesbian club of course!”

Andrea jabbed the butt end of her cue into Tom’s foot. “Ignore him,” she said to Lister, as Tom hopped up and down, “I’d love to play with you.”

They soon found out that the match was actually fairly even, since Andrea’s much-lauded prowess at the game was matched by Lister’s less than impressive talents. Still no one was too bothered about the outcome, having fun just playing. They had completed three games by the time more people started to filter into the room on their lunch break. One of those people was Lieutenant Chadwick and Andrea let out a small internal groan as he started up a game with one of his cronies on the adjacent table. In between shots she could see him glancing at her, sneering nastily each time.

Andrea tried to ignore him and concentrate on her own game. Finding herself at the end of the table, she bent over to line up her shot when she felt something poke into her back.

“Hey, watch it,” she said, swinging round to find it was Chadwick who had nudged her with his cue.

“Oops, sorry,” he said, “I didn’t see you there, I was just trying to take my shot.”

“Yeah, right,” said Andrea confrontationally, “You did it on purpose.”

“I assure you I did not,” he replied, “The tables are just a bit close here,” he said indicating the small distance, “Go on, take your shot first.”

Andrea eyed him suspiciously before turning back to her table and bending down once more, sticking her hand out on the green baize and resting the cue between her fingers. She was easing her cue back when she heard a comment from behind her. It was whispered, but intentionally not quietly enough so that she would miss it.

“You’d think with all that counselling she might learn to control her temper better.”

Andrea was up again immediately. “What did you say?” she demanded of Chadwick.

“Me?” he replied innocently, putting his hand to his chest and glancing at his companion as if it were ridiculous he could have said anything.

“What do you know about my counselling?” pressed Andrea, stepping aggressively towards him.

She was close enough now that his next remark was only audible to the pair of them. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Andrea was balling her fist when suddenly Tom was between them, pushing her back towards their table.

“Come on, Andrea, he’s not worth it.”

“That’s right, let the mummy’s boy rescue you,” called Chadwick, as Tom still attempted to hold Andrea back.

Tom froze before swinging slowly round to Chadwick, an icy expression on his face. “What did you call me?”

“You heard me, *mummy’s boy*,” repeated Chadwick, “It’s true though isn’t it? I can’t say as I can blame the Colonel for not wanting to be associated with someone like you, I think I’d disown you too if you were my son.”

Suddenly Tom flew at Chadwick, surprising Andrea with how quickly he had gone from being the one trying to stop any potential fight to the one instigating it. The two men tumbled to the ground as they wrestled with one another, raining in blows on each other where they could. Andrea attempted to reach down and grab Tom, though it was difficult to get hold of just one of them with all the flailing limbs. In the end she yanked them both to their feet and shoved Chadwick from Tom. As the man staggered backwards, Tom was all for going for him again and Andrea had to wrap her arms around Tom to stop him.

“I’ll have you!” shouted Tom pointing at Chadwick as he struggled in Andrea’s grasp.

“Any time!” replied Chadwick, dabbing at his lip where it had got cut.

“Tom!” cried Andrea, trying to get his attention, “Just leave it. Remember, ‘he’s not worth it’”

Tom looked to her, before relaxing his attempts to get free. “All right, all right, you can let go.”

Andrea released him, for the first time seeing that they had gathered a small crowd with the fracas. “Let’s just get on with our game,” she suggested.

“I don’t really feel like playing now,” said Tom, immediately walking off for the door.

Andrea glanced at Harry and Lister in bemusement before giving chase. She managed to catch Tom before he'd gotten too far down the corridor outside the rec room.

"What was that all about?" she asked, keeping pace with him as he continued to stride along.

"Nothing," he stated firmly.

"It didn't seem like nothing. It seemed more like he hit a nerve. He appears to have an uncanny knack for doing that I've noticed"

Tom stopped, turning towards her and sighing. "Damn, I can't believe I let him rile me like that," he said, shaking his head.

This sounded all too familiar to Andrea. "Don't beat yourself up," she said, placing a consoling hand on his shoulder, "He's an arsehole. I know how he can get to you with that annoying look and his snide comments."

"Still I should be able to resist the temptation to whack him," Tom said ruefully, "I guess it still pisses me off, about my dad."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"Oh, it's all a big fat mess, hardly worth talking about. The thing is, Chadwick was right, my dad doesn't want to have anything to do with me."

Andrea was reminded of the situation with her own parents, though she didn't think the cause of Tom's obvious estrangement could be the same.

"Is that because of..." Andrea searched for a diplomatic way to express it, "...what you did before you came here?"

"You mean is it because I was a crook?" asked Tom with a sardonic laugh, "It's all right, you don't have to sugar-coat it. That is partly the reason, yes, but our relationship was pretty much non-existent before that anyway."

Tom waited for a soldier to walk past them before he continued on. "To tell you the truth I've not seen much of him since I was ten years old. He and my mum split up then and I went to live with her. She thought I didn't know why, but I wasn't too young to know what an affair was, and that my dad was having one."

"I'm sorry," said Andrea, "It must have been hard, finding that out."

"Yeah, well, I didn't exactly hold much respect for him after that, so I didn't really care if I saw him or not. He was pretty busy with his military career anyway, so it was basically just me and mum. She did her best, but I guess it was tough for her bringing up a teenage son without a strong male role model. I just sort of slipped into crime – I'm sure you've heard the tale a thousand times yourself. It starts off with a

bit of shoplifting, onto some more serious nicking, maybe a bit of car theft and then you're on the slippery slope."

Andrea nodded. She *had* heard similar tales a fair few times in her police career. "You eventually got arrested though?"

"Yeah, so any faint chance of a reconciliation was pretty much blown out of the water by that, the embarrassment of the great Colonel having a son in prison."

"But you're here now," noted Andrea, "Are you sure he didn't have some hand in that, considering he's the one ultimately in charge?"

"I didn't think so, but now you mention it..." pondered Tom.

"Maybe you could find out who arranged for you to come here?"

"I guess so," Tom allowed, still unsure.

"What have you got to lose, unless you don't want to make up with him?"

Tom rubbed wearily at his face. "I'm not sure what I want."

"I can understand that," said Andrea sympathetically, "My own relationship with my parents is pretty strained and I'm not sure what I would do if they suddenly extended an olive branch. Your father's coming this week isn't he? Maybe you could speak to him then?"

"I think that might be a bit soon," said Tom hesitantly, "I'll think about it. You won't tell anyone else about this will you?"

"Of course not," said Andrea sincerely.

"Thanks, you're a good friend," he said warmly, offering up a small smile. "Now how about some lunch? That is if you can resist dismantling any more of the messhall?"

Andrea smiled too, relieved that he was joking again. "I'm sure I can control myself," she agreed as they headed into the canteen.

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The Major walked down the corridor, annoyed that there was yet another troublesome incident to contend with. As if dealing with the fire and the subsequent investigation wasn't bad enough, now it was fistfights in the rec room. She realised that none of this would be helping her tenuous hold on her job. She'd already spoken to Lieutenant Chadwick and Tom about it, but they'd been evasive as to the cause, both men refusing to place any blame on the other. She suspected that was down to misplaced male pride or honour, though the latter seemed doubtful in the Lieutenant's case.

In the hope of some enlightenment, she'd found herself heading to the section of the second floor dedicated to the superhuman's quarters. One thing she had been able to garner was that amongst those present during the fight was Andrea. In fact by all accounts she had been the one to break it up. The Major hoped her desire to calm the situation might extend to filling the Major in on the details.

It was now evening so she knew the young woman would most likely be in, having finished for the day. As the Major entered the secure area she heard the familiar sound of rock music drifting along from Tom's room. She really wished he would use some headphones from time to time. As if somehow sensing that desire, the music suddenly cut off. Only now she could hear music of a completely different kind.

It was classical music, the faint strings of a violin to be exact. The Major didn't know enough about that sort of music to be able to recognise the tune, though it was certainly hauntingly beautiful. Subconsciously she stopped to listen for a moment to the lilting melody. Only after she'd been standing in the corridor for a minute did she realise it was coming from Andrea's quarters. She would never have had Andrea down as a classical music lover, and she didn't recall seeing many cds of that type in the collection she'd got a brief glimpse of last time she was in the other woman's room.

As the Major rang the chime on the quarters the music abruptly ceased before Andrea opened the door. She was out of her daytime training gear, in some of her own clothes, and the Major noted that for once she wore her hair down, the blonde strands falling just below her shoulders.

"Major, what can I do for you?" Andrea had looked surprised briefly before a smile flickered across her face.

"I was hoping I could have a word."

"Of course, come in," said Andrea, gesturing her inside.

The Major entered the room, deciding it was probably best to remain standing since it was a fairly official visit. As Andrea closed the door, the Major was just opening her mouth to speak when something caught her eye, completely making her lose track of what she was going to say. Sitting on the coffee table was a violin.

"Are you all right?" Andrea asked, having noted how the Major had gone quiet.

"What?" said the Major, her eyes swinging back to the young woman. "Oh yes," she added, trying to get her mind back in gear again. She couldn't help glancing back over at the table. "That was you playing?" she asked, still not quite able to grasp the fact.

Andrea laughed, crossing over to pick up the delicate instrument. "I know it was a bit off, but I haven't practiced for a while."

“Off?” said the Major incredulously, “It sounded pretty damn good to me; I thought it was a cd when I heard it outside.”

Andrea smiled sheepishly at the compliment. “It could have been better,” she insisted, “I guess I like to strive for perfection.”

The Major didn't quite know how Andrea could improve on the wonderful playing she'd heard, but decided to defer to the young woman's obviously greater knowledge on the subject.

“It seems like I've managed to find something else about me you didn't know, though,” added Andrea in amusement, studying the Major's still somewhat bemused expression.

“Indeed,” agreed the Major, watching Andrea place the violin carefully away in its case. Just before she closed the lid Andrea ran her fingers softly along the polished wood, as if she was giving the instrument a farewell caress.

The Major only realised she was staring when Andrea swung back round and she was forced to look up at the young woman. “Well, why did you think Tom called me Sherlock?” asked Andrea, having seemingly missed the study.

“Sorry?” said the Major, her confusion deepening, “I just assumed that was the detective connection.”

“That's part of it, but the other thing Sherlock Holmes was famous for, besides the pipe and the hat, which I don't own by the way, was his violin playing.”

“Of course,” said the Major, “I never thought Tom would give quite so much thought to a nickname.”

Andrea shrugged. “Anyway, what was it you wanted?”

The Major had almost forgotten she'd come there with a specific purpose. “Right, yes,” she said, trying to get her mindset right after the distraction. “I wanted to ask you about the incident in the rec room earlier today.”

“By 'incident' I presume you mean the fight between Chadwick and Tom?”

“Yes, I've spoken to both of them about it, but they weren't very forthcoming.”

Andrea was eyeing the Major suspiciously now. “So why are you asking me about it?”

“You were there weren't you?” the Major stated evenly.

“So were lots of other people,” noted Andrea, still seeming rather wary, “Have you been round to see all of them too?”

“No,” admitted the Major, thinking to herself that perhaps it could seem a bit strange that she had picked Andrea of all the potential witnesses. She wasn’t entirely sure of her reasoning herself. “So do you know what it was about?” she asked, getting back to the point.

“It was...personal.”

“Well, I didn’t think it was over the weather,” said the Major, somewhat exasperated. “What sort of personal?”

“I don’t think it’s up to me to say, maybe you should ask your Lieutenant again?”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” asked the Major, not sure she liked the implication.

“Nothing.” Andrea’s eyes had flicked away as she said it.

“If you have some sort of problem with Lieutenant Chadwick I want to know.”

“Besides him being a wanker, you mean?”

The Major exhaled slowly. Though she personally didn’t care for the man, she couldn’t allow her subordinates to be slandered so. “Unless you have a specific grievance I would thank you not to refer to the Lieutenant in that manner.”

“These are my quarters aren’t they?” said Andrea obstinately, “I’ll call him whatever the hell I like. Arsehole. Dickhead. Twat. I can’t quite decide which is most appropriate.”

“Andrea,” said the Major warningly, “This is not helping matters.”

“Oh sorry, should I be helpful like the Lieutenant? Winding people up and watching them explode.”

The hostility evident in Andrea’s tone made the Major think they weren’t necessarily discussing Tom any more. “Has he done something similar to you?”

“No,” replied Andrea quickly. Maybe a bit too quickly, considered the Major.

“Are you sure?” The Major found herself more than disturbed by the thought that Chadwick was antagonising Andrea in some way.

“Of course I’m sure,” stated Andrea defensively.

The Major recognised that they weren’t getting anywhere fast with the current direction of the conversation. In an attempt to ease the tension she sat down on one of the sofa chairs, putting her below Andrea’s eye-line and encouraging the young woman to follow suit, which she duly did.

“Look, I know Lieutenant Chadwick can be a bit...abrasive in his approach,” allowed the Major, deliberately lowering the tone of her voice to a more gentle one, “But he’s still a good and loyal officer. If, however, he were abusing his position in some way, I would want to know about it. So I’ll ask you one more time, is there anything I should know?”

Andrea regarded her silently, her eyes holding the Major’s gaze. As the blue eyes observed her the Major got the sense that Andrea was weighing up what she could say, making the Major think there definitely was something going on.

“No, there’s nothing you should know,” Andrea said finally.

The Major sighed disappointedly – she could only ask so many times. She hoped that eventually Andrea would tell her the truth. “Fine,” she said, “But if you do think of anything, you know where I am.”

.....

The Major closed the door to her office, finally glad to be free of Colonel Parsons and able to look forward to a much more pleasant evening. The Colonel had been as suspicious as she was as to the cause of the fire the previous Wednesday, agreeing with her that the disabling of the alarm and sprinkler system was too coincidental for it to be an accident. Unfortunately the investigation had not yielded anything telling and they were pretty much at a dead end, no nearer finding out why the fire had been set and who had done it. Though her superior hadn’t directly said anything, she could feel the pressure was on her to ensure there weren’t any more ‘accidents’.

She resolved not to think about that for a few hours at least, as she walked down to the ground floor, looking forward to seeing her friend Sophie McAllister. Somehow Sophie had managed to swing being part of the Colonel’s party, though quite how the Major didn’t know – she wasn’t even in the same corps. No doubt Sophie would fill her in on her powers of persuasion when she saw her. The Major was nearly at the lobby when she found herself waylaid by a call.

“Major!”

The Major swung round to see Andrea hurrying after her. There was a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead and around the neckline of her dark green t-shirt, making the Major think she had come straight from a training session. “Andrea? Is there something wrong?”

“What? Oh, no, I just wanted to speak to you,” explained the other woman.

The Major’s brow creased slightly, wondering at Andrea’s urgency if all she wanted was a word. Now Andrea had stopped before her she could see the individual beads of sweat on her skin, watching one slowly slip down Andrea’s cheek and on down her neck, finally sliding down beneath the edge of her shirt. The Major’s eyes continued tracking its imaginary course, though she only got as far as Andrea’s chest before she realised it was her turn to say something. She quickly swung her eyes back up again.

“Fire away then.” She wondered why her voice had come out quite so huskily, she certainly hadn’t intended to speak like that.

The Major looked on in surprise as Andrea shifted anxiously before speaking herself. She found it hard to believe that there was anything Andrea was nervous about saying, normally she had no trouble speaking her mind.

“I just wanted to say sorry,” said the young woman, “About last night in my quarters. I shouldn’t have got annoyed like that, you only wanted to know what happened. I’m only sorry I couldn’t tell you. Tom did confide in me as to the reasons behind the fight, but I hope you understand that I can’t break that confidence.”

The Major was taken aback by the apology, not having expected it at all. “I guess I can understand that,” she agreed, “You wouldn’t be much of a friend if you discussed his private business with just anyone.”

“I don’t think of you as just anyone, though,” said Andrea quietly.

The Major wasn’t sure she was even supposed to have heard the comment, and she looked at Andrea quizzically, wondering exactly what it meant. Before she could ask, though, she was summoned for the second time, only this time it was much less formally.

“Kate Jarvis! There you are!”

The Major glanced over her shoulder to see Sophie approaching with a huge smile on her face. Without any regard for propriety she wrapped the Major up in a hug when she reached her. The Major eventually managed to extricate herself, acutely aware that Andrea was still standing right next to them. Glancing over at the young woman she caught a brief flash of something she didn’t quite recognise on Andrea’s face. It appeared to be a mixture of suspicion and quite possibly dislike, though why Andrea would have such a reaction to Sophie, the Major didn’t know.

“I better be going,” said Andrea, uncharacteristically not meeting the Major’s eye and then hurrying back the way she had come before the Major could say anything further.

“Oops, I certainly seem to have stood on someone’s toes,” said Sophie, watching the departing Andrea.

“I’m sorry?” queried the Major, staring at her friend uncertainly.

“Tall, blond and gorgeous,” Sophie remarked, tilting her head in the direction Andrea had gone.

The Major realised Sophie was referring to Andrea, though didn’t know what else it was she was trying to say.

“Oh come on, Kat,” said Sophie, rolling her eyes at the Major’s persistent confused look, “She fancies you!”

“What, Andrea?” cried the Major incredulously, “Don’t be ridiculous!”

Sophie lifted her eyebrows. “Ridiculous is it? Is that why she was giving me the evils and sizing me up as the competition?”

“She was not,” stated the Major as if it were the most preposterous thing in the world, “You’re letting your imagination run wild. She was probably just a little wary because you’re a stranger round here.”

“Sure,” said Sophie disbelievingly, “I’m telling you I know jealousy when I see it and that was a first class case of the green eyed monster.”

The Major shook her head, realising Sophie just didn’t know Andrea well enough to be able to assess her behaviour. “Don’t be silly,” she said, “Andrea is not interested in me as anything other than her commanding officer and maybe a friend, that’s it.”

Sophie was nodding her head in a doubtful way. “Uh-huh.”

“Stop it,” the Major warned her.

As was her way, Sophie disregarded the friendly caution and continued on anyway. “You just don’t realise the affect you have on us poor gay girls do you? I’m right that she’s gay aren’t I?”

“I don’t pry into the sexual orientation of my operatives,” said the Major evasively.

Sophie fixed her with her dark eyes, waiting for the real answer.

The Major sighed, knowing that the other woman wouldn’t let it go until she had one. “Oh all right. Yes, she is gay.”

“Ah-ha, I knew it!” cried Sophie in triumph, “Another direct hit for the old gaydar.”

“But that doesn’t mean she ‘fancies’ me,” added the Major quickly, “Just because she’s gay and I’m a woman!”

“If you say so,” said Sophie, stroking her chin lightly, “Well, if you’re not interested maybe I’ll give it a go?”

The Major couldn’t help the brief choking noise that erupted from her mouth. She had to clear her throat before she could speak. “Seriously?”

Sophie had a look of intense amusement on her face now. “Now who’s jealous?” she remarked pointedly.

“You think I’m jealous?” asked the Major, her face a mask of bewilderment.

“You aren’t?” asked Sophie, her eyes scanning the Major the whole time, “I would say that slight blush on your face along with the way your voice crept up ever so slightly despite your best attempt to cover it up would indicate that you are.”

The Major made sure her tone was completely even before she answered. She was sure it hadn’t done any of the things Sophie said, but it was best to be careful. “Now you really are being fanciful,” she stated calmly, “I’m just concerned for one of my operatives left to your tender mercies.”

Sophie laughed. “You make me sound like some sort of wanton hussy, I’m sure she’s a big girl and can take care of herself. Just a shame she’s not really my type. Plus she seems to have her eyes set on someone else anyway.”

“Will you stop saying that?” exclaimed the Major, getting annoyed by the teasing now.

“Oh, of course, silly me,” said Sophie, ignoring the Major’s discomfort, “I forgot you’re the regular straight girl aren’t you. And you don’t find her the least bit attractive...are you sure you’re even alive?”

The Major evaded the question, not even wanting to consider it. “What is this, are you recruiting for the gay cause again or something? Haven’t got enough members already so you need to start trying to convert the straight people?”

Sophie smiled wickedly. “You can’t blame a girl for trying, I’m hoping I might wear you down eventually.”

“Sorry, I’m still straight and even if I weren’t, there would be nothing going on with Andrea – she’s under my command for a start.”

“Like that’s stopped you in the past!” scoffed Sophie.

“And look where that got me,” the Major reminded her.

The comment finally managed to stymie the other woman, both of them knowing how disastrous the Major’s brief relationship with Adam had been. She didn’t want to even think about him anymore and decided to close off the subject there and then.

“Believe me, I’ve learnt the hard way that command and love life do not mix.”

“Ok, sorry for raking up old wounds,” said Sophie with honest apology.

“Forget about it,” the Major said dismissively, “Now let’s go have a drink and you can fill me in on the sordid details of your life instead.”

.....

Andrea stood out on the windswept grass of the island, waiting with the other superhumans for their training session to start. It was a reasonably warm May morning, but not yet warm enough for them to discard their jackets as they stood on the exposed ground. As the breeze whipped at her face and flicked a few strands of hair across it, Andrea couldn't help her mind drifting back to the brief conversation with the Major the evening before. Of course, she knew it wasn't the content of the conversation that bothered her, it was the other woman who had turned up and interrupted them. Andrea wondered who the dark-haired woman was. She certainly seemed to know the Major pretty well if the hug they had shared had been anything to go by. As she pondered that, Andrea was surprised by the hosility she felt towards someone she didn't even know.

Luckily, the other three were chatting amongst themselves as normal, providing her with at least some distraction from her troubling thoughts.

"I'm telling you, they're getting us ready for something," said Harry animatedly.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," said Tom with a sigh, "Have you been reading those comic books again? We're not the X-men you know."

Harry wasn't being put off easily though. "You may laugh, but just you wait – we'll have matching uniforms before you know it!"

A cheeky smile curved Tom's lips now. "Hmm, now you're talking," he remarked, casting his eyes over Tardelli who stood next to him, "I could just see you in a skin-tight leather cat-suit."

Tardelli laughed at him. "Only if you agree to wear one too," she replied.

"Hey, I'm willing to give anything a go," insisted Tom.

Their laughter was interrupted by a jeep pulling up and disgorging the ever-surly Lieutenant Chadwick from the back of it.

"If you freaks have had quite enough fun playing around, it's time for some work."

"Nice too see you too, Chaddy," said Tom sarcastically, using the nickname he knew the other man hated.

Chadwick glowered at him but didn't rise to the bait. "Right, Hallstrom, get up in the air," he ordered Andrea, "It's time for a bit of save the puck."

"Would it hurt you to ask nicely for once?" Andrea asked.

"Yes it would, now just do it before I kick your arse up there."

Andrea thought the Lieutenant's methods of motivation could use a little work, but didn't bother arguing the point. Instead she sprang into the air, soaring up to a position about a hundred feet off the ground. Once up there she stilled into a hover.

As a result of the weeks practice she could now maintain a stable position while up in the air without much direct thought.

However, as she waited for the launch of the projectile that new-found control allowed Andrea's mind to start wandering again. Images of the Major hugging the dark-haired woman swimming through her brain once more. Too late she realised the object had already been fired and flown straight past her. She could only watch as it thudded into the turf below while she remained where she was, high up in the air.

You're meant to catch the bloody thing, Hallstrom, not float around like an idiot.

Andrea ignored Chadwick's voice on the radio and tried to set her mind onto the task at hand. A small pop indicated the launch of a second projectile. She flew after it, attempting to judge its trajectory so she could catch it before it hit the ground. She was reaching out her hand when out of nowhere another image flashed through her mind. In this one the dark-haired woman's hand was stroking the Major's back as they hugged. She mentally shook herself, grasping for the object but the telling puff of earth as it thumped down showed she was too late again. Cursing to herself she landed on the ground, snatching up the sturdy projectile and flinging it off across the island in annoyance. It flew over the nearby copse of trees and disappeared from view.

"Oi, what do you think you're doing?" Chadwick was pacing across the ground towards her now, a thunderous look on his face.

"Nothing," replied Andrea turning to meet him.

"Well that was a pile of crap, Hallstrom," he said disdainfully, "But before we go again you can go and get that bloody thing back." He jabbed his finger in the direction she had dispatched the projectile.

"Oh, fuck you."

Chadwick's eyes narrowed, his hands now on his hips. "What did you say?"

"You heard," repeated Andrea with deliberate slowness, "I said...fuck...you!"

"You better watch your mouth," he snapped back before his tone lowered to a more menacing one, "We don't want any other nasty accidents do we?" Chadwick reached for Andrea's left arm and she reflexively drew it back, protecting the power regulator that lay under her jacket.

"Bastard!"

Chadwick's lips curved into a nasty smile, now he sensed he had got to her. "Aw, what's the matter, had a little tiff with your girlfriend?"

The colour drained from Andrea's face and all she could manage was a startled "What?" in response. Andrea wasn't entirely sure if Chadwick meant anyone in

particular, or if he was just generally teasing her about being gay. She realised that it was her that had jumped to the conclusion that he meant the Major.

“What’s up, she been sharing her affections has she?”

“Shut up!”

Chadwick then left it under no doubt as to who he was referring. “She’s quite an affectionate woman isn’t she, the Major, always stroking and patting people” he said sleazily.

“Wanker!”

Andrea leapt at him, just about restraining herself from using the full force she could as she punched him in the face. Then she was on top of him pummeling him in the chest. She was dimly aware of some hands grabbing at her trying to haul her off him but she shook them off in her fury. Finally she allowed herself to be pulled up, only then seeing that someone else had joined the group. A horrible plunging sensation swept through Andrea’s stomach as she saw the Major regarding her fiercely with her blue-grey eyes.

“In my office, now!”

Chadwick opened his mouth to speak.

“Both of you!” shouted the Major, swiftly turning on her heel and stalking off.

.....

Andrea stood before the desk in the Major’s office, gripping her hands firmly behind her back in an attempt to appear cool and calm, despite the fact that inside her heart was hammering wildly. Next to her was Lieutenant Chadwick, similarly standing ramrod straight his dark eyes betraying little. The Major meanwhile sat behind the large mahogany desk her eyes flicking between each one of them in turn like a lion deciding which one to pounce upon and tear to bits first.

Andrea felt about two inches tall under the withering gaze, and rather than attempting to meet it she found a point on the wall behind the Major’s head and fixed her eyes on that instead. The silence stretched on, the Major letting the pair of them stew under the intense perusal. Andrea hoped that at least Chadwick felt as uncomfortable as she did.

“So, would one of you mind telling me what that was about?”

The Major’s tone was deathly, matching the expression on her face. Despite the demand neither Andrea nor Chadwick spoke. The Major slowly rose from her chair, breaking Andrea’s resolute staring at the wall. Andrea caught a brief glimpse of the murderous look on the Major’s face before she found a new spot to look at, down on the red-carpeted floor.

“I see, suddenly everyone’s gone dumb have they?” said the Major sarcastically. Andrea sensed her coming round the table towards them, but didn’t look up. “I would expect this sort of behaviour from a couple of children, not two grown adults.”

The Major’s black-booted feet passed Andrea’s gaze and continued on to stop in front of Chadwick. Andrea risked a sideways glance to see the Major jutting her chin out as she stared up at him. Though he was a good few inches taller than her, there was no doubt who held the power.

“Lieutenant, what happened?” she asked, her tone deceptively even. Andrea got the feeling that at any minute she was going to explode at one of them.

“It was a misunderstanding, ma’am,” replied the Lieutenant. Despite her dislike for him, Andrea was impressed he could answer so calmly.

“Ah, a ‘misunderstanding’?” repeated the Major, her voice tinged with obvious doubt.

She turned from him and walked towards Andrea. Andrea thought it would be too obvious to look down again so forced herself to meet the Major’s eyes, though it took most of her willpower to hold the penetrating stare she received.

“Andrea?”

Andrea never realised quite so much could be made of just her name, but the way the Major said it demanded an answer. “The Lieutenant’s right,” Andrea replied, following the soldier’s lead, “We just got our wires crossed. It was nothing.” She was equally impressed she’d managed to keep her own voice so composed.

The Major merely pursed her lips and nodded at the answer, pacing away from both of them. Andrea allowed herself a small sigh of relief now she was out from the piercing stare. Then suddenly the Major swung round.

“What an utter load of crap!” she exclaimed loudly. Andrea actually flinched at the venom in the words, noting Chadwick had done the same next to her. “A misunderstanding? Nothing? How stupid do you think I am?” She was before them again now, and if Andrea thought the other woman’s stare had been piercing before she considered that this one could well peel paint off walls with its ferocity. “Well?”

Both Andrea and Chadwick mumbled out some sort of response in unison, along the lines of them not thinking she was stupid at all.

“Really?” barked the Major, “Because I can only assume you must think I am, if you expect me to believe this bollocks you’re spinning me.” Andrea was again taken aback by the fact that the Major chose to swear, knowing the other woman must be furious.

That was evidenced further by the way she stood with her hands on her hips, not blinking as her eyes remained on the two people in front of her. Andrea squirmed under the harsh inspection, but managed to keep her jaw firmly shut despite the urge to try and justify her actions.

Finally the Major sighed and made her way back round the desk to lower herself into her chair. “Fine, if you’re not going to tell me what’s going on, then all I will say is that you better sort this out on your own time, and quickly.” She leant forward, placing her hands deliberately together on the desk before glaring up. “If I don’t see some sort of improvement in both of your attitudes then I will be forced to take disciplinary action. Either way I do not ever want to see that kind of behaviour on my base again, is that understood?”

Andrea mumbled her affirmative response, as did Chadwick next to her.

“Now get out!”

Neither of them dared say anything further, turning immediately for the door, grateful to be dismissed at last. Chadwick’s hand was just on the handle, when suddenly the Major’s voice rang out again.

“Hang on, Andrea.”

Andrea froze where she was, her back to the other woman. Chadwick shot her a sneering look as he continued out, closing the door behind him. Andrea could feel a small prickle down her spine, sensing the presence of the Major behind her. It had been hard withstanding the Major’s ire and disappointment while Chadwick was present, but to now be left alone with the other woman filled her with an irrational dread. Andrea slowly swung back round with no small amount of trepidation. However, as she turned she saw that the Major was perched on the edge of her desk, her features considerably softened from the cold expression they had been displaying moments before. Andrea was too stunned by the shift in mood to say anything, just about managing to take a couple of steps back across the room so she wasn’t quite so far away.

The Major’s silent study went on for a couple of moments before the other woman gracefully lowered herself off the desk and crossed the carpet in Andrea’s direction. As she neared, Andrea’s heart rate increased further, while her breathing was growing ever shallower. In the end she had to take a small gulp of air, hoping it wasn’t as audible as it sounded to her own ears.

“I was hoping that maybe you might feel like saying something without the Lieutenant present,” offered the Major.

Andrea wondered if the heating in the Major’s room had been switched to high that day, because she was feeling decidedly warm under her training gear. Seeing the Major waiting expectantly for an answer, Andrea sincerely wished she could give her the truth. Yet at the same time she knew she could hardly tell the other woman that it was Chadwick’s suggestive comments that had led to Andrea losing her cool. Not when those comments were about the Major herself. However, the Major’s continued soft look really wasn’t helping matters. Andrea considered that it was far more persuasive than any of her stern ones.

In the end Andrea was forced into saying something, though it started out as an incoherent mumble, before she steeled her voice. “I...er...we...do have some differences...I’d rather not say what they were.”

The Major’s eyebrows raised ever so slightly. “Andrea?” The single word was an invite to elaborate further.

Andrea didn’t think she had ever known her name used as quite such an effective weapon, but there it was again for the second time that morning. It was short yet deadly in its potency when dealt in that manner by the other woman. It was agony trying to resist. “I promise, we’ll sort it out,” Andrea said, “It won’t disturb training again.”

The Major’s eyes now bored into her from barely a foot away and Andrea’s heart was hammering so loudly she wasn’t sure she would hear if the other woman did in fact answer. Luckily she managed to catch the words over the roaring blood in her ears. “All right, if you think you have it under control then I’ll trust you for now,” the Major conceded, “But I meant what I said to you both - I do *not* want a repeat of this. I’ve come to expect better of you.”

Andrea was infinitely sorry to have disappointed the Major and certainly didn’t want to repeat the experience. “I understand.”

The Major nodded before finally stepping away, turning for the large window on the right-hand wall. As soon as her back was turned Andrea heaved a huge inaudible sigh, relaxing the shoulders she had been holding stiffly the whole time the Major had been in close proximity. The Major was heading over towards the drinks cabinet while Andrea stood uncertainly where she was – she wasn’t sure if she had been dismissed or whether the Major was going to add something further. The Major busied herself getting a drink, and Andrea began to think that maybe she’d completely forgotten Andrea was still in the room.

“Would you like something?”

Obviously she hadn’t.

“Er...yes...water, thank you,” replied Andrea. She was certainly hot enough to require the cooling liquid.

Having poured it the Major lowered herself onto the expansive couch, placing both drinks on the table in front of her. Andrea presumed that was an invitation for her to join the other woman, so she crossed the room and sat down warily a couple of feet to the Major’s left. Rather than saying anything, though, the Major merely leant back on the cushions, regarding Andrea keenly. Andrea could feel the eyes on her the whole time she reached for her glass and took a sip of the cool water.

In the end the pressure was too much and Andrea had to say something to fill the silence. “I am sorry about earlier,” she said, “It was stupid.”

The Major pursed her lips for a moment, and Andrea wondered how much longer the other woman was going to make her squirm. At this rate Andrea thought she could well be flinging herself on the floor at the Major's feet, begging forgiveness such was the desire to receive it.

Finally the Major nodded, her hair bobbing slightly at the ends as she did. "Yes it was," she agreed, "But it's over and done with now. *It is* over and done with isn't it?"

"Yes it is," stated Andrea emphatically. She only prayed that was true, supposing she would just have to ensure she didn't rise to Chadwick's bait anymore, whatever the provocation.

"Good, because this is the last thing I need right now."

Andrea was so busy being relieved that she almost missed the signs of frustration in the Major's tone and demeanour, but not quite. "Did the Colonel give you grief over the fire?" she asked, knowing the question could be a bit presumptuous but keen to change the subject any way she could.

The Major exhaled slowly, but didn't answer the question directly. The way she turned to look out at the clouds drifting by outside was answer enough.

"Have you found anything out yet, about what caused it?" asked Andrea.

"No," said the Major, her eyes still on the overcast skies, "Superficially it seems like an accident."

"But you're not convinced?" With the Major's face turned side-on, Andrea had the opportunity to watch the other woman's reaction for once, without feeling like she was being examined herself.

The Major's eyes tightened ever-so-slightly, her lips becoming a thin line. "No," she said finally, "And this isn't the first occurrence of something like this either."

"Really?" This was news to Andrea. It seemed that there were still some things around the base that could be kept a secret.

The Major's face swung back to Andrea. "There have been a few other innocuous incidents, but put them all together..."

"And you can't help feeling it's deliberate," finished Andrea.

"Exactly."

Andrea was surprised the Major was confiding in her so, especially so soon after the other woman had been tearing a strip off her. She considered that maybe the Major felt that she couldn't confide in anyone under her command for fear of appearing weak, or maybe she just didn't trust them. To that end, Andrea wanted to clarify precisely what it was they were talking about. "So you think you have a saboteur on the base?"

“I don’t *want* to think that,” the Major said ruefully, “And maybe I’m being paranoid, but that’s what my instincts are telling me. The Colonel tends to agree too.”

Andrea digested the information, her mind coming up with a few prime suspects, one of whom had recently left the room. She wasn’t sure if that was her emotions overriding rational thought, though, it wasn’t as if she had evidence that the Lieutenant was involved in any way. “When did these incidents start?” she asked.

“About two months ago, though the recent fire was by far the most serious.”

“So just after I got here then?”

The Major’s eyes narrowed. “Do you have a point?”

“It never crossed your mind that I could be the saboteur?”

The Major’s mouth actually dropped open slightly at Andrea’s comment, a look of horror mixed with surprise crossing her face. Andrea realised she must have stunned the other woman considerably to render her speechless.

“I’m not!” Andrea quickly said, “I was just drawing attention to the strange timing. Maybe it’s even more reason to find out the truth behind my accident, there could be some sort of link.”

The Major looked doubtful. “Now you really are fishing! I told you I was looking into it, you’re just going to have to be patient.”

“I’m not very good at patient.”

“Tell me something I don’t know!” remarked the Major, making a small laugh.

Andrea laughed lightly too, glad it appeared the earlier altercation was forgotten. “All right, I’ll be patient...for now.”

It was true that the concept of waiting for someone else to act was pretty foreign to Andrea, but considering it was the Major she thought she could afford to wait a bit longer. Sooner or later, though, she knew she would be forced to do something herself if there were no results.

CHAPTER 11

Andrea managed to avoid Lieutenant Chadwick for the next couple of days, hoping that a bit of distance might give the dust a chance to settle. However, two days after their fight she got an unwelcome surprise when she arrived early for an appointment with Doc in his lab. It was just supposed to be the two of them, but as she entered the underground room a quick scan of her surroundings found Chadwick already there, fiddling with some of the equipment sitting on one of the counters that lined the walls.

“What are you doing in here?” asked Andrea, making Chadwick swing round in surprise, and quickly drop whatever it was he had been tinkering with.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you, Hallstrom,” he replied, crossing his arms defiantly. “In case you didn’t realise, you don’t run this base, even if you do have the Major’s ear.”

“And you don’t run it either,” countered Andrea, “Even if you like to think you’re some bigshot.”

“I should do, though. You’d find things were a bit different with me in charge. I certainly wouldn’t have let you get away with attacking me the other day, that’s for sure. I guess the Major has her favourites though.”

Andrea could feel her blood starting to boil. It wasn’t so much what Chadwick said, it was the entirely condescending way he delivered his remarks that got her goat. She clenched her fists to clamp down on her anger, remembering the promise she had made to the Major two days previously.

“What’s up?” asked Chadwick, “A bit too close to the mark?”

“Maybe the Major appreciates people she can rely on,” suggested Andrea, “Rather than back-stabbing wankers?”

“And you think she can rely on you?” scoffed Chadwick, “Your previous colleagues didn’t have much success in that area did they?”

Andrea’s fingers were now digging so hard into her palm that she could feel the blood starting to drip between them. Luckily for her and Chadwick the door swung open at that moment and Doc entered the lab, immediately sensing the tense atmosphere.

“Andrea? Lieutenant? What’s going on?”

Andrea took a few steps away from Chadwick, hiding her hands from Doc in the process. “Nothing, I think the Lieutenant was just leaving.”

Chadwick shot her a last disparaging look before he made for the door, stopping to speak to Doc before he left. "Be careful what you say, Doc," he whispered loudly as he leant close, "She's liable to attack you for no reason."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," replied the be-spectacled man, "Though I think it's just you that has that effect. In fact I think you prompt that reaction in a lot of people."

Chadwick sneered down at the smaller man, but didn't respond, instead stomping from the room. Andrea tried hard to stifle her snigger until the door closed after him.

"Was he giving you trouble again?" asked Doc, crossing over to join Andrea.

"Again?" queried Andrea warily.

"Well, there was that altercation during the pool game on Monday," outlined Doc, "And I heard about the fight outside two days ago."

"Right," noted Andrea, calmer now she realised that was all he was talking about. "It's nothing I can't handle, he just likes to stir things. Anyway, what are we up to today?"

The Doc frowned briefly at her avoidance of further discussion, but let it go. "We're going to be studying your energy conversion rates."

"Sounds fascinating," said Andrea jokingly.

"Yes, well, you can't always be flying around outside. If you'd take a seat on the bed?"

Andrea hopped up onto the mattress as Doc explained his experiment further. Apparently he was going to stimulate the energy conversion in her cells by attempting to draw off some of her energy so it need to be replaced by her natural ability to convert energy from ambient light. He outlined how he had been working on a way to safely access the energy held in her body for a while, and that this was the first trial run of his new device. It didn't look like anything particularly special to Andrea, an innocuous looking steel box, about the size of a microwave oven, with a set of controls atop it. In order to siphon off the energy, Doc inserted a small needle just under the skin of Andrea's right arm, taping it down with some surgical tape. The exposed end trailed three wires to the device that Doc had wheeled over. Leading from the other side of the box were some more wires, attached to Doc's computer that he had also positioned close to the bed on it's movable trolley. He attached a few more sensor pads to various points on Andrea's body before settling down in front of his screen.

He ran a careful eye over the controls. "Right, I'm going to start slowly. Let me know if you feel anything odd straight away."

Andrea nodded and he flicked the switch on the device, a series of green lights indicating it was active. For the first couple of minutes or so it just caused a dull tingling in Andrea's arm, around the area where the needle was affixed. It was

certainly nothing that she couldn't handle and she sat on the bed watching Doc looking with interest at his computer monitor.

"I'm just going to increase the power slightly, ok?" he asked, glancing up at her to verify the request. "Let me know if it starts to feel at all uncomfortable."

"All right," said Andrea with a nod.

Doc touched a couple of buttons on the device by the bed, swivelling back to his monitor afterwards. Andrea felt an immediate surge in the degree of the pulsing generated through the needle. The tingle was extending down her arm now and out across her chest. Since Doc seemed so transfixed, Andrea waited for a couple more minutes before bothering him. Only when she found that she was having trouble breathing did she decide she really had to say something.

"I think maybe we should stop now," remarked Andrea, through clenched teeth.

Doc's eyes flicked up, having heard the slightly pained tone in her voice.

"Bloody hell, Andrea," he said, shooting up from his seat, "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

He tapped at the controls, a confused expression creasing his brow as it beeped uncooperatively at him.

"Now would be a good time," Andrea said anxiously. The pounding had worked its way up into her head now, and she was starting to feel dizzy and not a little nauseous.

"It won't shut off!" cried Doc, thumping the metal casing in annoyance.

Andrea had a flashing thought to pull the needle out of her arm, but the room was spinning rather unhelpfully making it hard to focus, let alone lift any of her limbs.

The next thing she knew she was staring up at the white ceiling. She didn't recall ending up on her back and she blinked a couple of times to try and clear her fuzzy thoughts. Then there was a hand on her bare arm, squeezing it gently. She thought Doc was being rather forward and turned her head to tell him so only to be met, not by the bald-headed scientist, but by a pair of concerned blue-grey eyes.

"How are you feeling?" asked the Major softly.

Andrea tried to sit up, but the pounding in her head returned as she lifted it off the pillow forcing her to sink back down onto it, letting out a small involuntary groan.

"Easy," said the Major, a mild chastisement in her tone. "Doc," she called over her shoulder, "She's awake."

The scientist hurried over, easing the Major out the way as he reached the bed. A look of relief was evident on his face. "Thank goodness! You gave me quite a scare there," he said, checking on Andrea's vital signs as he fussed around her.

The Major had taken a step back now, to give him room to work, though she still hovered in Andrea's view, watching Doc with no small anxiety. It crossed Andrea's mind to wonder exactly what the Major was doing there. *Had Doc called her? If so, why? And how quickly had she come?* All the questions seemed rather inappropriate to voice out loud at that moment.

"She seems to be ok," Doc informed the Major after completing his checks.

"Is that why my head's pounding like I've had a bad Saturday night out?" asked Andrea sardonically.

"I'll give you something to help with that," he replied, disappearing off to one of the supply cabinets on the far wall.

Andrea risked trying to raise herself again, finding the Major's hand on her arm once more, helping her up into a sitting position. The fingers felt hot on her bare skin, though she wasn't entirely sure if that was because she was cold after passing out, or if it was just her imagination.

"Thanks," she said as she shuffled up the bed.

The Major smiled back at her. It seemed to Andrea that she was being studied even more intently than normal. "Doc was right," the Major said, "We were worried. You're sure you're ok?"

'We' were worried? Andrea repeated wonderingly in her mind. Before Doc had just referred to himself, but it seemed he wasn't the only one who had an interest in her well-being.

"Yes, I'm fine really," Andrea reassured her.

The major nodded, a contemplative expression crossing her face. Andrea got the distinct impression she was going to say something more, that thought being borne out when the Major made to speak again. "I..."

"Here we go, this should help with the headache."

Andrea could gleefully have slapped the doctor at that moment. She was convinced that the Major had been about to say something important, surprised by the degree of frustration she felt at not knowing what it was. Realising the moment was gone she offered up her arm to the man who was completely unaware he had disturbed anything.

"So what happened?" she quizzed him as he injected the pain-relieving drug.

"I wish I knew," he replied ruefully.

"Just another random accident?" offered Andrea, making sure she caught the Major's eye as she said it.

The Major looked displeased at the suggestion. “We don’t know that there’s anything suspicious about this,” she reasoned, “You did say this was a new piece of equipment, Doc? So it could have just been a malfunction.”

“It could have,” he allowed, “But I did test it thoroughly before I used it on Andrea.”

“Of course, I wasn’t insinuating you would do anything to jeopardise Andrea, just that testing something and the real thing can sometimes yield different results.”

“That’s reassuring to know,” interjected Andrea, “Just another day at the office for us guinea pigs then?”

The Major rolled her eyes in Andrea’s direction. “You know we don’t think like that. All I’m saying is that accidents can happen sometimes. I still want Doc to go over his device with a fine-tooth comb, to check for any signs of tampering.”

Something suddenly occurred to Andrea. “Lieutenant Chadwick was in here when I arrived. I’m not sure what he was up to, but he appeared surprised to see me.”

“Was he doing something to Doc’s equipment?” the Major asked, her brow creasing at the disturbing implication that her subordinate might be involved in some way.

“I’m not really sure,” Andrea answered, trying to recall exactly what Chadwick had been doing. “He had his back to me when I came in – he was over at the bench there.”

“What do you keep there?” the Major asked Doc.

“Nothing to do with this device,” he answered, “It’s something else I’m working on for Dr Todd.”

“But he could have done something to this before I got here,” Andrea posited, holding up the coloured wires of Doc’s device that now hung loose at the bedside.

“Possibly,” allowed the Major doubtfully, “But it would be pretty stupid to come and sabotage something with someone to witness it. Are you sure you’re not letting your personal disagreement with Lieutenant Chadwick cloud your judgement?”

“I’m just saying what I saw,” Andrea stated. The Major’s reluctance to believe ill of her officer confirmed to Andrea that she had been right not to mention the previous encounter with Chadwick in her quarters.

“And I will look into this,” asserted the Major, “But since we don’t have any evidence one way or the other at this stage I don’t want any kind of unfounded accusations circulating, is that understood?”

“Perfectly,” replied Andrea.

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Having been given the rest of the day off, Andrea headed back up to her quarters to try and relax. She unsuccessfully attempted to play her violin, but her mind was too distracted to concentrate properly. She thought that old Mrs Chambers would be spinning in her grave if she could hear the sounds that passed for music emanating from the strings. That was assuming Mrs Chambers was actually dead by now, which Andrea thought highly likely considering the violin teacher must have been about eighty when she used to teach Andrea as a child.

In the end Andrea settled for some mindless gaming on her playstation instead. However, even slaughtering an army of zombies or racing round the streets of Monte Carlo didn't really help ease her mind.

Her thoughts kept coming back to the lab and she couldn't help thinking that Chadwick was somehow responsible for what had happened to her. She knew she only had the fact that he had been present prior to the accident as any sort of evidence, and considered that she could be letting her personal feelings get in the way as the Major had suggested. Thinking of the other woman she realised the fact that the Major had seemed to discount her suggestion was more troubling to her than what had actually happened.

Dumping the console's control pad on the floor she took a swig of her Pepsi. The phone sat invitingly before her and she decided she'd call one of her outside friends, to give her a chance to connect with the real world for once. A quick check of her watch verified that it was late enough to find someone at home. Picking up the cordless handset, she deliberated over who to call for a second before her fingers punched in the number she knew off-by-heart.

"Hello?"

"Hi Meg, it's me."

"Andi? It's good to hear from you. How have you been?"

"Not too bad. I just thought I'd give you a call, catch up on the gossip from home."

"Feeling a bit out of it?"

"You could say that, so what's been happening back in London?"

"Oh my god!" said Meg suddenly, *"Actually I'm glad you called, I heard something worrying from Mike, you know Maria's partner."*

Andrea was alert and on the edge of her seat now. "What? What did he say?"

"Well, he was a bit drunk at the time," noted Meg warily, *"So I don't know how true it was or if it was just him spouting off."*

"Just tell me what he said...please."

There was a moment's hesitation on the other end before Meg spoke. *"Well, he was saying he wasn't sure Maria's death was an accident."*

"What?" cried Andrea, shocked.

"I know, freaky, huh?"

Andrea was having trouble taking it in. "And did he say what made him think that?"

"Not much that made sense, though he seemed pretty adamant. Most of it centred around the fact that Maria was investigating something on the side. Something that she hadn't even told him the details of, all very hush, hush by all accounts. He reckoned she'd stumbled on something she shouldn't have."

Andrea was silent, struck dumb by the implication of Meg's words. This secret thing Maria had been investigating, it was the warehouse incident, it had to be. Which meant that if what Mike said was true then Andrea had gotten Maria killed.

"Andi?" came Meg's voice again, *"Are you still there?"*

"Y-yes, I'm here," stuttered Andrea quietly.

Meg couldn't fail to pick up on the shift in Andrea's mood. *"Are you all right?"*

"I...I need to go now."

"Andi?"

Andrea quickly hung up without even saying goodbye, the phone slipping from her hand to clatter noisily onto the coffee table. She couldn't talk to Meg at that moment, her mind was reeling too much for what she'd just learnt. She felt sick inside knowing she could have indirectly sent Maria to her death. All she could do was cling wishfully to the notion that Mike had got it wrong, that in his grief he'd concocted a fanciful scenario to justify a seemingly random, pointless death. Yet deep-down Andrea couldn't help the gnawing doubt that he could well be right.

She got up, wandering dazedly to the window, leaning her head heavily on the cool glass. The last light of day was fast disappearing over the bleak landscape of the island and Andrea felt a similar sinking sensation in her stomach.

The chime of the door broke her reverie. She glanced round at the door, supposing she could pretend she wasn't in, though knowing that a quick check with the monitoring room would verify her location to whoever was outside. Sighing she ran her fingers roughly through her hair, trying to steel herself for her visitor, hoping she could get rid of them quickly.

"Come in," she finally called.

The Major entered, her eyes swinging round the room until she located Andrea over by the window.

“Is everything all right?” the Major asked, noting Andrea’s demeanour.

“Yes,” replied Andrea shortly.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you look a little...haggard.”

Andrea shrugged. “I suppose someone trying to kill you can have that effect on a person.”

The Major ignored the barbed edge to the comment and crossed over to join Andrea by the window. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about actually,” she said, still scanning the young woman. Andrea wished her moods weren’t quite so seemingly obvious to the other woman. “Though we can leave it until morning if you’re not feeling up to it.”

“No, you’re here now, you may as well continue,” replied Andrea, thinking that was the easiest option to avoid further questions on her state of mind.

The Major eased round the edge of the sofa and lowered herself onto the cushions, crossing her uniformed trouser-legs and waiting expectantly for Andrea to join her. Andrea contemplated remaining standing to indicate she wasn’t expecting a long conversation.

“Are you going to make me get a crick in my neck, or are you going to sit down?”

Andrea walked round the low coffee table to sit at the far end of the sofa, the Major turning to face her as she did.

“Mainly I just wanted to check how you were,” she said gently, “Though I suppose I already have my answer to that,” she added her eyes sweeping over Andrea again.

Andrea sighed, trying to avoid the appraising stare by looking off at the window over the Major’s shoulder. She felt a bit bad making the Major think the earlier incident was the cause of her current bad mood. “I’m ok really, just a bit tired.”

“If you’re sure,” replied the Major doubtfully before continuing on. “I’ve spoken to Lieutenant Chadwick, by the way, he says he didn’t touch Doc’s device.”

Andrea snorted with derision. “Really. So that’s it then? Another whitewash? You lot are good at covering things up aren’t you, just like the warehouse incident.”

“You can hardly link the two things,” reasoned the Major, “And it’s not a whitewash, investigations are still ongoing. Doc’s taking his equipment apart piece by piece, when he’s finished hopefully we’ll have some answers.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” muttered Andrea, “Just like I’m not holding it for any results from your other *investigation*.”

The Major's face took on a pinched expression at Andrea's sarcastic tone. "You're hardly making me think it's worth my while continuing with it if that's your attitude."

"Oh, sorry, am I somehow meant to be grateful?" wondered Andrea bitterly. She couldn't seem to stop thoughts of what Meg had told her colouring her current conversation.

The Major paused before answering, her eyes narrowing perceptibly as she observed Andrea. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" asked Andrea, shifting her gaze away once more.

"Why are you being so antagonistic all of a sudden?" the Major asked evenly, never taking her eyes from Andrea, "I thought you were happy for me to be taking my time looking into it. I thought you understood the need for caution."

"There's taking your time, and then there's doing sod all." Andrea didn't know why she was being so short with the Major. It seemed she was just a convenient target for her repressed frustration.

The Major was doing remarkably well not rising to it, though there was an edge of annoyance creeping into her tone too. "Are you accusing me of doing nothing?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything," said Andrea off-handedly, "Why, do you have something to be guilty about?"

"Of course not!" cried the Major, before lowering her tone again, "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing. I told you I'm just fed up of your inaction."

The Major shook her head, eyeing Andrea suspiciously. "There's something you're not telling me." Her eyes travelled round the room, taking in her surroundings as she left a gap for Andrea to volunteer something. Andrea could see them passing over where the phone still sat upturned on the coffee table. "Have you spoken to someone today?" queried the Major, looking back at Andrea.

"I might have done," replied Andrea non-committally. Why she hadn't just said 'no' she didn't know.

"What did they say to you to get you this riled up?"

Andrea leapt to her feet, snatching up the phone and putting it back in its cradle. "There is such a thing as a private conversation you know!" she snapped, before walking back over to the window so her back was to the Major. She crossed her arms, standing stiffly while gazing out at the twilight.

"Sorry, I'm just concerned, that's all," came the Major's voice from behind her. "If there's something wrong I want to help."

The Major's voice had come from slightly closer the second time, making Andrea think she had got up too.

"Andrea?"

Andrea almost jumped as the Major's hand came to rest on her shoulder. She could feel the warm fingers just as earlier in the lab, the simple touch strangely comforting. Andrea exhaled slowly, letting her shoulders droop in resignation.

"It was Meg," she said quietly.

"Oh?"

Andrea slowly turned round, the Major letting her hand drop though she didn't step back. "She told me something...worrying about Maria," outlined Andrea.

Andrea explained the rest of what Meg had told her, the Major's expression growing increasingly concerned as she spoke. Even when Andrea mentioned how she had asked Meg to look into the warehouse accident for her, the Major didn't interrupt, letting Andrea finish before she spoke.

"It does sound disturbing," she conceded, "*If* what Maria's partner is suggesting is true. There must have been some sort of investigation surrounding the circumstances of her death though, which I'm presuming didn't reveal anything untoward?"

"True," agreed Andrea, "But then there are investigations and there are cover-ups aren't there?"

The Major frowned at the implication she would be the sort to know about such things.

Andrea sighed again, closing her eyes. "It's just so bloody frustrating – I need to do something!" she cried casting her hands up. "Instead I'm stuck up here on my own cut off from everything."

The Major placed a calming hand on Andrea's upper arm. "You're not on your own, you have friends here."

Andrea glanced down at the fingers that were stroking her skin almost imperceptably now. Andrea wasn't even sure the Major realised she was doing it, since she seemed to be naturally tactile, always ready with a reassuring pat here or a comforting stroke there. At least she was tactile with Andrea, the young woman not recalling seeing her touch anyone else quite so often.

Looking up into the Major's eyes she found it hard to remember what they had been talking about for a moment. Fortunately the Major continued on, relieving Andrea from the need to formulate anything to say. "I know no one could replace Maria," she said in a low husky voice, "But that doesn't mean you're alone."

“I just miss her sometimes,” confessed Andrea, “And then I start thinking of home and missing that and everyone there too. I never thought I was that attached before, but I guess we don’t always realise until we lose something. God, I even miss my bloody cat! How ridiculous is that?”

“It’s not ridiculous,” said the Major understandingly, “It’s all right, you are allowed to feel a little homesick and lonely from time to time, you were uprooted rather suddenly under trying circumstances. You can let the tough exterior drop every once in a while and we won’t think any the less of you; *I* won’t think any the less of you.”

Andrea wondered why the Major felt the need to add the extra bit on the end, touched that she had. Andrea managed a small half smile of reassurance, to let the Major know she had taken in and accepted her words.

“The thing is it’s not like I could talk to anyone back home about this even if I could see them,” Andrea noted in frustration, “What would I say? ‘Oh, by the way, I’m a mutant with super powers.’ It’s hardly the easiest thing in the world to comprehend or accept.”

“You never know though, maybe they wouldn’t be bothered in the slightest. I mean how did your friends react when you told them you were gay? I bet most of them didn’t really care, knowing that you were still the same person whatever your sexuality.”

“That’s true,” agreed Andrea, “But then there are all those people who aren’t my friends. There’s a good number of narrow minded bigots out there, who fear anything that’s different or they don’t understand. And if you think being gay is enough to alienate you from those people, then what about being a mutant?”

The Major pursed her lips contemplatively. “Or maybe it wouldn’t be so ‘bad’ in their eyes. Not that I’m justifying homophobia, but there’s a whole load of cultural and religious reasons behind it.”

“Maybe,” allowed Andrea, “On the other hand there are thousands of other gay people. How many other mutants are there? It’s not as if there’s many people to turn to for support who understand what you’re going through.”

“You have us here at the base,” offered the Major.

“No offence, but none of you know what it’s really like. You can study us as much as you like, but you don’t know what it’s like to have this thing inside you that sets you apart from everyone else, to carry the burden of these abilities.”

The Major frowned slightly. “You make it sound like a curse. There must be some good aspects to it. Isn’t it even the slightest bit wonderful to be able to do something no one else can?”

“Ok, maybe it is a bit,” conceded Andrea, “But at the same time it would be nice to be able to share it with someone, both the good and the bad.”

The Major nodded as she gazed up at Andrea. “As I’ve said before, I want to help you as much as I can. All right I may not know exactly what you’re going through, but I can try if you give me the chance.”

Andrea didn’t quite know how to respond to that. It was true that the Major had expressed similar sentiments before, but never in a sentence so littered with first person pronouns. It sounded as if Andrea was becoming something of a cause for the Major.

“Anyway, I’ll leave you to it for tonight,” said the Major while Andrea was still considering her previous words, “Try to get some sleep and we’ll speak again tomorrow about how we might move things on.”

Andrea’s eyes shot to her quizzically.

“Our own investigation,” clarified the Major, “Into the warehouse accident.”

“Ah yes, of course,” agreed Andrea, not knowing what she had been thinking of.

After the Major had left she went over their conversation again, thinking that maybe the Major was right that it wasn’t so bad being a mutant if it meant she got extra personal attention from the army officer.

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Two days later Andrea was heading back to her quarters with thoughts of bed after a long days training, the hot jets of the shower looking more inviting than ever. Entering her quarters, she went straight through to the bedroom to discard her jacket haphazardly on the bed. She was starting to peel off her t-shirt when something struck her about the room she had just come through. Pulling her shirt back down she wandered out into the living area, flicking on one of the uplighter lamps. Andrea’s mouth dropped open in surprise as the light revealed that what she thought she had seen the first time through was indeed there.

Andrea reached down to pick up her cat from where he was sitting contentedly on her sofa. “How on earth did you get here?” she asked of the tabby and white tomcat, brushing her fingers over his fur.

He merely answered by starting to purr in her arms. It was then that she saw there were a number of tins of cat food sitting on the kitchen counter along with Gerry’s bowl. She had walked over to inspect them when the chime on her door sounded.

“Come in,” called Andrea, spinning to face the door with her cat still cradled in her arms.

The Major came in, smiling when she saw the animal held close to Andrea’s chest. “Good, you found him then,” she noted, “I meant to warn you before you got here.”

“*You* brought him here?”

“Yes,” confirmed the Major, before a brief look of concern flashed across her face. “That’s all right isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” replied Andrea quickly, “More than all right. I didn’t realise pets were allowed.”

“Well, no one else has one,” the Major conceded, “At least not that I know of, but conversely there’s no rules against it. I thought it might be a small reminder of home for you.”

“It’s great, thank you.” Andrea set Gerry down on the counter top, still stroking him as she tried to gather her thoughts. “Can I offer you a drink?” she asked to give herself some more time.

“Thanks,” answered the Major, “Coffee please.”

Andrea laughed. “I hardly had to ask did I? Take a seat and I’ll bring it over,” she suggested, indicating the couch. As Andrea busied herself with the kettle she continued speaking over her shoulder to the other woman. “How did you manage to get him off Meg?”

“I called her and asked if we could send someone to pick him up. I hope you don’t mind, but I thought it would be a nice surprise for you.”

Andrea supposed she should be a bit offended that the Major had been speaking to her friends without permission. However, any minor affront was far outweighed by the pleasantly warm sensation sweeping through Andrea at the idea that the Major would want to arrange a surprise for her. Andrea had only mentioned missing Gerry as a casual comment, yet it seemed the Major had wasted no time acting upon the information.

As Andrea turned with the coffee and her own tea she was amazed to see that Gerry had sauntered over to the sofa and was now making himself comfortable on the Major’s lap. Andrea smiled to herself at the incongruous sight of the uniformed army officer with a ball of fur busily kneading her thighs.

“You can chuck him off if you like,” noted Andrea as she joined the pair of them on the sofa, setting the drinks down on the coffee table. “Though you should feel privileged - he doesn’t like to sit on just anyone.”

“In that case I better let him stay put,” said the Major, tentatively stroking him. Andrea stifled a chuckle, guessing the Major obviously wasn’t really a cat person by the way she warily eased her fingers across his back. “So his name’s Jerry then is it?” asked the Major, “Wasn’t Jerry the mouse, or is it an ironic thing?”

“What?” said Andrea, confused for a second. “Oh, no,” she laughed, as realisation dawned, “It’s Gerry, with a ‘G’, as in Gerry and the Pacemakers?”

The Major's brow creased into a dubious look. "I sincerely hope that's not who he's named after."

"Do you not like Gerry and the Pacemakers?" Andrea asked, trying to hide her smile.

The Major shot her a look to indicate she knew Andrea was winding her up. "I like 'Ferry Cross the Mersey' as much as the next person," she replied evenly.

"As long as the next person has some earplugs, right?" suggested Andrea with a wink. "But, no he's not named after them, though there is a Liverpool connection I'm afraid to admit."

"Hang on, Gerry with a 'G'?" checked the Major once more, "That wouldn't be short for Gerrard would it?"

Andrea nodded sheepishly. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, to name her cat after the Liverpool captain, and normally she never got as far as explaining where the name came from in order to feel embarrassed about it. She considered that she should come up with some other fake reason for the future – maybe the Major's cartoon character suggestion would come across better and not make her look like quite such a sad football fan.

"And I thought I was a devoted fan," remarked the Major, looking like she was about to burst out laughing at any moment, "But I've never gone to quite that extreme. Ow!"

The Major glanced down at the cat on her lap, who was now flexing his claws in her kneecap as if in silent protest about her mocking of his name.

"Here, let me take him," suggested Andrea, reaching to pick him up off the other woman's legs.

"It's all right, I was just surprised..."

The Major stopped as Andrea's hand brushed over her own. It was purely accidental, both women having been going for the cat at the same time, but to Andrea it felt like an electric shock had been discharged up her arm. She quickly retracted her hand.

"Sorry," she said, averting her eyes and trying to calm her breathing which had shallowed perceptibly. Her breathing stopped completely in the next instant when the Major took her hand again as Andrea was moving it away.

"It's all right," said the Major softly, her husky voice sending further tingles right through Andrea.

The room suddenly seemed small to Andrea, everything pressing in and focussing on the joined hands. Her eyes were fixed on them, staring as a thumb gently stroked over the skin of the back of her hand. Andrea was unable to tear her gaze away, scared to look up in case the Major decided to stop the intimate contact. At least it seemed intimate to Andrea, though for all she knew it could be perfectly normal for the Major

to touch people like that. Maybe she wasn't even aware she was doing it. Andrea, on the other hand, was acutely aware, as she was of the reactions it was evoking in her – sending her pulse rate and temperature soaring in equal measure. Finally Andrea managed a ragged breath, forcing herself to look up. Seeing the Major regarding her with soft eyes, Andrea had to take a tiny gulp. Andrea was further stunned when the Major didn't let go of her hand, even though she had been holding on far longer than was entirely appropriate for a friendly gesture.

What was the Major doing? Andrea wondered. Was she actually doing anything? Andrea considered she could be completely imagining it, that she was the only one who felt the charged atmosphere in the room.

Suddenly a loud electronic bleep broke the silence and the moment. The Major started as if she too had been caught up in thinking about something, Andrea desperate to know what that had been. The Major swiftly dropped Andrea's hand to answer the call from her communicator. As the other woman responded to it, Andrea didn't hear the words of her conversation. She was too busy looking down at her hand, brushing her own fingers lightly over where the Major's had been moments before.

“Sorry, I have to go,” said the Major, rising off the sofa and spilling Gerry from her lap.

Andrea's eyes flicked dazedly up to her. “Yes...of course...”

“Is everything ok?” queried the Major, stopping for a moment before she left when she noticed Andrea's distraction.

“Uh...yes...,” replied Andrea unconvincingly, realising she was sounding like a bumbling idiot. She had to steel herself before she spoke again, injecting some calmness into her tone. “Thank you again for arranging for Gerry to be brought here,” she said, thinking that was reasonably safe.

“No problem,” said the Major with a smile.

“Feel free to pop by and see him any time, since he seems to like you.” Andrea cringed inwardly as soon as the invite had passed her lips. Why on earth her mouth insisted on coming out with such rubbish in the Major's presence was beyond her.

“Thank you,” replied the Major, seemingly unperturbed by the offer, “I might just do that.”

Andrea tried to stop her eyebrows raising in surprise, though it felt like they were threatening to sneak right off the top of her forehead.

The Major had left the dumbstruck Andrea and was near the door now, turning slightly as her hand rested on the handle to wish Andrea a “Good night.”

“Good night,” Andrea replied automatically, thankful her mouth seemed to be working still. As the door closed, Gerry hopped up onto Andrea's lap, rubbing his

head against her hand. “Oh, now you want me do you, traitor?” she said accusingly. “Mind you I’m not sure I can blame you...” she added, glancing back off at the recently shut door.

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“Is it meant to be this dark?”

Andrea sighed, turning in the blackness to where the voice of her companion had come from. “I don’t know, Harry. I’ve done this as many times as you have, which is precisely none.”

“Didn’t you do this kind of thing in the police force though?” pressed the young man.

“I think you’ve been watching too many episodes of The Bill,” suggested Andrea, shifting uncomfortably on the hard floor where she sat, “Most police work is pretty mundane - hours of painstaking investigation and mountains of paperwork. It’s certainly not all explosions and car chases.”

“What, no hostage rescues at all?”

“I have been involved in some hostage negotiations,” admitted Andrea, quickly continuing on when she heard Harry taking a breath to speak, “But only as one of the officers on the scene. And in all those cases it was hours of sitting around followed by the suspect giving themselves up voluntarily. We certainly didn’t storm in with all guns blazing.”

“Maybe they do things differently in the army though?” pondered Harry, “It’s kind of an SAS thing isn’t it? Surprise the enemy, take them all out before they know what’s happening.”

“You really do watch too much TV you know that?” said Andrea, shaking her head, “But you could be right. Either way, it’s what we’re meant to be doing today so who am I to argue?”

Andrea could hear some stifled coughing and spluttering noises coming from next to her. She peered into the darkness but couldn’t make anything out in the pitch black.

“Are you all right?” she asked Harry.

He coughed a couple more times. “Yes, but I could have sworn I just heard you say you weren’t going to argue. A month or so ago you wouldn’t shut up moaning about these exercises – ‘it’s too cold’...’it’s too wet’...’I’m tired’...’what the hell are we doing out here’...”

“All right, all right,” interrupted Andrea, “God, you make me sound like a right whinger.”

There was the deafening sound of silence from by her side.

“That’s the point where you’re meant to leap in and say that I’m not,” she informed Harry.

“Right...” he noted, “...er...so how’s your cat?”

“How the hell did you hear about that so quick?” said Andrea in alarm, forgetting that he hadn’t done as requested. The Major had only given Gerry to Andrea the night before.

“Like you can keep anything a secret round here!” scoffed Harry.

“I’m beginning to see that,” noted Andrea ruefully. “He’s fine thank you,” she added answering the original question, “I little disoriented for now, but he’ll be roaming the halls in no time.”

“That was nice of the Major wasn’t it?” commented Harry evenly.

If Andrea could have eyed him suspiciously she would have done. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s never brought any pets in for me.”

“Do you even have a pet?”

“Well, no, but that’s beside the point.”

“Which is what exactly?” queried Andrea.

“That this is more proof that you’re the Major’s new favourite.”

“*New* favourite?” repeated Andrea, emphasising the first word.

Harry seemed reluctant to continue, stuttering out a response. “Well, there was...erm...well...maybe I shouldn’t say,” he mumbled. “Forget I said anything,” he swiftly added.

Andrea wondered what he had been referring too. Whatever it was, it seemed that some things *could* be kept a secret after all. In a way she was glad about that, since it appeared no one seemed to be aware of her propensity for night time walks round the base. Since discovering the Major on the roof nearly two weeks previously, Andrea had ended up there more than once. Each time she reasoned to herself that she liked to get out in the peaceful night air and watch the stars, and that it was nothing to do with hoping she might find a certain army Major up there again.

If that had been her aim, then it would have been successful on several occasions, the Major being on the rooftop more often than not when Andrea arrived. Each time they would share a coffee and a friendly chat about the events of the day before Andrea went back in to bed. On the nights when Andrea opened the door on an empty roof she always found herself faintly disappointed.

Hallstrom, are you and King in position?

Andrea shook herself out of her nighttime recollections to reply to Chadwick over the intercom. "Yes, we're ready to go."

Ok, King, you know what to do.

"I hate this bit!" stated Harry as Andrea sensed him clambering to his feet.

"At least it's dark," she noted, hearing the sounds of clothing being removed, "And I'm really not interested in seeing anything you have to offer anyway."

"Thanks, that makes me feel so much better," he replied sarcastically, "Just make sure you pick my clothes up!"

Andrea heard the faintest whispering noise in the dark, assuming it was the sound of Harry activating his power to alter the molecular density of his body. Unfortunately that power didn't extend to anything he might be wearing, so in order to take on the lightest gaseous form he could achieve meant removing them. The next thing she heard was the sound of a lock clicking undone as Harry undid it from the other side having slipped under the tiny crack at the foot of the door. The door swung open to reveal an empty corridor, Andrea blinking a couple of times as light flooded into the area on the dark side of the entrance.

Harry's head poked round the edge of the door, his naked shoulders just visible. "Why you can't just bash the thing down I don't know," he said in annoyance as Andrea handed him back his clothes.

"Because that would activate the alarms straight away and this is meant to be a stealthy mission at this point," she explained.

Harry continued muttering to himself as he pulled his trousers back on, Andrea taking the opportunity to glance up and down the dim corridor to check for any boobytraps or other devices. It was just a training exercise, but she still liked to do things right. She couldn't spot anything untoward, just bare concrete walls and floor stretching off into the distance. They were in a specially constructed building on the island, used for such activities by both them and the regular troops.

When Harry was finally clothed again they crept along the corridor, alert the whole time for danger. Though Andrea had denied it to the young man, the fact that she had been in the police force did give her some experience, at least more than Harry had that was for sure. Before coming to the island base he'd been working in computing, doing some mundane deskbound job. Sitting typing at a keyboard all day didn't really prepare you well for attempting to rescue hostages from hostile terrorists, even if it was only a simulation.

In the simulation the parts of the terrorists were played by soldiers on the base, while the hostages were just dummies. It was up to Andrea and the other superhumans to sneak in and then use any means necessary to secure the hostages' safety. Andrea supposed 'any means necessary' in army parlance included actually killing the

terrorists, though obviously they wouldn't be doing that in a simulation. It troubled her to think that might be expected in the real thing though, if they were ever called upon to engage in the real thing. She had used force to apprehend suspects in the police before, but never to the extreme of having to kill someone. The fact that the British police didn't routinely carry firearms made that a rarity in general.

"This is it isn't it?" Harry whispered to her, having stopped in front of a sturdy metal door.

"Yes," replied Andrea, recalling the briefing they'd received from Lieutenant Chadwick before they started.

Andrea relayed their position to Chadwick, who was running the exercise that morning, the Major busy elsewhere. She could see Harry shifting uneasily at her side as they waited for the signal to go in, suddenly struck by the similarity between the current setting and the raid on the warehouse over two months ago that had started everything. Harry even looked a bit like Walker she suddenly realised, having to shake away the unwanted mental image of the young constable dying by her side.

"Andrea!"

"What?" she queried, turning to Harry.

"That was the signal!"

"Helvete!"

Andrea leapt to her feet, berating herself for letting her mind wander. The time for stealth was over now and she kicked the door down in one easy motion, the clang as it hit the concrete echoing off the bare walls. The pair of them dashed into the room on the other side, both knowing the part they were supposed to play. Andrea was immediately up in the air, avoiding the tracer bullets being fired in her direction. They wouldn't hurt if they hit her, beyond a small sting, but any touch would signal the end of her participation. Swooping down at the fake terrorists she could see the other superhumans fulfilling their roles, Harry hardening his density this time to repel attack, while Tom zipped round the room disarming their opponents. That just left the two men holding the 'hostages' to Andrea. Landing next to them she whipped the guns from their hands before they could turn them on her and crushed the nozzles in her fists, rendering them useless. Discarding them she grabbed both men by the scruff of the neck, hoisting them effortlessly off the floor, their legs spiralling in free air.

"Do you concede?"

The men merely nodded, and she set them down, catching sight of some other activity on the far side of the room. Everyone had stopped, thinking the exercise was over, but suddenly Chadwick was behind Harry, tripping him up and then levelling his gun at Harry's head.

“Bang!” said the Lieutenant as Harry whirled round, “Look’s like you’re dead.” Chadwick now had his foot on Harry’s chest, pinning him to the ground as he loomed menacingly over him.

“All right, you can let me up now,” said a disgruntled Harry.

“Huh, what was that?” asked Chadwick, looking around the room, “I thought I heard a little voice?”

“Leave it out, Chadwick,” said Harry, trying to move the other man’s foot.

Chadwick sneered down at him. “You wouldn’t last five minutes in the real army. You lot are pathetic, my men would have you in a second.”

Andrea was next to them now, hands on hips as she stared at the Lieutenant. “Let him go, Chadwick.”

His eyes flicked to her, his sneer still curving his lips. “Here they are, the rest of the mutie band,” he said, seeing that Tom and Bel were behind Andrea too, “You lot would be a bunch of losers if you didn’t have your powers. You are with them.”

“Want to put that to the test?” challenged Tom.

Chadwick finally removed his boot from Harry so he could square up to the fair-haired young man. “Anytime! Just name the day!”

“Tom!” cried Andrea, grabbing his shoulder, “You can’t fight him.”

“Yeah,” agreed Chadwick, “The Major wants us all to be friends, and we all know how Hallstrom wouldn’t want to offend her.”

Andrea returned the nasty look Chadwick was currently shooting her.

“I didn’t say anything about a fight,” remarked Tom, “How about something more civilised – a football game, us against you lot?”

Chadwick considered it for a moment. “And no powers?”

“Yep, no powers.”

“All right, you’re on.”

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Though Tom’s suggestion had started out as a way to ease the tension with Chadwick, the rest of the base soon got wind of it and suddenly everyone was interested in who was going to win the football game, a number of books starting up on a range of topics from what the final score would be to who would be first to be sent off. Since

there were only four superhumans it was decided that the game should be five-a-side, Doc joining up on the superhuman's side to make up the numbers.

Two days after Tom's initial challenge, Andrea headed down to the indoor gym where the game was to be played still unsure who was on the other team. Chadwick had been keeping his selection a closely guarded secret, though it had been agreed that his team should include two women, to keep the sides even. Andrea dumped her bag in the changing room and headed out into the gym, noting that spectator gallery that overlooked the wooden-floored room on one side was jam-packed. Tom and Harry were already out in the middle, Harry doing some enthusiastic stretching while Tom looked on in amusement his foot nonchalantly resting on a ball. His eyes flicked up as Andrea approached.

"Oh bollocks, you're not wearing that are you?" he cried as soon as he caught sight of her attire.

Andrea looked down at her replica Liverpool home shirt, which hung loose over the top of her plain black shorts. "What? You said we were playing in red. Anyway, you can hardly talk," she added, casting her eyes at his Manchester United shirt.

"But this is the shirt of winners," he reasoned.

"Hey, we're in the final of the Champions League, that's more than your lot," Andrea teased him.

"Maybe," he reluctantly conceded, "But there's no way you're going to win it."

"We'll see."

Their debate was cut short as more people entered the room. Chadwick was at the head of a group of three other soldiers. Andrea recognised one as Chadwick's pool-playing partner, and she thought she'd met the woman down in the monitoring room once, though her name escaped Andrea at that moment. The other man she didn't know, though he was talking animatedly with Chadwick, so she could only assume he was one of the Lieutenant's cronies. They all wore white shirts, to distinguish them from Andrea's team, combined with miscellaneous coloured shorts. Next came Bel and Doc, kitted out in red, along with Dr Todd who wore black, leading Andrea to assume he was refereeing the game. Finally the doors swung open to reveal the final player.

Andrea had to do a double take of the figure in the white t-shirt and navy shorts. Her second look, confirmed what the first had told her but she hadn't quite believed – it was the Major. As the other woman crossed the room, Andrea found her eyes drawn to the Major's chest, telling herself it was the "Carlsberg" logo across it that had led them that way.

"Bloody hell," cried Tom also looking at the Major's shirt, "Why don't we all put Liverpool shirts on and be done with it?"

“I have more than one if you’d like to borrow one,” Andrea commented in Tom’s direction.

“Bugger off!” he exclaimed in horror.

The players filtered off to their respective sides ready for the kick off, Andrea finding herself staring at the Major’s retreating back, still not quite able to grasp that she would be part of the game. Andrea wondered how and why she had got involved. Was it to keep an eye on things between Chadwick and the superhumans? Maybe it was because she was friendly with Chadwick and he had asked her? Or was it just because she was competitive and liked to play football? The answers weren’t forthcoming from the white material of the back of the Major’s shirt, beneath which Andrea could make out the band of her sports bra. The whistle from Dr Todd to start the match saved Andrea from contemplating why she had noticed that last thing.

Since it was a five-a-side game the players were all over the pitch marking various other players at one time or another. Andrea received the ball from Tom, taking a moment to control it with her instep. Suddenly a tackle flew in, whipping the ball off her toes. Glancing up to see who’d been so fast in closing her down she caught sight of a brief smile from the Major before the other woman was off, dribbling the ball towards Andrea’s team’s goal.

Doc looked exceedingly nervous between the white posts as the other team advanced, the Major laying the ball off to Chadwick. When the shot came in from the Lieutenant, Doc practically leapt out the way as it sailed into the net. Chadwick was slapping hands with the others on his team as Doc glumly retrieved it.

Once the game restarted Andrea found herself with the ball again, making sure she protected it better this time. Only now the Major was right up behind her, marking her tight. It was all part of the game, the jostling and nipping at the heels, but when Andrea felt the Major’s hand in the small of her back as she balanced herself to get sight of the ball, Andrea completely lost her concentration and the ball was gone again.

“Andrea, what the hell are you doing?” hissed Tom as he ran past her to defend the attack.

Andrea ignored him and sprinted back towards her own goal too, managing to slide in and knock the ball away before the Major could shoot. Suddenly it seemed as if the game was a turning into a private battle between the pair of them. Whenever Andrea got the ball the Major was all over her and vice versa. When half time came with the score still at one up to the military team, Tom wasn’t slow in mentioning the obvious personal duel.

“What’s going on with you and the Major?” he asked, sitting down on a bench at the side of the gym and swigging from a water bottle.

“I don’t know what you mean,” replied Andrea, glancing off to where the other team were also having refreshments.

The Major was standing up, turned slightly away from Andrea as she chatted with her team-mates. She was pushing her hands through her auburn hair and putting back on the hairband that held it away from her face. The sweat was tumbling down over her cheekbones, everyone exceedingly hot due to the frenetic nature of the game. The Major's limbs all had a healthy sheen to them from the exertion, Andrea's eyes particularly drawn to her lithe legs and the cut of her thin shorts.

Tom broke her study. "Really? Is that why you're staring over there now?"

Andrea swung back to him. "I was not staring, I was just gauging how tired the opposition are."

"Ah, and you can discern that from ogling the Major's legs can you?"

Andrea didn't reply, since she could hardly deny it, instead whipping the bottle off him and taking a long cooling drink. She resolutely avoided looking at him, knowing he currently had a smirk on his face.

She didn't stay cool for long as the second half started, the gaggle of soldiers up in the viewing area cheering both teams on in near equal measure as the battling game resumed. The shouts for Chadwick's team were ever so slightly louder and more earnest, but it could have been far worse, considered Andrea. She'd imagined that most of the troops would be rooting for Chadwick, but it seemed there were others from amongst the rank and file that wanted to see him lose. Plus most of the civilian scientific staff sounded like they were supporting Andrea's side.

Tom won the ball off the other woman on Chadwick's team, who had been identified to Andrea as Private Ramis now. Seeing Tom looking for someone to pass to, Andrea started off down the wing, and Tom duly found her in space with the ball. As in the first half the Major was on her in a flash, surreptitiously grabbing a handful of Andrea's shirt on the blind side from the referee to stop her getting away. Andrea rose to the challenge this time, managing to safely pass the ball to Harry.

However, it wasn't long before Andrea's team lost the ball again and it was back with the Major. Returning the favour of moments before, Andrea was up behind her, holding on to the edge of the other woman's shirt. Attempting to turn with the ball, the Major backed right up into Andrea, her backside pressing into Andrea's groin. Suddenly Andrea was feeling a whole lot warmer, unable to blame the game this time. She actually gasped out loud at the arousing sensation of the Major's buttocks rubbing up against her. Andrea couldn't think anything sensible as she felt the warm mounds of flesh through the thin shorts, and before she knew it the Major was off leaving her standing like an idiot.

"Andrea, for god's sake - wake up!"

Andrea started at Tom's remark, hoping no one else had noticed her distraction. She began to run after the Major, but Tom stopped her.

"You take Chadwick, *I'll* mark the Major."

Andrea wasn't going to argue, knowing the Major was running rings round her at present. Andrea just seemed to lose all recollection of how to play the game when she got close to the other woman. Andrea dashed over to the Lieutenant's position, though he didn't have the ball at that moment. She stuck close to him as he tried to find space to receive a pass. With the ball on the far side of the room, Chadwick took the chance to turn and speak to her out of earshot of the others.

"See, I knew you lot wouldn't be able to hack it," he whispered in her ear.

"Sod off," she replied succinctly deciding that action would be better than words.

She had spotted that Harry had won the ball for her side and she got a pass from him now. With the Lieutenant in between her and the goal, she deftly flicked the ball between his legs, rounding him while he dazedly wondered what had happened. Crossing the ball, Andrea found Harry again who thumped the ball home to bring them with one of the other team.

"Who can't hack it now?" she commented to Chadwick as she walked back for kick-off.

As soon as the game re-started Chadwick made a beeline for her, marking her tightly as she got the ball. When it seemed like she was going to get away, he yanked roughly at her shirt, causing her to stumble to the floor. A loud blast on Dr Todd's whistle signalled that he had seen the foul, and Andrea clambered to her feet glowering at Chadwick. The Major was quickly there, interposing herself between them, maybe sensing that the game could boil over at any moment.

"Take it easy, Callum," she said to Chadwick, using the first name that Andrea had never heard before, "This is meant to be a friendly game."

He grunted and ran off to take up his position, the Major leaning closer to speak quietly to Andrea. "That goes for you too," she noted.

"Me?" said Andrea incredulously in an equally low voice, "I believe *you* were the one barging into *me*."

"That's all part of the game isn't it?" asked the Major innocently, raising her eyebrows before turning back to the match.

Andrea sighed and re-joined the game too. From the free kick the ball was played out to Bel. She side-stepped the hapless Ramis out on the wing and fired the ball back across the goal in Andrea's direction. The Major was on her again as the ball came to her feet, leaning in on her side. It took all Andrea's concentration not to let the ball slip beneath her foot when she felt the Major's breasts rubbing up against her arm with only the thin material of her football shirt to separate them from Andrea's bare skin. Andrea used her own body weight to ease the Major out the way, giving her a sight of goal that she willingly accepted – levelling the game at two apiece.

"Good shot," noted the Major genuinely.

“Thanks,” managed Andrea, trying desperately not to look down at what had been distracting her moments before.

The deadlock was maintained for the rest of the half, but as the last minute came Andrea found herself clean through with just the keeper to beat. The man was dancing across his line to try and put her off as she neared. She drew back her leg to shoot when suddenly she was clattered into from behind. Her standing leg was taken completely from beneath her, the young woman too surprised to stop herself crashing to the floor as her momentum carried her forward. The side of her face whacked into the hard floor as she fell, stunning her for a moment. Shaking her head, she was aware of a commotion behind her.

“That was an outrageous foul!” cried Tom.

Chadwick was puffing out his chest as Tom wagged his finger at him. “It was a good, honest tackle,” stated the burly Lieutenant.

“Bollocks! You could have broken her bloody leg!”

“All right, all right,” said Dr Todd, stepping between them with hands up, “I’ve blown the whistle - it’s a penalty.”

“What?” exclaimed an outraged Chadwick.

“The referee’s decision is final,” stated Dr Todd.

The three men continued their heated argument for a moment, the Major taking the chance to come over and check on Andrea. She knelt down by the young woman, Andrea trying to stop her eyes being drawn to the way the Major’s shorts now gaped open up her thigh. “Are you all right?”

Andrea attempted to force her eyes upwards while trying to engage her vocal chords. Only on the way up the close proximity allowed her to see that, with the combination of sweat and a white colour, the Major’s shirt was taking on a distinctly see-through quality.

“Andrea?” asked the Major again, “Did you hit your head hard? You seem a bit out of it.”

“Huh?” managed Andrea eloquently, “Oh, no,” she added, “I’m ok.” At least her head was ok, she considered, she wasn’t sure about her racing heart.

The Major helped her up off the floor, allowing her hand to stroke down Andrea’s arm in a final check that she was all right after her fall. The small hairs on Andrea’s arm were standing on end as the fingers left her skin. The men had finished their argument now, Tom coming towards Andrea carrying the ball.

“Do you want to take it?” he asked, “You won it after all.”

“No, you take it,” suggested Andrea. “The game was your idea, you should be the one to stick it to Chadwick,” she added with a sly smile.

Tom grinned back at her, before going to the penalty spot and placing the ball down.

“Just make sure you score!” Andrea called after him, adding a wink when he swung round at the comment.

Taking a couple of paces back, Tom ran and resoundingly thumped the ball home, turning to receive the congratulations from his team mates who were quickly upon him, hugging him and slapping him on the back. Dr Todd took the opportunity to blow the final whistle, and Andrea experienced great pleasure in seeing the dark look on Chadwick’s features now his team had lost.

The Major approached Andrea once she had disengaged herself from the ecstatic Tom, extending her hand. “Good game.”

“Thanks,” replied Andrea, taking the delicate fingers and shaking gently.

“Now I have to go console my team mates,” said the Major, casting her eyes over her shoulder at Chadwick.

Chadwick didn’t really looked like he wanted anyone to speak to him as the Major attempted it, and Andrea allowed herself a final satisfied smile before heading for the changing rooms.

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The Major wandered into the changing rooms, realising she could have just changed back in her quarters, but feeling so hot and sweaty that she’d wanted to have a shower then and there rather than wandering the corridors looking dishevelled. It seemed someone else had the same idea, as the sound of running water filtered through from the shower area. The Major glanced at the pile of clothes that sat on the bench on the opposite side of the room from her own, wondering whose they were.

Sitting down on the wooden bench, the Major had just finished undoing the laces of her trainers when the sound of the shower stopped. She was in the process of removing her shoes when Andrea entered the changing area wearing nothing but a fluffy white towel. She didn’t immediately see the Major, too busy running her free hand through her dripping blonde hair and shaking off the excess droplets. The Major’s eyes followed the young woman across the room. Her towel really was too short for someone of Andrea’s stature, considered the Major, the edge of it sitting on her smooth, white thighs.

It slowly dawned on Andrea that she was not alone, her head turning to regard the Major. “Oh, hello, decided to change down here too did you?”

Watching the beads of water still tracking across Andrea’s exposed shoulders, the Major found her mouth was suddenly dry. “Yes,” she managed to croak out.

“Don’t mind me,” said the young woman, turning to her pile of clothing so that her back was to the Major.

That was harder said the done as Andrea blithely removed her towel and started drying herself with it.

“That was a good game,” she called out over her shoulder.

The Major tried to engage her brain to say something sensible in response, but she was finding it difficult to tear her eyes away from the naked vision in front of her.

“Yes, it was,” she replied inanely, forcing her eyes down to the floor to continue removing her socks.

Andrea was still happily talking away as she dried, seemingly thinking nothing of displaying her nakedness. The Major on the other hand was getting increasingly nervous about the prospect of removing her own clothes. She didn’t know why, she had changed in front of plenty of people in the army before without feeling self-conscious about it.

“I thought you had us there,” said Andrea, “Lucky Chadwick is such an arse really - giving us that penalty because his male pride was wounded.”

The Major didn’t reply immediately, her eyes drifting upwards once more and spotting something else of interest, as if the endless legs weren’t diverting enough. In the small of Andrea’s back there was a tattoo, a small celtic design of some sort. It really was highly intricate, with the complex bands of the pattern weaving in and out of one another. The Major found herself tracing the lines with her eyes, wondering how long it would have taken to do. As she continued to study it, she found herself thinking about what it might be like to touch it too. Would it be smooth like the skin around it, or would it be a rough contrast?

Suddenly Andrea whipped round and the Major caught a brief glimpse of belly button instead before a white towel obscured it. She found it hard to hold back the flush that crept across her cheeks as she met Andrea’s querying gaze.

“Did you want something?”

“Sorry?” asked the Major, deciding it was best to play dumb, maybe Andrea hadn’t really noticed.

“You were staring at my back.”

Shit! Time for some honesty. “Um...I couldn’t help noticing your tattoo,” revealed the Major, “Does it mean something in particular?”

Andrea’s right hand darted round to her back, as if she herself had forgotten she had a tattoo there. “Oh that,” she said, “To tell you the truth I’m not sure what it means – I just liked the design.”

The Major was still finding it hard to control her eyes, the blue orbs insisting on continuing to flick down to Andrea's bare legs at every opportunity, following the curves of them as they disappeared up under the towel. All she could hope for was that Andrea hadn't noticed the scrutiny. "It's very detailed," she said, trying to stick to the subject in hand, "It must have taken a while to do."

"It did, and it was bloody painful, let me tell you. I certainly won't be in a hurry to get anymore. It just seemed like a good idea at the time, and Meg seemed to like it..."

Andrea had trailed off, looking as if she was recalling some memory or other. The Major wondered what exactly about the tattoo it was that Meg liked, suspecting it wasn't so much the design as it was location and the fact that Andrea was more than likely naked whenever she would have seen it. That thought made the Major totally lose track of the conversation, though she could sense Andrea waiting for her to say something. Suddenly a chirrup from the Major's communicator echoed round the room.

Thank god! cried the Major internally.

The Major eagerly grabbed the communicator that sat on top of her bag, speaking to the person on the other line briefly, before turning back to Andrea.

"I have to go," the Major informed the young woman.

"Not changing first?"

"It's an urgent call," lied the Major, "I guess I'll just have to speak to the Colonel in my football shirt."

And with that she quickly gathered her belongings and dashed from the room, relieved to be out in the cool corridor. *What the hell had that been about?* she wondered to herself as she walked for the lift. She'd seen plenty of naked bodies before – not much was private in the army - but she'd never been so unnerved as she had been in the changing rooms with Andrea. Her friend Sophie's words returned to her at that moment, the other woman's question of Andrea's attractiveness filtering through her mind. The Major supposed that Sophie had a point. Even the Major could see that Andrea was exceedingly attractive, no doubt especially to those who were interested in that sort of thing. Which of course the Major was not, she maintained to herself as the lift carried her back up to her office.

CHAPTER 12

Two days later and the base was still abuzz with the news of the superhumans' victory over Chadwick's team. All of the superhumans were on a high, while Chadwick had been lying low, merely sticking to the job in hand on any occasions when he was called upon to interact with them. Andrea was more than happy with that, though her recollections of the afternoon of the game tended to centre around things other than the annoying Lieutenant.

In particular she couldn't help wondering at the brief, yet strange conversation with the Major in the changing rooms afterwards. Andrea had just finished her shower when she'd stepped out into the main area to find the other woman there. Any cooling effect of the shower was swiftly lost when she caught sight of the blue eyes staring intently at her from across the room. Though she wore a towel, it had felt like she may as well be standing there naked so intense was the study. Andrea had amazed herself by not only managing to speak in a reasonably calm voice but also by making it back to the bench where her clothes sat with some dignity.

Only of course when she got there she'd realised that it would look rather odd if she didn't dry herself and put her clothes on. Not that Andrea was normally bashful, but something about the Major's presence unnerved her more than she would care to admit. In the end she'd just had to steel herself and turned away so that at least she wouldn't have to see the other woman as she changed and that conversely the Major wouldn't see the blush that was threatening Andrea's face. Andrea had assumed that the Major would go on changing herself, but Andrea had sensed the lack of movement behind her and swung round to see the Major still staring at her.

Andrea was bemused by the Major's behaviour, finding it odd that she had noticed the tattoo in the small of Andrea's back. Not for the first time Andrea wondered why exactly the Major had been staring at the base of her spine in the first place. And then there was the way the Major had dashed off so suddenly. Though she supposedly had an urgent call, Andrea had the feeling that the other woman couldn't wait to get out of the room.

Andrea was again on her own in one of the underground rooms now, though this time it was Doc that had left her to it, having to go and attend to an experiment in another of the labs. Andrea was in a sectioned off area of the lab, putting her t-shirt back on after have been doing some more tests with Doc, when she heard the door go. Her immediate reaction was to stand up and greet whoever it was, but recalling the possible sabotage of some of Doc's equipment the week before she instead ducked down out of sight, just in case it was the same person returned again and she could catch them at it. Doc hadn't found any signs of direct tampering with his equipment, but Andrea still found the whole incident highly suspicious.

As the new entrants spoke it was quickly apparent to Andrea that it wasn't her potential saboteur, but rather than stand up at that point she found herself eavesdropping on the interesting conversation.

"It looks like Doc isn't here," came the Major's voice, "He must have been called away. Shall I summon him back?"

"No, it's fine, we'll catch up with him later."

Andrea risked a quick peek to verify who the male voice belonged to, catching sight of Colonel Parsons before she hid from view again. Andrea considered how the Colonel had only visited once in two months to begin with, yet now here he was at the base twice in one week.

"Have his special reports been satisfactory for you?" asked the Major. The question seemed innocent enough, but Andrea could detect a slight caustic edge in the way it had been said.

It appeared the Colonel had noticed it too. "You know why we have to keep a close eye on that situation, or would you rather the alternative?"

"I'm not sure, sometimes I do wonder if that would be better."

"You don't mean that."

Andrea heard the sound of a sigh from the Major. "I suppose not. I just don't like anything that impinges on the way I run the base."

"How is it coming with investigations into these incidents of possible sabotage anyway?" asked the Colonel, changing the subject completely. Andrea was slightly annoyed at that, since this was the second time she'd heard the Major discussing these 'special reports' with someone. Andrea was desperate to know what they were about, thinking it was either something to do with her or what the intentions behind the superhumans' training was. Secretly she hoped it wasn't the former, since that would mean the Major had been keeping things from Andrea, a thought that did not please the young woman in the slightest.

"Not good," replied the Major, "We've not found out anything new since I last spoke to you."

"Which means we basically know nothing?"

"Pretty much."

"I have to say the timing of this is not good," the Colonel noted, "Especially not with all the time and money that's being invested in this project."

"And it's not all about money and whatever it is you're hoping to gain from this, there's actually the people here," the Major reminded him, "What would happen to them if anything should happen to the base?"

The Colonel paused for a moment before he answered. "I remind you that you're meant to be guarding the army and government's interests in this project. I hope you're not getting too attached to these people."

Andrea wasn't sure she liked the way the Colonel had said 'these people', and it seemed the Major shared her reservations. When she replied her voice carried a definite steely quality. "I am protecting the army's interests, but that doesn't mean I can't also look out for the superhumans."

"Just as long as you remember where your ultimate loyalties lie."

"I'm well aware of that," the Major answered, almost snapping at him, "Why, are people starting to question the way I'm running things here?"

"Not yet, or at least not to me," replied the Colonel, "Though that could possibly be because they know of our close connection. However, if this goes on they might start to make any comments openly."

"Great, so basically I have to watch my back?"

"You just need to be extra careful right now. There are a whole host of people who weren't happy with this project getting off the ground ten months ago, and then with what happened last November...well, you know as well as I do how close we came to being shut down on that occasion. Any more mistakes will be seized upon by our opponents. In fact they want a full report on progress on Tuesday."

"Tuesday?" cried the Major, "You could have given me a bit more notice, or is it deliberate on their part to try and catch us unprepared?"

There was no answer, Andrea assuming that meant the Colonel had merely nodded in some way.

"It looks like I'll have a busy weekend then," noted the Major, "In which case we'd better get on."

Andrea listened to the sounds of them leaving, giving it a couple of minutes before she got up off the floor. The conversation had certainly been interesting, though it raised more questions than it really answered. It sounded as if the Major was under quite a lot of pressure, though Andrea admired the way she had stood up to the Colonel despite that, particularly when it came to defending the superhumans. With the words playing over in her mind again, Andrea followed the two officers out of the lab.

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Andrea cried out as the sharp needle pierced the soft flesh of her arm, just in the crook of her elbow. She tried to pull away from the painful contact but her arm was immobilised, bound, she now realised, to the table she was lying on. She tugged

against the restraints but they wouldn't budge. Her super strength seemed to have deserted her. Meanwhile there was a dark figure looming over her, their face indistinguishable against the bright light that shone from behind them.

"Stop, what are you doing?" she asked the person trying to control her rising panic

They didn't reply, too intent on their task and Andrea could now feel the ebb of her blood out through the needle. It seemed to go on for an agonising eternity, and she considered that surely she didn't have that much blood in her. Finally the person withdrew it, retreating to a dark corner of the room.

Andrea fought desperately to break her bindings again. This wasn't right, she kept telling herself - she should be able to break free. Why couldn't she break free? By now she was panting, gasping with the continued effort. Suddenly there was a wrenching noise and she found herself lying face down on the floor.

Andrea heard her captor moving towards her, and she didn't hesitate, leaping to her feet and sprinting for the door. It was locked. Swinging round she could see the shadowy figure coming for her, their hand raised, holding some sort of weapon. She squinted to try and see what it was – a gun? A knife? The rest of the room was too dark for her to see any other means of escape, the only light being the bright pool cast on the table she had been lying on. She rattled the handle of the door again and it flew open this time. She was so surprised that she fell out into the corridor beyond, hitting the stone floor with a jarring thump.

Scrabbling to her feet Andrea started to run, unsure where she was going, just knowing she needed to run somewhere, anywhere to get away.

Then they were there in front of her as they were every time – MacKenzie, Humphreys, Madison, Walker. Andrea felt the familiar twisting anxiety in her chest as she saw her dead colleagues.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" she exclaimed, coming to an abrupt halt.

"You've forgotten about us," moaned MacKenzie, "We knew you would."

"I haven't forgotten," pleaded Andrea, stepping away from them as they pressed her back down the corridor.

"She's too interested in her new life now," remarked Walker

"Wants to be the superhero," added Madison

"No, I'm still trying to find out what happened, I am!" insisted Andrea

It seemed they weren't listening, continuing to talk about her amongst themselves. "I think she likes being the special mutie freak, thinks she's better than the rest of us," noted Humphreys

"She always thought that anyway," said MacKenzie

“Not that her powers are much use...”

Andrea whirled round to see her recently deceased friend Maria behind her.

“Maria? No, not you too!”

“What’s the point in having powers if you can’t help anyone,” continued Maria, her eyes boring into Andrea.

“I was miles away, how could I have known?”

As with the others, Maria seemed to ignore her words. “Why weren’t you there?”

“No, just leave me alone!”

Andrea barged forcefully past them, not wanting to hear any more of their disparaging words, but they chased after her, repeating them again and again as she tried to flee. Andrea stuck her hands up to cover her ears, but that didn’t help – it was like the words were ringing inside her mind, a constant stream of accusation and criticism.

And then she was falling, sailing down through the air. Somewhere in her mind she had a recollection that this seemed to happen every time too – one minute she was running down the corridor, the next hurtling down into nothingness. Her fall was abruptly halted by the floor rushing up to smack her in the face.

Andrea’s eyes shot open at the point of impact in the dream, groaning to herself as she realised that was what it had been. She lay there for a moment on the cotton sheets, going over the images that had been presented to her. Despite continuing counselling with Dr Shah, nearly every night she had a nightmare with similar elements to the one she’d just experienced, though the addition of Maria was a first. It was quite obvious her sense of guilt over Maria’s death had led to her subconsciously inserting her friend amongst all the other people pursuing her.

Andrea tossed and turned under the duvet a few times, before giving up on getting back to sleep, and pulling on some clothes to head off for a calming walk. As usual she made her way out onto the rooftop of the base, finding it deserted that night. Disappointed she sat on the wall for a moment, watching the clouds sweeping across the moon as the wind whipped through her clothes. It was too cold to sit there for long, yet she didn’t feel like going back to bed yet. Not really knowing her exact motivation, Andrea headed back inside, but rather than turning for her quarters, she took the corridor that led past the rooms of the officers. A quick check of her watch revealed it was two in the morning and she wondered how wise it was to continue on her intended course of action. She was here now, she surmised, so she might as well see if the Major was awake.

The press of the chime yielded an immediate response, Andrea glad to know that the Major was still keeping similarly late hours. As she stepped into the room Andrea’s eyes had to adjust to the dim light for a moment, eventually spotting the Major

relaxing on a sofa near the window, reading a hardback book which she now closed and placed down on a coffee table in front of her. The only illumination in the room was from the lamp that overlooked the Major's seat, picking up the redness of her hair in its glow.

"Having trouble sleeping?" queried the Major, turning her face to her late-night visitor. She shuffled up the sofa as she spoke, sending out a silent invite for Andrea to come and join her.

As Andrea crossed the room she made a quick study of her surroundings. The Major's quarters were quite different to any of the other ones she had been in on the base already, though the basic layout was identical to Andrea's own. However, where Andrea's belongings just resided as an extension to their environment, the Major's room seemed like a proper home, as if everything had its proper place and belonged exactly there. The best words Andrea could think of to describe the decoration and furniture were understated and tasteful, though neither of those really did justice to the warm homey feel she had felt as soon as she'd stepped through the door.

Of the specific furnishings, the first thing Andrea had noticed was the dark red sofa, since the Major had been sprawled out across it when Andrea entered. It looked exceedingly soft and inviting, the kind of sofa you could happily fall asleep upon. The next most prominent thing in the room was the antique desk by the wall nearest the door. It was made of dark wood and ornately constructed with smart curves and fine points. Andrea thought that it would have been more fitting to have had an old style typewriter on top, rather than the laptop that actually sat in the middle of the polished surface.

There were various ornaments, plants and pictures dotted around the room, and Andrea only had the chance to observe a few of them in detail. One eye-catching picture displayed a view of space, with the myriad colours of a nebula or gas cloud of some kind fanning out across the blackness.

Lowering herself onto the sofa, Andrea found it was as comfortable as it looked and she tried to relax back into the cushions though she felt far from relaxed inside. She was on edge, not knowing if it was the lasting effect of the earlier nightmare or the closeness of the Major causing it. She had hoped a chance to talk would calm her, but at present it was having the reverse effect.

"I wasn't sure if you'd still be up," Andrea said by means of introduction.

"I was working quite late," said the Major, "And was just reading to unwind before I go to bed."

That explained why the other woman was still in her uniform trousers and shirt at that late hour, considered Andrea, though for the first time she noticed that the Major's feet were bare, her heavy boots along with her socks discarded at the side of the sofa. Wondering why she had been working so late, Andrea recalled the eavesdropped conversation of the day before, deducing that the Major had been preparing for her impromptu meeting. Of course, Andrea knew she couldn't reveal her own knowledge

of the meeting unless she also wanted the Major to know she had been snooping on her.

“Do you often work so late on a Saturday night?” asked Andrea, wanting to see if the Major would tell her about it anyway.

“I have been accused of working rather long hours in the past, in this case I have to prepare for an unexpected meeting on Tuesday.”

That hadn't been hard thought Andrea. “Really?” she said out loud trying to sound sufficiently surprised, “It's lots of extra work is it?”

“It's just a report to the government on our progress, it's nothing out of the ordinary.”

Andrea didn't think it had sounded quite so ordinary when the Major and the Colonel had been discussing it. Maybe the Major didn't want to reveal the degree of pressure on her, wanting to seem like she could handle anything. “Well, I'm sure you'll suitably impress them with how well we're doing,” remarked Andrea.

“I hope so,” agreed the Major.

“You don't sound convinced,” Andrea said, having noted the other woman's tone, “Are we not doing well?”

“No, of course you are,” stated the Major quickly and emphatically, “You all are.”

“Then what is it they're worried about?” Andrea pressed, still keen to see how much the Major would reveal to her. Andrea was particularly interested in the incident six months ago that had called into question the Major's running of the base, but couldn't think of anyway to bring it up without showing her prior knowledge.

“Nothing specific as far as I know,” the Major declared, “Though obviously the recent accidents are a cause for concern. Not everyone is quite as behind this project as the Colonel and I are, so they're looking for anything they can use against us.”

“Who exactly is 'everyone'?”

“Other army officers, members of the government. Basically we have to make sure everything runs smoothly to ensure the ongoing funding of this unit.”

“It all sounds a bit political to me,” noted Andrea. The Major was being pretty candid, though unfortunately for Andrea she still hadn't mentioned this other incident. Andrea wondered if anyone else knew about it. Perhaps she could ask Tom, she pondered, since he seemed to know everything that went on round the base.

“It is very political,” agreed the Major, “Which isn't really my arena. I'm much more of an action woman, someone on the ground who likes to get things done, rather than wading through reams of red-tape and beauracracy.”

“Is that why you like to get involved in football games between the staff?”

The Major laughed. “Partly,” she conceded with a tip of the head. The small movement caused the ends of her bob to flop across her cheek and she quickly pushed it back again. “That and my insane competitive streak!”

Andrea laughed too, recalling the football game. “I did notice that you were rather...zealous in your marking style.”

“While of course you weren’t bothered at all if you won?” the Major asked, eyeing Andrea with a look of amused suspicion.

“I didn’t say that,” said Andrea, “It’s no secret that I wanted to wipe that smug expression off Chadwick’s face.”

“Indeed,” commented the Major, obviously not wanting to get into Andrea’s antagonistic relationship with the Lieutenant. “So what brought you to my door this evening?” she asked instead.

“The usual,” said Andrea, knowing full well that the Major would know what that meant. They had already discussed it a few times on their other nighttime meetings on the roof.

“The nightmares?” the Major deduced. “How are things going with Dr Shah? Have you made much progress yet?”

“Some, but it’s not helping much with the nightmares yet,” Andrea admitted.

“I guess you have to give it some time,” offered the Major, her face softening along with her eyes. Andrea found herself staring into them as the Major continued to speak. “I know it took me a couple of months to start to resolve things when I had counselling last year and even now I find it hard to look back on what happened, even though it’s more than a year now since it happened.”

Andrea knew that the Major was talking about father’s death, though the fact that she hadn’t directly mentioned it proved how hard it was for the Major to talk about it. Every now and then it would crop up in their conversations, but always the Major avoided going into too much detail.

Sensing the other woman wasn’t going to change that habit now, Andrea’s eyes drifted over the table in front of them, noticing the papers haphazardly scattered across one corner of it for the first time.

“Writing something?” asked Andrea, leaning forwards to try and make out the words. The Major’s handwriting was quite hard to decipher though.

The Major quickly gathered the papers up into a pile and inserted them in a folder that was also on the table. “It’s nothing really.”

Andrea was intrigued by the Major’s faintly embarrassed reaction. “What is it, a book of some sort?”

The Major was uncharacteristically blushing now. “Yes,” she confessed. “You know how it is – everyone likes to think they can write a novel.”

“What’s it about?”

“Nothing much,” the Major said evasively, “It’s probably a load of rubbish anyway, but it keeps me amused.”

“I’m sure it’s not rubbish,” insisted Andrea, “I’d like to see it sometime if I could?”

“Sometime maybe, but definitely not yet,” the Major said, “It needs a lot of work!”

Andrea let it go, sensing the Major was unsure of her writing skills, though she was intrigued what would be produced by the Major’s imagination. *Would it be a thriller? Comedy? Romance?*

“Would you like a drink?”

Andrea had to force herself to stop thinking about what romance the Major might write about to answer the question. “Yes, thanks, tea please, if you have it.”

“Of course,” the Major replied, heading to the kitchen area to fix the drinks. Andrea watched as she padded across the carpet in her bare feet, stepping tentatively onto the cool tiles of the kitchen with an audible intake of breath. Andrea couldn’t help the smile that twitched at the corners of her lips at the reaction.

While the Major was busy, Andrea started scouting the room again. The photographs displayed at various points were mostly too far away for Andrea to be able to make out the people in them in the low light, though she did catch sight of one on a closer bookcase of the Major with the dark-haired woman Andrea had seen briefly in the corridor the week before last. Andrea had gotten a definite vibe off the woman at the time, besides the one that said Andrea didn’t like her.

The pair of them looked much younger in the picture, maybe somewhere in their early twenties, and they were grinning at the camera, both of them decked out in dress uniforms, complete with peaked caps. The other, taller woman had her arm around the Major’s shoulder in the relaxed shot. Andrea felt a strange, unpleasant prickling sensation in her stomach at the pose, and continued on her sweep of the room, rather than continue to stare at the offending photograph.

Coming back to the table, Andrea noticed something on the lower shelf, reaching down to pull it out. “You like to play?” she asked holding up the Scrabble box.

The Major was now walking back across the room with the mugs. “If I can find someone to play against,” she said, setting them down, “I’ve managed to entice Dr Todd into a few games every once in a while, but I think he was put off by my competitiveness. Would you like a game?”

Andrea was taken aback by the friendly offer. “Er...yes...why not,” she replied eventually.

The Major smiled, seemingly pleased she’d found someone else to join her in a game, and Andrea was equally pleased at being that one. She watched the Major eagerly setting the board out on the wooden table before shaking the small green bag of letters in Andrea’s direction. “Pick one to see who goes first,” she instructed.

Andrea delved into the bag, her fingers brushing against the Major’s palm through the material at its base. She fumbled around for a bit until she could prolong the pretence that she was searching no longer. She drew out an ‘a’, the Major regarding her suspiciously when she showed it to the other woman.

“Looks like you’re first,” she said grudgingly, displaying her own ‘s’.

Andrea fished out her first seven letters and they settled into the game, neither of them seeming to care that it was so early in the morning. The scores were quite even until Andrea managed to place a seven letter word on the board, glancing up to see the Major glowering at her afterwards.

Andrea couldn’t help laughing at the disgruntled expression. “You weren’t joking about that insane competitive streak were you?”

The Major’s face immediately softened into an amused expression. “At least I did warn you. What can I say, I like to win.”

“Just as long as you don’t expect me to let you,” teased Andrea.

“I can’t imagine you doing that anyway,” countered the Major.

Andrea merely smiled in response, drinking some more from her mug of tea. The Major was studying her letters intently now, her lips pursed in deep concentration as her fingers rearranged the small tiles on the plastic slide before her. Every now and then she would stop the swapping and bring her hand up to rub her temple or her chin, oblivious to the scrutiny of the young woman next to her. Considering that this was a perfect friendly moment to bring up pretty much anything, Andrea decided it was time to get an update on something in particular.

“So, how are things coming with your private investigation into the warehouse accident?” she asked as nonchalantly as possible.

The Major’s eyes flicked up. “I’m afraid I haven’t had much time recently, though I did find out that the Colonel’s team are on the trail of this Cowley guy?”

“Yes, he was the one whose warehouse it was,” confirmed Andrea, “Have they found anything out about him?”

“Not as far as I could tell,” the Major said, “Though it seems to be quite hard finding information out about him.”

Andrea nodded. “Tell me about it. He was always the mystery man to us too. Though we’d been investigating him and his various criminal enterprises for months before the raid on the warehouse we still didn’t even know what he looked like.”

The Major appeared surprised at that. “Really? You must have questioned people that had met him though?”

“And they were all very tight-lipped. I think they were scared of him, of what might happen to them should they betray him.”

“But you did manage to find out about the shipment at the warehouse,” the Major mentioned.

“True,” agreed Andrea, “But even then we weren’t entirely sure what it was, only that it had just arrived from Eastern Europe. It could have been drugs, guns, even people – Cowley was involved in all of them. We had even heard that it was possible that Cowley himself would be there, so as you can imagine we were quite keen to catch him there if possible.”

“But you didn’t.”

Andrea thought back to the day for a moment. “He could have been there,” she admitted, the confused recollections trying to coalesce in her mind, “I don’t know. It was all a bit of a mess once we got inside.” She paused again, but the break didn’t help to make things clearer. “And then there was the gas...and...well...” Now all she could see was the image of Walker choking, gagging and begging her for help. She closed her eyes to try and push it away and compose herself.

It was then that she felt the comforting fingers, gently stroking down her arm to her hand where it rested on her thigh. She opened her eyes again, fixing the Major with a pleading look.

“Why did I survive? Why didn’t I die with everyone else?”

“You know the answer to that,” said the other woman softly, still holding Andrea’s hand.

“Ah yes, my much vaunted powers,” said Andrea bitterly, shaking her head. “They didn’t really do me much good then did they?”

“You’re not exactly being fair on yourself,” the Major suggested, “You were hardly in a position to do anything by all accounts, and I doubt that you would have been able to even if you hadn’t been incapacitated.”

“But I don’t know that,” Andrea said, the nasty feeling of guilt clawing at her once more. “I won’t know for sure until I find Cowley and discover what happened in that warehouse.”

“And *we* will do, I promise you,” stated the Major sincerely.

She gave Andrea's hand a small squeeze to emphasise her point, the combination of the touch and the understanding words sending a surge of emotion through the young woman. Looking into the major's eyes, it was all Andrea could do not to let the tears that were welling up inside spill over and display her fragile state.

Andrea slowly drew her hand away, glancing at her watch instead. "I think I've taken up enough of your time for one night," she said as calmly as she could manage. Before the Major could object, Andrea had risen from the sofa. "Thanks for the game," Andrea added.

"No problem," replied the Major, "Feel free to drop back in any time."

Andrea got the sense the offer was more related to what had just passed between them than an invite to play more Scrabble. The Major seemed to genuinely understand the difficulties Andrea was having and the young woman had no doubt that she would be taking up the offer soon.

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By the time Tuesday came round Andrea hadn't been round to the Major's quarters again, thinking it best to let her concentrate on her meeting for the time being. As she sat in the messhall munching on some breakfast she was joined by the other three superhumans, Tom setting down a heart-attack inducing plate brimming with bacon, sausages and fried bread. Harry meanwhile had some cereal like Andrea and Bel was just cradling a cup of coffee.

"God how can you eat that so early in the morning?" asked Andrea as Tom shovelled the bacon in his mouth.

"That's nothing," said Bel on his behalf since his mouth was full, "You should see some of the other stuff that passes for breakfast round at Tom's – cold pizzas and chinese being most common."

Andrea raised her eyebrows at the other woman. "You're there a lot of mornings then are you?"

Bel flushed slightly at being caught out, causing Andrea and Harry to laugh at her discomfort.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" asked Bel to shift the focus from her.

"I think we've got another exercise with Chadwick, out at the house," Harry replied.

"Oh, great, not Chadwick again," sighed Bel, "Can't we have some training with the Major?"

"She's gone to headquarters today," interjected Andrea, "To give some sort of report to the bosses."

The other three's eyes all swung to her. "And how exactly did you know that?" asked Bel.

Andrea shifted uncomfortably in her seat as the other three continued to stare. "She told me," admitted Andrea, omitting that she'd actually first heard it while eavesdropping on the Major and the Colonel.

"She..told...you?" repeated Bel slowly, "And when might this have been, because I'm pretty sure I missed that briefing?"

"Yeah, Andrea," joined in Tom now he'd finished scoffing his bacon, "When did you and the Major have this personal chat?"

Andrea stared back at them defiantly. "Is there something wrong with talking to the Major out of office hours?"

"No, no, of course not," said Bel, pouting her lips to indicate she didn't mean what she was saying.

"Not at all," agreed Tom, "I go round the Major's quarters all the time too."

"You do?" asked Andrea, surprised.

"Of course not!" cried Tom. "But that's where she told you then was it?"

Andrea realised she had been cleverly manouvered into the position and tried to think of a way out of it. However, her momentary pause was more than enough to give the game away.

"It bloody was, wasn't it!" exclaimed Tom, "You were round her quarters!"

"All right, all right, keep your voice down," said Andrea, glancing round the room to see a few other soldiers peering in their direction, "Yes I went round there, but only because I had something I wanted to discuss with her."

Tom shook his head. "You're on a hiding to nothing you realise."

"I don't know what you mean," said Andrea, genuinely confused by his reference.

"Trying to get close to the Major," clarified Tom.

"I'm not trying to get close to her," stated Andrea firmly, "We're just friends."

"Either way she's not the sort to get too close to the people under her command," outlined Tom, "At least not any more."

Andrea was quick to pick up on his words. "What do you mean 'not any more'?"

Tom looked more than surprised. "You've not heard the story about Adam Dixon yet?"

“No.”

“Bloody hell, I thought someone might have let that one slip by now,” he said with incredulity, “Mind you people don’t like to mention it considering what happened.”

Andrea was desperate to know who this Adam Dixon was now, especially if he had something to do with the Major. “For christ’s sake, will you stop beating about the bush and tell me then!”

Given the way she had snapped at him, Tom looked reluctant to continue. “I wasn’t actually here at the time, maybe you could tell the story better Harry?”

“Oh, thanks, dump it on me,” said the dark-haired young man, shooting a look at Tom.

Andrea meanwhile fixed her eyes on Harry, staring at him until he gave in.

“Ok, I’ll do it from the beginning shall I?” he said, not waiting for an answer before he continued, “Well, the Superhuman Research Unit was set up back in July last year, nearly ten months ago now, with Bel and I being the first recruits to join. The Major was obviously new to the base too and there were a few rumours about how exactly she’d got her posting and what she’d been doing prior to that.”

“Which were?” asked Andrea.

“Am I telling this story or are you?” Harry shot back in response. Andrea nodded at him to carry on which he did. “There was some hint of an accident or something earlier that same year, out in Iraq. I’m not really sure what the Major’s involvement had been, but she’d been off on leave immediately prior to coming to the base.”

Andrea knew what that accident in Iraq was about, or at least some of it – it was when the Major’s father had been killed. And the leave Harry was referring to was the compassionate leave she’d had after that to grieve and have counselling. Obviously that wasn’t common knowledge and Andrea certainly wasn’t about to break the Major’s confidence and tell the others about it.

Harry continued on with his story. “As a result of this prior incident there were a few people who were a bit uncertain of the Major’s ability to command the base and I have to say there were times when she could be a little...erratic. Anyway after a couple of months we got another recruit – Adam Dixon. This guy was Mr Smooth, quickly winning everyone over, including Chadwick which as you know is some feat. He and the Major also seemed pretty friendly, though no one thought much of it. Only in the end they got a little too friendly...”

“Too friendly?” queried Andrea.

“You know...” said Harry, Andrea staring at him in bemusement not wanting to believe what she thought it was he was trying to tell her.

“For fuck’s sake Harry,” interrupted Tom, before turning to Andrea. “What he’s trying to say is that the Major and this guy Dixon were shagging.”

Andrea was dumbstruck, amazed that what she had been thinking was true.

“Yeah, I know pretty hard to believe, huh?” added Harry, now Tom had bluntly stated it, “The thing is I think he actually preyed on the fact that she was still somewhat insecure after whatever it was that happened in Iraq. He took advantage of the insecurity.”

Andrea wasn’t liking the sound of this man at all, having a irrational urge to hurt him, even though she’d never met him and knew next to nothing about him. “To what end would he do that though?”

“This is the whole sorry part of the story,” noted Harry ruefully, “It turns out Adam had a bit of an ulterior motive for getting close to the Major – he was selling information and secrets to outside parties.”

“Fuck!” exclaimed Andrea.

“Precisely. Of course it all got discovered in the end, at the start of November last year. As you can imagine the Major was in deep shit for having a personal relationship with someone of questionable character and the finger of suspicion fell on her too in terms of the loss of secrets – loose pillow talk and all that sort of thing.”

Andrea didn’t like the mental image that generated one bit.

“She was in the clear in the end,” said Harry, “But that didn’t stop her being mortally embarrassed that she’d let her judgement be compromised so, no matter what her personal situation.”

“That bastard,” seethed Andrea, “But what happened to him?”

“Obviously they couldn’t just let him go at that point, knowing what he did, so they supposedly shipped him off somewhere. No one knows where, and he was never heard from again round here. People don’t even like to mention his name, especially not in the Major’s presence. Not everyone thinks he got sent away though.”

“What do you mean?”

Tom leapt in to the conversation again at that point. “Harry, will you stop spreading those ridiculous rumours.”

Harry leaned low to the table, speaking in a whisper. “I’m telling you, I still reckon they killed him!”

“Don’t listen to him,” Tom said to Andrea, “He’s been reading his comic books again.”

Andrea found herself perversely wishing this Dixon person *was* dead; he sounded like a nasty piece of work. “And what about the Major? Did she get reprimanded?”

“I’m not sure what exactly happened,” confessed Harry, “But somehow she managed to keep her job. I’ve heard that her and the Colonel are pretty good friends, so I reckon he intervened in some way to save her hide.”

“But now she can’t afford anything else to go wrong or she’s had it,” added Bel, “Naturally she’s pretty wary of getting too close to anyone again, or of taking anyone into her confidence in case they betray it like Dixon did.”

Andrea could see why the Major would be wary, sickened again when she thought of Dixon and what he had done to the proud woman. If he wasn’t dead she hoped he was languishing in some prison somewhere. Part of Andrea did wonder why the Major had never mentioned this to her before, but considered she most likely didn’t want to rake up something so embarrassing. As the four of them headed out for their training session Andrea continued to think of ways she would hurt Dixon if she ever came across him.

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They had almost finished their exercise when Chadwick got an unexpected call from back at base and they were all summoned to an emergency briefing. They didn’t even have time to change, entering the underground lecture room still wearing their dirty combat gear. Sitting waiting at the desk at the front of the room was the Major, Andrea surprised she was back from her meeting already. Seeing the steely look on the other woman’s face and the way her hands were clasped firmly on the desk in front of her, Andrea wondered at the success of that meeting. *Was the Major about to tell them that it was all over, that the base had been shut down?*

Andrea sat at one of the benches, the first stirrings of anxiety fluttering in her stomach. Once they were all settled the Major slowly rose from the desk, coming round to stand in front of them.

“I’m not sure how many of you were aware of this,” she began, her eyes flicking briefly to Andrea, “But I’ve been at the corps headquarters today, attending a series of meetings on the future of the base.”

“A number of concerns were raised over our results in terms of what we’ve achieved and discovered, concerns which I believe I managed to satisfy for now.”

Andrea found herself sighing in relief at that revelation. As the Major started pacing across the room in front of them while she contemplated her next words, Andrea’s thoughts drifted back to what she’d found out that morning. She tried to picture the strong, confident woman before her being conned by someone like this Dixon person. No matter how she tried she couldn’t imagine it – someone who could face down a room of fellow officers and win out having the wool pulled over their eyes so badly. Andrea considered that maybe Harry was right and that the Major was still somehow vulnerable when she first arrived at the base. The angry feelings towards Dixon

started to surface again and Andrea had to push them down to pay attention as the Major continued.

“However, it was made apparent to me that there will be some additional demands placed on us from now on. As you know this is an government funded facility and the government would like to start getting some returns from its investment.”

The Major was still pacing across in front of them, as if she really didn't want to have to say whatever it was. Andrea didn't think she was liking where the conversation was heading either, things usually weren't good when politicians got involved.

Andrea interrupted, unable to take the tension any longer. “We get the picture, you're not happy about it. Now why don't you tell us what it is they want from us?”

The Major stopped her pacing and fixed her eyes coolly on Andrea, the young woman unsure if she was annoyed at the interruption or relieved that Andrea had forced her to cut to the chase.

“The government would like you to undertake certain...tasks for them, as special operatives.”

“I knew it,” cried Andrea, “We're going to be their little superhuman army!”

The Major's expression was definitely now verging on the edge of annoyance as she glared at Andrea.

“I don't know what all these tasks will be as of yet,” she stated evenly, never taking her eyes off the young woman, “But believe me I would not be a willing party to anything of a questionable nature.”

“Really,” said Andrea doubtfully, “And you expect us to believe you didn't know anything about this before now?” As she said it she realised that possibility actually disturbed her more than what the Major had said. She recalled the couple of times she had heard the Major talking about special reports and wondered if this was what it had all been about – some long term plan to turn the all into secret government operatives.

“I didn't know of these plans, no,” declared the Major.

Andrea merely snorted a laugh.

“I know you're upset about this,” the Major said, struggling to keep her voice calm, “I'm not exactly thrilled myself but we don't have much choice.”

“Why, what would you do to us if we don't agree?” asked Andrea challengingly.

The Major's lips pursed together in a thin line, her eyes perceptably narrowing. Andrea wasn't entirely sure why she was being so antagonistic, it wasn't as if she hadn't worked for the government before – what they were suggesting probably wasn't that different from a glorified police officer. She just didn't like to be taken for granted.

Luckily one of the other superhumans spoke at that point, breaking the tense silent exchange between the two women. “Andrea, for god’s sake, give her a break,” said Tom.

“Yeah, it sounds pretty cool to me,” agreed Harry, “I want to use my powers to help people if I can.”

“As long as that’s what we will be doing,” allowed Andrea, “Serving the country and not some politician’s private agenda.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” insisted the Major.

“Fine then,” said Andrea with a sigh, “I guess we’re all in, unless you have any objections, Bel?”

“No, I’m willing to go with the group,” replied the dark-haired woman.

“Looks like it’s your lucky day then,” Andrea remarked to the Major with a obvious sarcastic edge to her voice.

“I’m glad you’ve all agreed, thank you,” said the Major, “Because there is another reason I had to call you all in here so urgently – we have our first mission.”

CHAPTER 13

The hard seat banged against Andrea's backside as the plane she was sitting in jolted in some turbulent air. Gingerly rubbing it she considered that comfort obviously wasn't high on the army's list of priorities when designing these things. It certainly wasn't like travelling on your average passenger jet, with everything inside the small aircraft stripped down to the bare essentials. There were no smiling hostesses with pillows and blankets, and certainly no free drinks or food. It was also a hell of a lot noisier in the back cargo area of the plane where she and the other superhumans now sat as they flew off on their first mission as government operatives.

Though she had given the Major a hard time about it, part of Andrea was secretly happy to finally be putting her powers to some use other than training exercises. At the same time, taking on some hijackers was maybe a little too exciting for a first time out.

Harry sat next to her along one side of the plane with Tom and Bel perched on the bench opposite. The young man turned to her now, having to shout to be heard over the noisy aircraft.

"See, I told you it wouldn't be long before we got the matching uniforms," he remarked pulling at his top.

She thought Harry was exaggerating just a touch. Though they were all in black it wasn't as if they were specifically designed outfits. The clothes they wore were just variations of regular military dress. Andrea herself wore some standard black boots, along with combat trousers, a long sleeved jacket and a form-fitting vest over the top. The vest had a multitude of pockets and she thought that it's slightly stiff nature was no doubt due to some light-weight bullet proof material embedded under the surface. Looking at the young man next to her, Andrea could now see him jiggling his knees up and down nervously, his fingers drumming on his thighs.

"You'll be fine," Andrea said, putting a comforting hand over his to still his dancing fingers.

"Thanks, but that's easy for you to say, you've done this sort of thing before."

"I've never done anything quite like this!" she admitted with a wry smile. "We've all had the necessary training, we know what to do and I'm sure we can do it," she added confidently.

Harry smiled at her reassuring words, and Andrea was once again reminded of Constable Walker, sincerely hoping that this time her confidence wasn't misplaced.

Harry was inspecting some of his own pockets now, pulling out a swiss army knife that he flicked open. “I always used to play at pretending to be in the SAS ^[15] when I was a kid, I guess I’ve now got my chance to do the real thing.”

A loud bang indicated the door to the cargo bay from the front of the plane had swung open, and the Major stepped into the area, grabbing onto some netting to keep her feet as the aircraft lurched to one side. She was in the combat version of her uniform too, though she wore the more standard camouflage style unlike the superhumans. Her hair was tucked under a cap to keep it from falling in her face.

“Right, we’re almost in position,” she informed them. “Andrea, are you ready?”

Andrea nodded, getting to her feet and carefully making her way over to the side hatch. The Major quickly joined her, leaning in close so she could be heard over the drone of the engines. Her words were just for Andrea’s benefit.

“Are you sure you’re all right to do this? We can find another way if you’re not.”

Andrea made a small rueful laugh. “I think it’s a bit late for that now isn’t it? The people on that plane are running out of time. No, I can do it.”

“Good. Just to let you know I have every confidence in you too.”

Andrea felt glad she had made the brash statement as a warm glow settled in her stomach on hearing the other woman’s words, though in reality she was as nervous as hell. Training was one thing, the real world was something else and five thousand feet up over the Atlantic travelling at about 400mph was plain terrifying. Still the Major, and everyone else, was relying on her and she wasn’t about to let them down.

Checking that everyone was secure, the Major levered open the hatch, the swirling wind immediately whipping in and almost knocking Andrea off her feet. Clawing her way along the interior wall, Andrea fought against the stiff breeze so she could glance outside, able to see the passenger jet flying on a parallel course to their own a few hundred feet above. The other plane was supposed to have been on a routine holiday flight from London Gatwick to Lanzarote when it had been hijacked by terrorists, who were now threatening to blow it up.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” the Major yelled over the fierce wind, “You might want to wear these – I heard you were having some trouble with your vision when flying.”

The Major handed Andrea a pair of curved goggles with black frames that matched the rest of her outfit. Andrea slipped them over her hair, having to push a few loose strands out of the way as she brought them down over her eyes. “Thanks,” she said, looking outside once more and steeling herself for the task ahead.

“Be careful,” said the Major softly by her side.

Andrea gave her one last reassuring look before she leapt from the plane.

Suddenly she was flung backwards through the air, both planes zooming off ahead of her as she tumbled away. Only of course she wasn't going backwards, that was just the disconcerting sensation she got. In fact she was falling where she was, while the planes were moving away from her at speed. Gathering herself she activated her power to fly, soaring off after the two planes. It never ceased to amaze her that she could fly, not to mention fly as fast as she was doing. As she neared she could see the Major clinging to the edge of the still open hatch on the military aircraft, watching Andrea's movements anxiously.

Moving up towards the passenger jet Andrea was buffeted by the air in its slipstream, having to fight hard to keep flying a straight course towards its underside. At least the goggles made it much easier to see now, Andrea assuming they must be covered with some special anti-fog coating. Skirting along the white metal she came to the location of the undercarriage, looking just as it had in the hasty briefing they'd received before they'd left their island base. Her fingers sought out something to grip onto so she could brace herself to prise open the access panel. Dangling upside down all those feet above the sea while clinging onto the bottom of a fast-moving plane Andrea did have a brief flashing thought of how bizarre it was before the adrenaline took over once more.

Just as she was wrenching the metal open the plane suddenly swerved and dipped in the air. Andrea completely lost her hold, bashing her head against the fuselage and spiralling out of control up the side of the aircraft in a daze. She just about had the presence of mind to latch onto the wing with a desperate grasping hand before she was sucked straight into the spinning engine. The pull from the turbine was fierce, sucking at her feet as they hovered in the air mere feet from it. Slowly she managed to drag herself along the wing away from it.

Andrea? Are you there? Are you all right?

The Major's voice carried a definite frantic edge to it as it came to Andrea over her earpiece.

"Yes, I'm here," she verified, "Though I had a close call with one of the engines. I'm heading back round to the target area now."

She wasted no time opening the hatch this time, clambering up into the cold interior of the lower regions on the plane. Taking a moment she had to unpop her ears in the relative quiet that greeted her out of the rushing wind. She pushed her goggles up onto the top of her brow, reaffixing her disarrayed hair into a tight ponytail. Reaching into her top vest pocket, she pulled out the schematics of the Boeing 757, checking her location and where she needed to go before she set off.

Andrea had to crawl through the cargo area and over the haphazardly piled suitcases before she got to where she could safely punch up into the main area of the plane. With great care she tentatively eased up the small access panel, opening it just enough so she could get a view of the passenger deck of the aircraft. Almost directly in front of her eyes was a pair of booted feet, luckily facing away from Andrea. The nervous sweat was prickling down Andrea's spine now as she attempted to gauge how many terrorists were on board without being spotted. The man in front of her was cradling a

gun as he surveyed the passengers, all still firmly in their seats. Further along the central aisle, Andrea could see two more men, one by the central emergency exits and one at the far end. She assumed there was probably at least one more in the cockpit.

Ducking back down out of sight, Andrea relayed what she had discovered to the Major in hushed tones. The Major listened intently before quizzing Andrea on the armaments she had seen. Though each of the men carried automatic weapons, Andrea had seen no evidence of a bomb, at least not on the terrorists' person.

All right, said the Major eventually, We'll move to stage two of the plan then. Just be careful of that engine this time, Andrea.

Andrea smiled to herself, despite the situation, finding it funny that the Major still found the time to be concerned for her safety. Andrea worked her way back the way she had come, making sure she gave the engines a wide berth as she exited the craft and flew back down to the other plane. Judging the entrance to the small hatch was quite tricky in the swirling wind and Andrea had made a few abortive attempts before the Major's firm hand shot out and latched onto her arm. Andrea then managed to stagger inside, offering the Major a quick smile of thanks.

"How are you doing, no problems with your powers?" the Major quickly checked.

Andrea reflexively patted the regulator under her left jacket sleeve. "Everything seems to be functioning fine," she confirmed.

"Good, time to ferry some passengers of your own then."

That was Andrea's cue to carry the other superhumans over to the passenger jet, since she was the only one that could fly. The possibility of setting up some sort of line between the two planes had been mooted during planning, but the military craft would have to be much closer and risk being spotted by the terrorists. So instead Andrea grabbed a firm hold on the back of Harry and Bel's vests and launched herself from the plane once more. Harry let out a scream at the initial freefall, Andrea's laugh in response lost on the wind. Once she had safely deposited them in the cargo hold she went back for Tom, his reaction to the leap entirely different to Harry's as he whooped with delight.

"That was better than any skydiving!" he said enthusiastically when they were back inside the other aircraft too, "I can't believe you get to do that all the time."

The four of them followed Andrea's previous course through the baggage hold and up to the back of the plane. They took a moment to verify that they all knew what they were supposed to do before Andrea popped the hatch and they were off. The confined quarters of the cabin made it hard for them to utilise their powers to best effect but Tom managed to zip off to the far end, heading for the cockpit. Harry tackled the man closest to the hatch and Andrea was up over the seats, aiming for the man by the central exits. Fortunately he was too surprised to see someone flying over the heads of the passengers to raise his gun before she got there. Once she was in range Andrea snatched it off him, using the butt to crack him across the jaw and lay him out cold.

The sound of screaming from behind her caused Andrea to whirl around. On the opposite side of the aisle from her, by the other emergency exit another terrorist had appeared, grabbing a girl from her seat as a hostage. He pointed his gun at the girl's head now; the terrified youngster couldn't have been more than ten years of age. The screaming was coming from both the girl and what must have been her mother who was hysterically begging the man to let her daughter go. Andrea cursed herself for not having spotted the additional terrorist – he must have been hiding amongst the passengers.

The man dark eyes shot to Andrea. “Drop the gun!” he cried, his own weapon shaking in his hand in his highly anxious state.

It took Andrea a moment to realise he meant the one she had snatched from his fellow hi-jacker and still held. She carefully placed it on the floor at her feet, not wanting to antagonise the volatile man in the slightest.

“All right, all right,” she said as she slowly straightened up, placing her hands before her, “Just take it easy. Why don't you give me the girl and we can talk about this?”

“Stay back!” screamed the man spotting Harry now advancing up the aisle towards him too, “Just stay away from me you freaks!”

The terrorist used his free hand to force up the lever on the emergency exit and suddenly the door was sucked outwards in a rush. The cabin filled with a swirling, whipping wind in an instant, a number of the passengers screaming in terror now at the maelstrom that enveloped them. Andrea had grabbed onto one of the seats as soon as the door was popped, her fingers digging into the material to stop her being sucked out with all the other loose items.

“Don't be stupid,” she yelled at the man over the wind, seeing that he was eyeing up the sky outside.

“I said stay away from me!” he repeated fearfully backing up against the wall by the door, still gripping the young girl close.

Andrea motioned for Harry to stop his advance up the aisle, the terrorist's eyes swinging sharply around the plane.

“All right, we're not coming anywhere near you,” said Andrea in a calm and reasonable voice. She tried to make eye contact with the girl to give her a reassuring smile.

Out of the corner of her eye Andrea spied Bel advancing from the front of the plane. Andrea tried to gesture to her to keep back but it was too late – the terrorist had seen her too. Raising his gun he started randomly firing towards Tardelli, who threw herself to the floor to dodge the hail of bullets. Andrea seized her chance to leap at the man but not before he had flung the girl from him, the child disappearing straight out the open door. Andrea banged the man's arm against the wall to dislodge his weapon and then laid him out with a punch to the jaw. Hoping the others could mop up, she swiftly jumped out the door herself.

Andrea freefell from the plane, quickly jamming her goggles back down over her eyes as the wind rushed past her face. She scanned the vast open sky, trying desperately to spot the girl as she plummeted towards the sea. She searched and searched but she could see no sign of her. Then there she was – another plunging figure against the blue. Andrea shot after her, closing the distance between them in a flash. As Andrea got close she could just hear the girl’s screams over the roar of the wind, screams which abruptly ceased as Andrea wrapped her arms around the girl’s body and brought the pair of them to a sudden stop in the sky. The girl’s wide eyes shot up to Andrea in surprise before glancing down and seeing only Andrea’s dangling feet between her and the sea hundreds of feet below. She clutched even tighter to Andrea’s vest on seeing the sight.

“Who are you?” she managed in a tiny voice.

Andrea smiled at her. “Just a friend....”

“Amy,” the girl filled in for Andrea.

“Ok, Amy,” said Andrea, using her best confident and calming tone, “You’re doing great so far, but I need you to be an even braver girl now, while we try and get back to the plane. Do you think you can do that?”

The girl merely nodded, still clinging tightly to Andrea.

“Major?” queried Andrea over her radio link.

There was no reply, and Andrea’s eyes searched the sky ahead of her, seeing that the two planes were now mere specks in the distance way above, obviously too far away for the short distance signal to carry. Taking a deep breath she set off after them, cradling the girl close to her chest to try and protect her from the freezing wind that battered them. Andrea’s muscles were crying out in pain as she struggled to catch up, fearing for the first time that she wasn’t going to make it. As her energy resources were depleted she felt herself tiring and her speed dipping, the two planes edging closer with agonising slowness now. Though Andrea’s power allowed her to absorb more energy to replace what she lost, the prolonged high-speed flying was depleting her reserves faster than she could replace them. They had discovered that she had an optimal flying speed to maintain the equilibrium over a long time, and her current pace was far in excess of that. Sooner or later she would run out of energy and then she wouldn’t be flying any more, she would be falling rapidly towards the unforgiving sea. With one final superhuman effort she forced herself on, gratefully tumbling inside the hatch of the military craft.

“Andrea!” The Major was on her in a flash, kneeling down beside her as Andrea fought to catch her breath having safely set the girl down. The Major’s hand rested gently on Andrea’s back while she took great shuddering gasps of air. “We thought we’d lost you! Are you all right?”

Andrea took a couple of more rasping draws of oxygen, pushing her goggles up off her eyes. “Yes,” she managed, “I just need to get my breath for a moment, allow my

energy to recharge.” Already she could feel her body naturally doing that, absorbing energy from the light around her to replace what she had used.

“That was some pretty impressive flying.” The Major’s tone had become calmer now, after her initial mixture of shock and relief.

“Thanks,” said Andrea, finally able to get to her feet, though she wobbled slightly, the Major reaching out to steady her. “What’s going on over on the other plane?”

“They’ve neutralised all the terrorists...”

Major! The voice on the radio interrupted them, audible in both of their ears.

“Yes, what is it?”

I think we’ve got a problem here, continued Tardelli, During the brief firefight it seems both of the pilots were injured. I guess we must be on some sort of automatic pilot since we’re still up in the air, but we’ve got no one to land this thing and a whole host of lights flashing at us in the cockpit.

“Shit,” cursed the Major to herself, “All right, stand by Bel.”

She swung to Andrea, gazing up at her in a look of quiet assessment, her blue eyes peering out intently beneath the brim of her cap. “Are you all right to do some more flying?”

Andrea’s eyebrows arched up against her goggles. “You want me to ferry all 150 passengers over here?” she asked incredulously.

“No,” said the Major with a shake of the head, “We’d never fit them all in for a start. I was thinking of one additional passenger to the other plane.”

Andrea regarded her quizzically for a second.

“Fortunately during my career I’ve also learnt a few extra skills, including how to fly a plane,” explained the Major.

Andrea’s eyebrows were up again. “You want me to take you over there?”

“You *can* manage that can’t you?”

Andrea hadn’t really given taking passengers a second thought while ferrying any of the others about, but when faced with the prospect of being responsible for the Major’s safety she was suddenly unsure. “Er...yes...I think so.”

It seemed the Major didn’t share her concerns, willing to trust in Andrea’s abilities. “Let’s go then.”

When they reached the open hatch they paused for a moment, Andrea wondering exactly how to pick up the Major. Somehow hauling her around by the scruff of her

neck like she had the others didn't seem quite right. Instead she found herself offering up her arms, an invite for the Major to hop up into them.

The Major shot her a brief querying look before taking the plunge and leaping up into the waiting arms. "All right, all set," said the Major looking out the hatch.

Andrea was so distracted by the smaller body in her arms that she didn't immediately reply. Or move. Or breathe.

The Major's arms had naturally looped round Andrea's neck, a few strands of her hair poking out from under her cap and tickling against the exposed skin of Andrea's neck and chin. Andrea's legs were suddenly weak and she didn't think it had anything to do with the extra weight she was carrying. Noticing Andrea's hesitation the Major swung her eyes up to the young woman.

"Is everything ok?"

"Er...yes..." was all Andrea could think of saying, far too preoccupied with contemplating the warm curves pressed up against her chest.

Andrea took a couple of steadying breaths – now was not the time for such distractions. "Hold on tight," she said eventually before jumping into the free air.

The Major's arms reflexively tightened their hold round Andrea's neck and Andrea followed suit, pulling the other woman even closer to her. Though the air was freezing around them, the warm glow spreading through Andrea at the close contact was more than enough to compensate for it. In fact she thought she could quite happily continue flying along like this, out in the open air, not a care in the world.

"Andrea!"

Broken from her daydream, Andrea's eyes flicked down to the Major. "Huh?"

"The other plane is over there?" the Major instructed her with a tilt of the head.

Andrea looked over at it too, realising that she had been flying aimlessly through the sky in a random direction while her thoughts meandered. "Right, of course." She noted trying to make it seem she had known that all along and was taking them on the small detour on purpose. Forcing herself to concentrate, she cradled her precious cargo to her and carefully flew up to exit she had leapt from minutes before.

Once in the plane they both immediately headed for the cockpit, finding Harry and Bel fussing over the controls, trying to work out what to do. When Bel saw the Major had entered, she quickly vacated her seat, Harry also clambering out of the co-pilot's chair. Andrea watched as the Major surveyed the controls, checking a number of readings on her instruments and dials, of which there were many spread out in front of her and up over the ceiling too. Even though she couldn't directly see the other woman's face, the anxious movements and sharp intakes of breath were enough to alert Andrea to the possibility that all may not be well.

“Is there a problem?” she asked, leaning onto the back of the pilot’s chair.

The Major continued to flick switches and tap controls as she spoke. “Yes, we need to land – very soon!”

The Major grabbed the headset and proceeded to have a heated conversation with what Andrea could only assume was air traffic control. It seemed there was some debate over where exactly they should land, the Major eventually winning out. Andrea could understand that, she didn’t see how anyone could argue when the other woman took on the imperious tone she had used.

Removing the headphones for a moment, the Major craned round to the three superhumans. “Right Bel, Harry, go back and make sure the passengers are ok, I’m taking us down to land at Lanzarote. Tell them to fasten their seatbelts but remain calm, it’s just a landing like any other.”

Harry and Bel quickly beetled out the door, Andrea once again leaning over the shoulder of the Major’s chair. “Was that true? About the landing?”

“No,” confessed the other woman, “I’m not sure we’ve got enough fuel to make it - we could be gliding in the last bit.”

Andrea pursed her lips for a second, digesting the information. Though she didn’t know much about these things, she imagined landing a plane without any engines was pretty tricky.

“You can go back to the other plane if you want,” the Major offered.

Andrea’s brow creased in incredulity. “And leave you to it? Don’t be ridiculous! I’m staying right here.”

She had surprised herself with the vehemence of her words, but the Major smiled in response. “In that case you can take the co-pilot’s seat,” she said gesturing to the one next to her.

Andrea lowered herself into it, taking a moment to work out what she was supposed to do with the various straps of the harness. Next to her the Major had removed her cap and was running her hands through her hair which had become plastered to her head under its hot confines. Having enticed some life back into the bob, she put on the headset again, Andrea removing her earpiece and following suit.

“I’m going to need you to help out,” the Major said over her microphone, “Just follow my instructions and we should be fine.”

Andrea could have replied over the comm system too, but instead she felt the urge to turn to the other woman and nod her assent. It seemed the Major was expecting it, since she was already watching as Andrea’s head turned to her. The shared a brief look of understanding before both placed their hands on the control columns in front of them, though in Andrea’s case it was more for reassurance than she would be doing any actual flying. This time that was going to be all up to the Major.

The Major wasted no time in beginning her pre-landing checks before finally flipping off the automatic pilot and easing the plane into a slow banking turn. Andrea could see the sea far below then, stretching out in unending blueness, but no sign of any airport or any land at all came to that. She just had to trust the Major knew what she was doing.

“Andrea, can you flip that switch, third one up on control panel second from centre. The one with the flashing red light next to it.”

Andrea followed the other woman’s directions, flicking the requested switch. The Major instructed her to perform similar actions on a number of other controls as the plane continued its descent. The grinding from the undercarriage indicated the Major had lowered the landing gear and finally Andrea could see something up ahead of them, something very small. She really hoped it wasn’t what they were heading for because it didn’t look big enough to park a car on, let alone a whole plane. She took a nervous gulp, just as a loud beeping filled her headphones.

“What is it?” she asked the Major, who was tapping at one of the gauges in front of her.

“There goes the fuel,” noted the Major evenly.

Andrea didn’t know how she could be so calm about it. Here they were gliding in on nothing more than fumes and the Major looked as if it was a Sunday afternoon stroll in the park. Not that the Major really seemed like the sort of person to take Sunday afternoon strolls in the park, considered Andrea – they were probably far too sedate for her. Andrea had to shake herself and fix her mind on the present, thinking that it was no doubt her anxiety that was causing her mind to wander so badly.

“Hold on, this could get bumpy,” the Major said. The way the officer’s arms were vibrating as she grimly held onto the control column was evidence enough of that. The same juddering sensation was buffeting Andrea, rattling the teeth in her head.

The plane was dipping dangerously close to the water now, with the safety of the runway seemingly too far off for them to make it. Andrea dug her fingers into the armrests of her chair, leaning back into it as she willed them on. Then suddenly she was flung forwards as the plane’s wheels hit the tarmac and the Major swiftly applied the brakes. The tyres screeched ear-piercingly as they strove to halt the tonnes of metal, the plane finally coming to a halt a good few yards from the end of the runway.

Andrea tipped her head back against the leather, closing her eyes and heaving the hugest sigh of relief. The sound of spontaneous cheering and clapping filtered through to her from the back of the plane. There was also a much closer clunk and Andrea opened her eyes to see that the Major had peeled off her headset and let it drop to the metal floor. She was leaning back in her seat too, breathing heavily – it seemed that some things could get under that unflappable exterior after all.

“Maybe you should go and meet your adoring public?” suggested Andrea jokingly, with a tilt of the head to the main cabin behind them.

The Major grinned wryly. “I think I’ve had enough excitement for one day!”

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Of course neither the Major nor Andrea did in fact go back and make themselves known to the passengers. Knowing the continued need for secrecy and security, the Major and the superhumans had been spirited off the plane and away back to Scotland before any members of the press or anyone else got anywhere near them. The government’s cover-up machine went into overdrive, creating enough confusion around the incident to discount any accounts of people with strange abilities. Luckily most of the passengers had been far too terrified to pay proper attention, let alone offer a coherent record of what had happened. All most of them could remember was that some army personnel had somehow got onboard and saved them, the identities of those people unknown.

However, though the Major and the superhumans were unsung heroes as far as the general public were concerned, they found that it was a different matter once they got back to the base. There everyone wanted to shake their hand and congratulate them at length. Andrea was amazed at the reaction, supposing they all had a vested interest in the success of the project. The only person who didn’t look happy was Lieutenant Chadwick, but then again he never did.

It was late on the Tuesday when they touched down, and after the impromptu reception they all retired to get some much needed rest. Andrea herself was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow, for once her night not being disturbed by unpleasant dreams.

The next day started with a round of debriefings of the mission, but come the afternoon there was a surprise visitor in the form of Lieutenant Colonel Parsons. The base personnel hastily assembled on the parade ground next to the main complex to receive him, lining up just as his helicopter landed. First to greet him was the Major, having to hold onto her peaked uniform hat as she waited at the edge of the helipad. Andrea found her eyes drifting to the skirt the Major wore as part of her more official uniform, wondering if she was going to need to hold onto that too as the rotors spun viciously close by. Unfortunately the skirt looked like it was slightly too tight to be blown up by the wind.

Andrea must have been staring just a bit too hard, because suddenly she realised the Major was looking back at her with a quizzical expression. Andrea flushed slightly and averted her eyes, but not before she noticed the Major’s smile at having caught Andrea out.

The Major led Colonel Parsons along the line, introducing him to all the personnel. Andrea watched with interest as the white-haired officer got to Tom, the Colonel offering a stiff hand to his son, but no words to signify that Tom was anyone other than another member of staff. Andrea felt annoyed on Tom’s behalf, hoping that maybe the Colonel just didn’t want to say anything in front of everyone and would have a private talk with his estranged son later.

The two officers were in front of Andrea now, the Major gesturing in the young woman's direction. "This is Andrea Hallstrom, our newest recruit."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Hallstrom," said the older man, Andrea taking his proffered hand to shake. She was wickedly tempted to use her powers to squeeze harder than was necessary but just about resisted the childish urge. "I hear you were responsible for some daring and courageous flying during the mission, well done" the Colonel commented.

Andrea's eyes immediately flicked to the Major, knowing she must be the source of such information. "Thank you," she said to the Colonel, "Though it was a team effort."

"Of course," he agreed, "And we're pleased with all of you."

The Major led him on further down the line, the sun now coming out and sweeping over the concrete to add to the upbeat mood of the day. As the sunshine passed over the Major, the crowns on each of her shoulders glistened in the brightness, the brass polished to perfection for the visit of her commanding officer. Finally the two officers reached the end of the row and continued on inside the main building.

Once the formalities were over, everyone else retreated to the rec room, where Corporal Lister had organised a party to celebrate the success of their first mission. Andrea disappeared up to her room first to change into something less formal, picking out her favourite pair of jeans and a simple black shirt. Upon entering the rec room she could see that the pool and snooker tables had been pushed off to the side to make way for a dance floor on one side of the room, over which one of the soldiers acted as DJ. The main lights in that part of the room were dimmed to allow the flashing, coloured lights of the disco to sweep across the floor instead. Though it was early a few soldiers were already clumping round the wooden floor in a highly uncoordinated way, making Andrea think they'd had a few drinks already.

In other parts of the room there were tables sporting various foodstuffs, while the bar was heaving. Andrea pushed through the throng now to try and order herself a drink, one of the men ahead of her happy to oblige and get her one. With her beer in her hand she turned to the room, spying Doc hovering by one of the tables regarding a pie shaped object with suspicion. He looked pleased when he spotted her heading his way and quickly dumped the pie back down on a paper plate, wiping his hands.

"One of Corporal Lister's more intriguing creations," he said motioning towards the half-eaten pie, "I'm not entirely sure if it was meant to taste of peanut butter or not."

Andrea surveyed the other items on offer, selecting a safe-looking sausage roll to bite into, relieved to find it had no mystery ingredients beyond the meat and pastry.

She and Doc chatted for some time eventually being joined by Harry too. As the young man gave Doc a blow by blow account of his part in the rescue, Andrea got the sudden urge to look round at the door. Her back had been to it, but now she glanced over her shoulder she caught sight of the Major entering. Andrea wondered what had made her turn at that moment. To compound the tingling sensation that was already

building in Andrea's stomach, the Major seemed to show a similar sixth sense by identifying that Andrea was looking at her through the crowd and offering the young woman a quick flashing smile. She still wore the same uniform she had up on the helipad, though somewhere between there and the rec room she had lost her hat, jacket and tie. Her light-green collar was also open and the other woman looked happily relaxed as she crossed the room, talking with Dr Todd.

Eventually Andrea lost sight of the auburn head amongst the crowd, only then realising she had been tracking it at all. She quickly switched her attention back to the two men, thankful they didn't seem to have noticed her momentary lapse in concentration.

As the evening progressed Andrea caught sight of the auburn head a couple of more times, but never really got close enough to the Major to have a private word. They hadn't really had the chance to speak at all since the Major had landed the passenger jet successfully, and Andrea wanted to thank the other woman for her part in the mission, not least of which was the support she'd given Andrea.

Caught up in the celebration of the evening, Andrea had completely forgotten the other big event of the night until the sound of football filtered over the music from the dancefloor. Andrea drifted over to join the small group that gathered in the far corner of the room, around the television set. Tom was already there, swinging round to see Andrea approaching.

"1-0 down already I'm afraid."

Andrea thought he looked a little too pleased to be relaying the information that Liverpool were currently losing the Champions' League Final.

"We'll come back in a minute," she said confidently, sitting down next to him on the sofa.

Her brash words came back to haunt her almost immediately as Milan scored a second and then a third in quick succession. As the minutes ticked on, Andrea was getting a horrible sinking feeling in her stomach – 3-0 was just plain embarrassing. Before she could voice her concerns out loud, someone else did it for her.

"Oh my god, I'm afraid to watch anymore!"

Andrea swivelled round to see the Major hovering behind the sofa, glass of whiskey in hand. Andrea didn't know how long she had been there since she'd been engrossed in the match. The Major's relaxed demeanour for the night had extended to the sleeves on her shirt now being rolled up to just above her elbows, while Andrea was convinced another button at the neck had also been undone. The other woman was dangerously close to revealing her undergarments now, a stray thought crossing Andrea's mind as to how she could get the Major to lean forward. The young woman swiftly swept it away before it became too graphic.

"I think I might need a few more of these," the Major added sardonically, coming round to sit on the sofa next to Andrea, even though it was a bit of a tight fit.

Fortunately the game was still tense enough for Andrea to just about manage to ignore the pleasant warm sensation of their thighs pressed together.

The match continued, but Andrea couldn't help glancing to her side every now and then. Most times the Major would be busily watching the game, but on one occasion the Major glanced back, a small smile creeping across her face as she noticed the perusal. The strange flip in Andrea's stomach that evoked was highly alarming and she rapidly turned back to the screen, resisting the temptation to look again until the half-time whistle blew.

"Would you like another one?" Andrea asked the Major, promptly getting to her feet and indicating the other woman's now empty glass. She was glad to have an excuse to put a bit of distance between her and the Major, considering the odd tricks her body seemed to be playing on her.

The Major's lips creased into a wry grin. "Better make that a double if I'm going to endure another forty-five minutes of this!"

"You could always not watch," offered Andrea.

The Major just looked at her as if she had said 'you could always not breathe'. Andrea smiled in return. "I know, we're in it to the bitter end. I'll get the drinks."

The bar was still crowded and Andrea had to jostle between the bodies and then stand waiting to be served this time. As she did she was joined by Tom, who leaned in as if to say something quietly. *Here we go*, thought Andrea, *the taunting about Liverpool's performance*. She steeled herself for the impending jibes.

"Would you like me to leave you two alone on the sofa?"

"What?" asked Andrea, confused by the question. It wasn't what she had been expecting at all.

"You and the Major," clarified Tom, louder than Andrea would have wished for.

Andrea rolled her eyes as she realised what he meant. "No, you do not need to leave us alone!" she stated a touch more vehemently than she had intended.

"I suppose at least with me there you get to be squeezed nice and close together," said Tom with a wink and a slight nudge in the arm.

Andrea frowned at him. "Would you like me to pour one of these pints over your head?"

"Good luck getting one!" replied Tom, looking along the packed bar.

Finally Andrea managed to draw the barman's attention and get her drinks, leaving Tom there since Bel had wandered over to join him. As Andrea crossed back over to the sofa she could see that the party in the rest of the room was still in full swing, though the numbers around the television set were slowly increasing. Though it was

Liverpool playing, the fact that it was a Europe wide competition meant even supporters of other British teams were favouring them that particular night. Luckily Andrea's spot on the sofa was still free, the young woman briefly wondering if the Major had been saving it for her.

At least Andrea initially thought it was lucky her place was still vacant, but as she sat close to the Major her temperature once again started to creep up. It kept going unchecked on its upward course as the Major picked up her glass and started playing distractedly with the rim. Her fingers slid tantalisingly along the fine edge, Andrea watching them every inch of the way and back again, almost hypnotised by their dance. Thankfully the match resumed at that moment, and Andrea tore her eyes away from the Major's hands and fixed them resolutely on the screen. Just when she could feel her eyes trying to swing back to the woman next to her, the unbelievable happened – Liverpool scored. Andrea watched in amazement as Gerrard ran back to the centrespot, punching the air and encouraging his teammates. *Did he really think they could come back?*

“At least it's not embarrassing now,” the Major whispered next to her.

Andrea had to agree, though she couldn't quite find the words to say so as the trace of the Major's hot breath lingered on her ear. When the second Liverpool goal went in moments later, Andrea's eyes immediately shot to the other woman, widening in shock. The Major looked equally as stunned, knowing as Andrea did that this sort of fairytale simply didn't happen, especially not in European cup finals. Yet it seemed like it was a night for dreams because not four minutes later Liverpool had won a penalty. As soon as the ball was in the back of the net Andrea leapt up, punching the air with an emphatic ‘yes!’. The Major was still sitting on the sofa, shaking her head and laughing in total astonishment.

Andrea flopped back down, grinning inanely. “Unbelievable!” she said.

“Now we just need to get a winner!” noted the Major.

Andrea was unable to prevent herself from daring to believe that was possible. Try as they might, though, Liverpool couldn't find the final, killer blow and as the game ebbed on into extra time the tension in the room grew perceptibly. Andrea didn't think she was going to have any nails left if this went on much longer and the Major looked equally anxious next to her. Her glass was long since empty, but no one dared leave the sofa in case they missed something vital. At least the tense match had distracted Andrea from the magnetic pull the Major seemed to have on her eyes, though now she found herself shooting the other woman a few surreptitious glances again. Andrea didn't know why she had the urge to keep looking that particular night, it was just something about the way the Major seemed to be brimming with energy that kept drawing Andrea in. She was exuding a sense of power, enthusiasm and something else undefinable repressed only just beneath the surface, all of them waiting to explode if allowed. They didn't get the chance though, and after a few more close calls, the final whistle blew, signalling that the game was to be decided by the lottery of a penalty shoot-out.

“Oh god,” the Major said with a sigh, “Why do these always have to be so agonising?”

Andrea didn't know, only knowing that they could be as agonising as hell and she wouldn't care if it meant the Major would repeat the words 'oh god' in that breathy way again. Andrea mentally shook herself – here was the most important night in Liverpool's recent history and she was thinking about husky voices? She forced her eyes to the television set once more, thinking that the Major was right about the tense nature of the shootout. Everything about them seemed designed to test the nerves of both the players and the spectators to the limit. From the waiting around before the shootout commenced, to the long, slow, solo walk to the penalty spot for each taker. Going by the looks on the players' faces it always seemed more like they were on the way to their execution rather than to kick a football at a target twelve yards away.

Andrea could hardly watch, yet at the same time she couldn't tear her eyes from the riveting climax to the rollercoaster match. She found that she was biting her fingernails again and she forced her nervous hands down onto her knees, holding on as the first man strode to meet his fate.

One after another the men took their shots, Liverpool taking an early advantage, until it was 3-2 with one of the Milan players next to go. It was all down to this one shot. If Shevchenko of Milan missed or Dudek in goal managed to save it, then the cup would be Liverpool's. After eighteen years of near-misses and heartache it would finally be Liverpool's time. A deathly hush descended over the room, a hundred people holding their breath in unison. Andrea jumped as she felt a hand on her shoulder, gripping tightly. Surprised, she peered at the woman next to her to see the Major eyes still glued to the screen. Andrea realised the gesture had been completely subconscious – the Major had needed to hold onto something for reassurance and Andrea's shoulder was the closest thing. The Major's fingers were hot where they rested on Andrea's shirt, gripping even tighter now as movement came from the screen. Andrea turned back to see what was happening in Istanbul.

The ball was on the spot...Shevchenko was running at it...and...Dudek had saved it!

The room erupted as one in a cacophony of cheering. Andrea was up out of her seat in an instant, jumping in the air and joining in the unfettered whooping. The Major had done exactly the same next to her and without thinking they both simultaneously grabbed one another in a hug of unbridled joy. They danced up and down, spinning round on the spot as the clamour continued around them. Normally Andrea would never have dared to embrace the Major as she was doing, but in this moment of shared ecstasy it seemed completely natural and appropriate.

Andrea could hardly take it all in, dimly aware of the celebrations going on around them, but more acutely aware of the warm body she was clinging onto. A huge smile graced the Major's face and Andrea had little doubt that she bore a similar expression. It was just unbelievable – *they had won, they had actually won!*

Suddenly another pair of arms enveloped them both. “You lucky buggers!” cried Tom over the tumult, though he too was grinning.

The Major eventually broke away from them both, and Andrea found herself swept up in an unending round of hugs and slaps on the back from pretty much everyone present. The room was a dizzying melee of sound and bodies as she moved round it without really thinking what she was doing, just being carried along on the tide of good cheer.

Finally she ended up over by the dancefloor where the DJ had had the good sense to dim his music while the game had reached its conclusion. Now, however, he had quickly thrown on some upbeat party tunes to reflect the mood, the first strains of 'Celebration' ringing in Andrea's ears. As she was contemplating joining the heaving mass of humanity already on the dancefloor the decision was taken from her. Her hand was grabbed, and she was unceremoniously hauled out onto the wooden floor by the Major. Andrea tried to contain her surprise as the other woman let go of Andrea's hand and then started dancing in front of her.

The Major glanced at Andrea with an amused half-smile on her face, still swaying in time to the music as she leaned in to enable her to speak over the noise. "It's customary to dance when on the dancefloor," she yelled over the pounding beat.

Andrea couldn't think of anything sensible to say in response, too mesmerised by the utterly incongruous sight of the Major dancing. Not only dancing, but dancing rather well. Finally Andrea's brain managed to send the signal to her feet to move too. She had never had trouble dancing while in clubs back in London, but here with the Major she felt awfully self-conscious and stilted as she shifted from side to side. As the song progressed she found herself relaxing into the music a bit, though she still couldn't take her eyes off the Major, watching the way she moved. Andrea didn't think the other woman was even aware of how seductive those movements were, it just appeared natural and effortless. Andrea considered that maybe her inhibitions were loosened by the combination of drink and the joy of Liverpool's victory. Whatever the cause of it, Andrea was more than happy to bear witness to this looser version of the Major.

The music was changing now, the DJ obviously deciding that it would be appropriate to play 'We Are The Champions'. The song was much slower, not really lending itself to the frenetic dancing they had been engaged in before. There was an awkward moment as Andrea wondered what to do before the Major took charge again, sweeping Andrea up and starting to lead her around the dancefloor as if it were a proper slow dance. Of course the song wasn't intended for that at all, but Andrea wasn't complaining. No one else seemed bothered either, all too busy singing along to the triumphant tune to notice or care about the two women dancing together.

Andrea certainly cared though. To her it was like the other people weren't even there, like everything else had faded into the background in the light of the commanding presence before her. She was utterly swept up in the joyous, confident aura of the other woman.

It was then she started to notice the effect it was having on her. It felt so unbelievably good to hold the Major and a whole mass of sensations was buffeting Andrea's senses as they glided across the floor - the feel of the smaller body pressed close with its constant heartbeat detectable beneath her breast; the touch of the Major's breath as it

whispered out somewhere along Andrea's neck; the smell of the Major's perfume, sweet and intoxicating.

Andrea's heart was beating so rapidly now that she feared she might actually pass out at any minute. Andrea was reminded of holding the Major the day before, cradling her in her arms as they soared through the sky, only this time she actually had time to savour the wonderful moment.

Then the Major looked up at her and it was like being struck by lightning. The soft blue eyes penetrated all the way to Andrea's soul, stripping away her defences to leave the truth staring her in the face.

All those strange emotions Andrea had been feeling these past weeks. That disarming feeling she got whenever she was in the Major's presence. That urge to please the Major whenever possible and the ridiculous sense of pride when she did. The way she noticed every little mannerism and detail about the other woman. The desire to talk to her, confide in her, protect her, be with her even for the most spurious of reasons. Under the gaze of those wonderful blue eyes the reason behind it all was now glaringly obvious to Andrea.

She was in love. She was in love with the Major.

Now she had voiced it, it was so blatantly obvious she couldn't believe she hadn't realised sooner, or maybe she hadn't wanted to realise.

"Are you all right, Andrea," asked the Major, noticing her distraction.

Andrea was far from all right. It was all she could do to move her feet still, let alone engage in conversation. She knew she had to get out, try and regain some composure, before she blurted something out in the heat of the moment. She managed to disentangle herself from the Major, though her body was screaming at her not to break the tantalising contact.

"I just need a bit of air," she managed to say. She didn't care how stupid it sounded, anything would do right now.

"Are you sure you're ok?" asked the Major, looking concerned now.

Andrea managed a quick, strangled 'yes' before she pushed hastily through the crowd of bodies to get out of the room. Once safely outside she collapsed against the corridor wall, trying to calm her breathing and racing heart. Neither seemed willing to oblige, her body still able to recall how it felt to hold the Major and conspiratorially urging her to go back inside and take the other woman in her arms again. Andrea shook her head, knowing it was hopeless, that she could do no such thing.

How had she let this happen? How had she let herself fall for the Major?

As those thoughts crossed her mind, she knew that it had hardly been a conscious choice. Her heart had led her down this path and she may as well have stood on the beach and told the tide to turn back as to try and stop its course. She tried to reason to

herself that it was just a crush, but deep down she knew that wasn't true. There was no way the intense emotions the Major stirred in her was anything other than what she had already admitted – love.

It had been there before, of course, maybe even from the very beginning. She'd found herself drawn to the Major even then, when they had been arguing about why she was there in those early days. And that desire to interact with her had only gotten stronger over the weeks, though Andrea had resolutely maintained it was friendship at the time. Only now she had admitted to herself what it was she was really feeling, all her behaviour of the past couple of months fell into place. She knew without doubt that she was smitten.

To prove her point, a myriad set of images of the Major swept through her mind now - the Major sitting sternly behind the desk exuding power and confidence the very first time they had spoken; the Major clinging onto Andrea as the rain lashed down on the windswept night when Andrea had pulled her from the crashed car; the Major offering her a look of understanding at Maria's funeral; the Major laughing in the sunlight as she took the wheel of her boat; the Major gazing wistfully up at the stars as the moonlight reflected off her face on the rooftop; the Major smiling softly as they shared a drink in her quarters. And then finally the look from earlier that night, gazing up at her, blue eyes bright as Andrea held her in her arms.

Andrea shook her head again, sighing long and hard to herself. This was just what she needed, she considered, a nice case of unrequited love. For she knew that was what it was. Not only was the Major straight, but even if she wasn't there was that whole thing about getting involved with people under her command, especially after what had happened with Dixon. With sickening clarity Andrea knew that she couldn't say anything to the Major about this – it would be totally inappropriate and what would be the point? It would only make the Major uncomfortable since there was no way she would or could return Andrea's feelings.

There was only one course of action available to Andrea as far as she could see – she would try and restrict the time they spent together and hope the feelings went away. Even as she voiced the plan in her head she knew it was patently ridiculous – now she had opened the Pandora's box of her emotions, stuffing them back in again was going to be impossible.

CHAPTER 14

The Major crossed to her desk placing her steaming mug of coffee down on the metal coaster that sat waiting. The clang of the contact seemed to reverberate around her brain with an added touch of venom that morning and she brought her hand up to rub gingerly at her temple. She considered that she was getting too old for late night partying. Not that she had been drunk or anything the night before, and even if she had been she thought that it would have been permitted for once.

The total and utter amazing joy of the moment when Liverpool had won had been mind-blowing. As the penalty was saved it was a split second of complete perfection when nothing else in the world mattered. The fact that there were about a hundred other people in the room all jumping up and down madly with her had only added to the fantastic sense of triumph. It had seemed entirely natural to grab Andrea in that moment and embrace her, knowing that she would be feeling the exact same sense of pride and joy, mixed with a healthy dose of incredulity.

The Major hadn't thought twice about subsequently dragging the young woman onto the dance floor, though she'd had to hold back her laugh when Andrea had stared at the Major like she was demented as she started dancing. The Major hoped she hadn't made an utter fool of herself, especially when she started twirling Andrea around the dance floor during "We Are The Champions". She'd just had the urge to share her happiness with someone, and Andrea had seemed like the right choice. She wasn't entirely sure why, it wasn't as if there was a lack of other people in the room to celebrate with. Their special bond due to the fact they supported Liverpool had been part of it, but that wasn't the only reason the Major realised as she thought back over her actions.

During the past weeks they had bonded in many other areas too, to the stage where Andrea was probably one of the people she was closest to on the base. Their friendship was going from strength to strength and fortunately the young woman had seemed happy to humour the Major's ebullient behaviour of the previous night like only a good friend would. The Major cringed as she recalled how she had probably been tripping all over Andrea's feet. No wonder the young woman had eventually excused herself rather hurriedly.

Kate thought Andrea's reason had seemed a bit odd though - that she needed some fresh air. The Major guessed that could be true, the thrill of the night, coupled with the consumption of alcohol could have gone to her head. However, something at the back of the Major's mind told her there was more to it, though she wasn't entirely sure what that might be. She had found herself surprisingly disappointed when Andrea hadn't returned and she herself had gone to bed shortly after, the excitement of the night finally catching up on her too.

The night was catching up on her again now as she tried to take a sip from her coffee, only to find that it held a strange aftertaste. She determinedly vowed that she would never drink again.

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Andrea ran along the endless white corridor, glancing over her shoulder every couple of seconds to look for those chasing her. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there, just waiting for her to trip up so they could pounce on her. She skidded round a corner, trying to stop herself plunging off the edge that met her but travelling too fast to succeed. She fell into the darkness, hurtling down, seemingly unable to engage her ability to fly. Then with a crash she was on the floor, lying face down on white concrete. A foot or so in front of her were a pair of black boots.

Andrea groaned to herself, knowing there was little point even trying to raise her head to see who it was. Then suddenly there was a hand upon hers, causing Andrea to gasp involuntarily.

This had never happened before!

Andrea's eyes shot up. In front of her was not what she had assumed she would see all along. She had thought that the mystery feet belonged to another person out to get her, to tell her how useless she was or accuse her of abandoning them. Instead she found herself face-to-face with the Major who was regarding her softly, her fingers still resting on Andrea's hand.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her voice low and husky.

"Er...yes...I think so..." replied Andrea uncertainly

"Here, let me help you up," offered the Major, closing her fingers gently round Andrea's palm and pulling the young woman to her feet.

Andrea's upward momentum was more than she realised and she crashed straight into the Major, her hands reflexively shooting out to catch the other woman and keep her from being knocked to the floor. Now Andrea had her arms around the smaller body, she was reluctant to let go, in fact pulling the Major ever so slightly closer. The Major didn't object, so Andrea brought the Major's body tight up against her, feeling the warmth of her bosom as it pressed into Andrea's own. That warmth was spreading throughout Andrea now, building into a raging fire of desire. The Major tilted her head up to gaze into Andrea's eyes, the young woman finding herself drawn down towards them. They were so bewitching, tempting, how could she resist? Her head was lowering now, her lips parting slightly in anticipation before...

Her eyes shot open.

"Oh my god!" Andrea said to herself, repeating the exclamation a few more times for good measure. Not that it helped calm her thumping heart in any way, but she needed to do something to distract herself from the lingering image of the dream.

Sitting up in bed, she drew her knees up under the duvet and propped her elbows on them as she held her head in her hands. If she had thought trying to ignore the Major was a viable plan, the dream she'd just experienced exposed how difficult that was going to be. She knew that if she hadn't woken up at that moment then...

She had to mentally stop herself, knowing it would just be torture to think about it, filling her mind with wishful thoughts that could never be fulfilled. She sighed as she contemplated the rest of the dream before that, realising that her subconscious must have known long before she did how she felt about the Major. The boots had been there from the very beginning, but it was only now that Andrea had finally admitted the depth of her feelings that the other woman's face was revealed to her.

Andrea's heart ached now as she thought of the Major. She just couldn't seem to help herself, finally giving in and letting the images swim happily through her mind. Each new picture brought a warm glow to Andrea and she knew she was grinning stupidly as she gazed off at the wall seeing much more than the magnolia paint on its surface. What she saw was a vision of beauty, the Major's pale blue eyes reaching out to bring her close while her face softened, her auburn hair tumbling loosely around her cheekbones.

Andrea's breath caught in her throat and she had to cough for a moment to get her respiratory system to work again. The swirling mass of emotions evoked just by thinking about the Major was dizzying. Andrea didn't think she had felt this way about anyone before, certainly not Meg.

Thinking of London, Andrea got the sudden urge to run away from the island, to go back there and hide where she was safe from her own feelings, where she wouldn't be battered by this never-ending tumult of conflicting desires. Yet at the same time her heart cried out in protest at the very thought of it. To leave the island and not see the Major every day, maybe not at all, was not something she wanted to contemplate. The sick sensation that curdled her stomach at that prospect was more evidence, if she needed it, that she was desperately in love with the Major.

Andrea felt a furry brush across the back of her hand, Gerry obviously having been woken from his slumbering position on the end of her bed. He rubbed back and forth across her skin, purring quietly. Andrea tickled him behind the ears, generating some louder appreciative purring.

"What am I going to do?" she asked the cat. He glanced up at her, not offering up any answers to the question.

With one last, long sigh, Andrea flopped back down onto her lonely bed, covering her eyes with a forlorn hand.

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Somehow over the next few days Andrea managed to pretty much avoid the Major, or at least being alone with her. She could just about cope being in the same room as long as others were present, though even then she found her eyes had a propensity to

linger on the Major far more than was polite or acceptable. How the other woman hadn't noticed Andrea didn't know, only grateful that somehow she appeared to have missed picking up on the fact that Andrea had become a bumbling, stuttering idiot in her presence. She supposed it helped that she barely spoke around the Major, knowing her voice would betray the effect the other woman had on her. Andrea still had a hard time comprehending just how hard she had fallen for the Major – this sort of thing never normally happened to her. Usually she had a tight reign on her emotions, whereas now she could barely control them from one moment to the next.

The same was happening now as she sat in a briefing given by the Major to Andrea and the other superhumans. Andrea wasn't even sure what the briefing was about since as soon as she had entered the room she had been unable to stop her eyes drifting to the commanding presence of the Major stood at the front of the room. When she had started speaking Andrea paid far more attention to the timbre of her voice, the way she said certain words and how her speech was accentuated with a myriad of different hand gestures than what she was actually speaking about.

Suddenly it dawned on Andrea that the others were getting to their feet, signalling that the meeting was over. The young woman didn't know where the time had gone, quickly rising from her seat to escape the room before she was left alone with the Major. She had almost made it to the door when she got a call waylaying her.

“Andrea, can I have a word?”

Andrea froze with her back to the Major, watching in desperation as the other three exited the room. She took a couple of what she hoped were inaudible deep breaths before she turned back round, trying to keep her features as calm as possible.

“Is something the matter?” she asked, staying where she was rather than close the distance between her and the Major.

“No, nothing,” the Major replied. Since Andrea hadn't moved, she took the initiative and walked across the room, Andrea having to contain the dueling urges to either turn and flee or alternatively grab the other woman and kiss her. The latter was certainly more appealing, but also more unlikely. The Major was before her now, tilting her head up in a look of mild concern. The second of Andrea's urges was growing stronger all the time. “I just wondered how you were?”

Andrea could almost have laughed out loud at the irony. *How she was?* She wondered what the Major's reaction might be if she answered that with ‘Great, only I'm head over heels in love with you.’ She suspected it was probably best not to try it and find out.

“I'm fine,” she settled for instead.

“I've not seen you up on the roof at all since we got back from Lanzarote,” noted the Major. Andrea wondered if she had detected a faint air of disappointment in the tone, but put it down to an overactive and wishful imagination. “Been sleeping better have you?”

This time a small snort did escape Andrea's lips before she could stop it. The Major looked at her curiously and Andrea did her best to cover it up as cough. She certainly had been sleeping better, that was for sure, her dreams now ending with the appearance of a seductive Major most nights. Again, Andrea thought it best not to mention that.

"Yes, I think the counselling must be helping at last," she lied.

"That's good," remarked the Major, a smile spreading across her face at the news. Andrea could have died and gone to heaven right there and then. "Still it's a shame we've not been able to have any of our late night chats."

Now Andrea knew she had heard a touch of regret in the Major's voice, infinitely pleased that it was possible that the Major could miss her company in some way. Though it couldn't be anything like the big, gaping void Andrea herself felt at having to miss out on being with the Major due to her self-enforced distance from the other woman.

"Since it seems I won't be seeing you up there, how about you come round my quarters for a chat instead?"

Andrea was sure her ears were playing tricks on her now – had the Major just invited her round her quarters? Andrea considered that things had gotten so bad that she was dreaming in the daytime now. Only the Major continued on, just to confound her.

"I could maybe cook some dinner, we could play some scrabble, I'll even make tea instead of coffee."

Andrea was suddenly feeling faint while her mind was screaming at her to say yes, and quickly, before the Major changed her mind. Some logical part of her brain managed to kick into gear though, telling her that the Major was just being friendly, as she had been up until now. As far as the Major was concerned nothing was different – she had no way of knowing that Andrea was now a mass of swirling emotions, all of them centering on the Major herself. Given that, Andrea knew she couldn't put herself in that tortuous situation. A whole night spent in such close proximity to the other woman while being unable to declare what she felt would be awful.

"I'm feeling a bit tired actually," said Andrea, unable to meet the Major's eye as she lied once again.

"Oh, well, another night maybe?" offered the Major.

"Maybe," allowed Andrea. She had no intention of ever accepting the offer, but it was easier to agree, she might be able to get out of the room quicker that way and regain her shattered composure in some way. "If that's all?" she prompted.

"Yes, that was it."

Andrea nodded and hurried from the room as fast as she could without looking like she was running. She had never been so grateful to be out in a corridor in her life, hugging the plain white walls in relief.

“I was going to invite you for a game of pool, but I can leave you and the wall to it if you’d like?”

Andrea whirled round to Tom, forcing her hands down to her sides to appear more calm.

“Bloody hell,” he remarked, having already seen her agitated state, “What is wrong with you? You’re like a cat on a hot tin roof with ants in your pants to boot. What did the Major say to you?”

“Nothing,” replied Andrea.

“Really, and nothing has you clinging onto the walls does it? Something’s going on – you’ve been like this since the party on Wednesday night. Don’t think I didn’t spot the two of you having a rather friendly dance together.”

Andrea’s eyes shot to him in alarm, her heart rate quickening once more. If Tom had seen them then who else had noticed and was gossiping about it? And how long before someone said something to the Major?

Tom had been studying her reaction intently. “Oh my god, you fancy her don’t you?” he cried.

“I do not!” stated Andrea adamantly. It wasn’t entirely a lie, since ‘fancy’ was far too throwaway a term for what she felt.

“I should have seen it coming,” he said, ignoring her denial, “I thought we warned you about that?”

“I just said I don’t fancy her!” Andrea stated again, though her voice was now taking on a slight hysterical edge. She tried to calm it before she continued. “I hope you haven’t been spreading any sort of gossip to that effect.”

Tom looked wounded that she would think he would. “No, I’ve not said anything about it to anyone,” he replied, “But I’m right aren’t I?”

“Please, just leave it, Tom,” Andrea said, a hint of warning in her tone now.

He looked surprised that she had chosen to employ it, but seemed to sense she really meant it. Andrea decided it was best to try and switch topics. “Look, I don’t really want to talk about it right now, you’ll be the first to know if I change my mind, ok?”

“Ok,” agreed Tom reluctantly.

“Now, you mentioned pool?”

On the way up to the rec room, it suddenly struck Andrea that she'd forgotten to speak to Tom about the visit of his father. She'd been so caught up in her own startling revelations that it had completely slipped her mind. Aiming to rectify her lapse she turned to the fair-haired man in the lift as they travelled to the above ground part of the base.

"What about you and your father?" she asked, "Did you manage to speak to him while he was here?"

A dark look passed across Tom's face, partly answering her question before the man even spoke. "We had words."

Andrea was afraid to ask what they might have been. "I'm guessing it didn't go well then?"

"Not exactly, no. I tried to talk to him alone, but he said he was too 'busy'."

Andrea felt a sympathetic anger at Tom's father's avoidance, wishing she had crushed the Colonel's hand when she'd had the chance.

Tom continued on bitterly. "He's obviously far more interested in his base and how that's doing than what his son's up to."

"I'm sorry," said Andrea, "Maybe he really was busy, he did have a lot of people to speak to that day." Andrea didn't know why she was making excuses for the Colonel, just trying to find a way to make Tom feel better about it.

It didn't seem she was succeeding. "Yeah, right!" scoffed Tom, "Anyway, I've had it trying to reach out, if he wants to speak to me, he knows where I am."

It appeared that was the final word on the matter and they proceeded to the rec room in silence, both of them enveloped in thoughts of very different kinds.

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The Major typed away at her keyboard, trying in vain to finish the report for the Colonel. It had only been a week since his visit to congratulate them on the success of their mission, but he was demanding his updates as usual. However, the Major was finding it hard to concentrate that day, the words seeming to blur into an incomprehensible mass on the screen. Realising she was getting nowhere fast she got up from her office desk and crossed to the large window, looking out as the early summer sun brushed over the grass of the island. It looked like a lovely day outside, the first day of June, and the Major wished she could just leave the report and head off out to sea on her boat. She'd hardly had time to go sailing at all recently, with their increased workload and training schedule. As she tried to recall the last time, she realised it had been over a month ago, when she had taken Andrea out for the day.

Thoughts of that day filled her mind now, a small smile creeping across her face as she remembered Andrea dripping and indignant after her impromptu dip in the sea.

Maybe she could entice the young woman out for another attempt some time, she considered, and try not to hit her with the boom this time. As she contemplated the idea, it occurred to her that it might be quite hard to accomplish since Andrea seemed to be avoiding her recently.

The Major wasn't sure if she was imagining it or not, but there seemed to be a definite distance between them that hadn't been there little over a week ago. Where before they had been getting quite close, sharing many an evening just talking or stargazing, now Andrea was hardly speaking to her, let alone spending any time with her.

The Major was surprised at the degree of concern she felt, realising she was actually missing those nighttime chats and their interaction in general. When Andrea had turned down her offer of dinner a couple of days previously the Major had found it hard to hide her disappointment, even now feeling a small pang of regret at the missed opportunity. Resolving to do something about the situation, she walked back over to her desk, picking up her communicator. She paused for a moment, trying to think of a plausible excuse for summoning the young woman. Unable to come up with one immediately she keyed in the correct code, deciding she would just wing it.

“Andrea?”

There wasn't an immediate reply, and the Major was about to repeat herself when the other woman's voice suddenly came on the line. *Yes?*

“Could you come to my office please, there's something I need to discuss with you.”

Again the reply was delayed, the Major imagining she could hear the sound of Andrea's breathing as she waited for a response. For a minute she thought Andrea had actually cut the link. *I'll be right there.*

The Major breathed a small sigh of relief as she placed the communicator back down, unsure exactly why. If she didn't know better she would say she was nervous at the prospect of the encounter, finding her hands subconsciously smoothing down her trousers as if she was trying to make a good impression. It wasn't long before there was a knock at the door and she called out to grant Andrea entry.

The Major studied the young woman as she entered, searching for any signs of anything untoward. Andrea had an implacable expression on her face, though the Major did note that she seemed to be staring just over her shoulder, rather than making direct eye contact.

“Why don't you sit down?” offered the Major, gesturing to the chair in front of the desk. If she'd thought more about it, she realised she should have sat over on the sofa, but to cross now when she was already behind the desk might seem a bit odd.

Andrea slowly approached, lowering herself into the chair but not saying anything at all. If anything the Major would have classed the other woman's demeanour as frosty, and she wasn't sure how successful she was going to be in getting anything out of her. Still, she plunged on anyway.

“I was just wondering how you’re doing?” she asked.

Andrea’s eyes briefly flicked to her in a quizzical look. “You called me here to ask how I am?”

“I like to keep track of the welfare of all my operatives,” said the Major, cringing at the formal sound to her words. It sounded as if she was carrying out an assessment of Andrea or something. She tried to qualify the statement better. “I haven’t really had the chance to speak to you much the last week or so, and I wanted to make sure everything was all right.”

“Yes, everything’s fine. Is there any reason it shouldn’t be?”

Andrea really wasn’t making this easy for her. “No, no reason,” said the Major, “I was just...concerned. I might be wrong, but I got the impression you were avoiding me.”

Andrea paused for a moment before answering, her eyes now having drifted to the floor. Suddenly the Major got a feeling that she might not have been wrong at all. Andrea *was* avoiding her, but why?

“I’m not avoiding you,” stated Andrea defensively, “I’ve been to all the necessary briefings and training sessions haven’t I?”

“Yes,” agreed the Major, “But...” she searched for a way to put it without sounding too anxious, “...we’ve not spent any time together outside work.”

Andrea shrugged. “I’ve been doing other things.”

The Major tried to control the dismay she felt at Andrea’s dismissive attitude, speaking before she’d really considered her words. “What sort of things?”

Andrea’s eyes flashed angrily. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realise I had to give you a full report of my after hours activities. Would you like pictures, video recordings too?”

“Of course not...”

“Maybe I could tape all my conversations for you...”

“No, I didn’t mean....”

“Though you pretty much do that already anyway don’t you!”

Andrea was up out of her seat now, glaring down at the Major. “I’m fine, all right,” she snapped, “So if that’s all, I have work to be getting on with.”

Without waiting to be dismissed Andrea spun on her heel and stalked out of the door, leaving the Major wondering exactly what had just happened.

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Andrea sagged against the wall, round the corner from the Major's office. This was much worse than she had thought. Not only could she not control her emotions round the other woman, but now her frustrations were spilling out in other ways, such as starting arguments for no reason whatsoever. She had thought distancing herself might help, but if anything her feelings just seemed to be intensifying. Even worse was that the Major seemed to have noticed the lack of contact between them.

Andrea's mind conspiratorially took the word contact and started bombarding her with thoughts of all the ways the Major had touched her in the past. From how she had held Andrea so close out on a muddy rain-lashed field, to the barest of brushes across her hand. Each touch was remembered with a corresponding tingling at the point of contact, like she could still actually feel those fingers now.

Those thoughts were nothing compared to the devious tricks her mind had been playing on her while in the Major's office, though. As soon as Andrea had stepped inside the room and seen the other woman sitting behind her desk, regarding Andrea with her soft blue eyes, Andrea's heart had started beating wildly out of control. Trying not to stare at the Major's face, or hair, or eyes, or body, Andrea had suddenly started having disturbing fantasies while at the same time trying to conduct a normal conversation. Those daydreams centred around what she'd like to do to the Major on the invitingly large desk between them. No wonder she had eventually snapped, it wasn't right for any one person to try and contain that amount of raging desire.

Finally composing herself Andrea turned for her quarters, deciding that a very long and very cold shower was definitely in order.

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The last working day of the week found Andrea out on the training ground of the island base, thankful for once that it was Chadwick rather than the Major who was leading the exercise. Her happiness at that was short lived when the burly Lieutenant joined her as she was running some last checks on the explosive devices arrayed before her on the ground. He knelt down next to her, surveying her work with his dark eyes.

"Make sure you get it right, Hallstrom, we don't want any nasty *accidents* do we?"

"You'd know all about those wouldn't you," she countered. If she had hoped that the football game would settle things between them once and for all, she'd been sorely disappointed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whatever you want it to," she replied cryptically, clambering up to get away from him.

She still thought he was responsible for the accidents that had occurred on the base, though she'd found nothing else to back up her suspicions and she was hardly in a

position to be pushing her case to the Major anymore. She experienced an unwelcome clutching sensation in her stomach at the thought of the Major, who never seemed to be far from her thoughts these days. Gazing out across the sun-drenched grassland did little to push those pervasive thoughts away either.

“Oi,” called Chadwick from behind her, “When you’ve quite finished sunning yourself?”

Andrea turned back to him, walking over and petulantly snatching up one of the devices. Not bothering to wait for his orders she zoomed straight up into the sky, knowing what she was meant to be doing anyway. Reaching the apex of her curve she turned for the ground, beginning her run to drop the device on its target. Sweeping through the air, she spotted a plane high up in the brilliant blue sky, the sun glinting off its white body as it trailed two white streams behind it. Suddenly she was taken back to the week before and another plane entirely. How she wished she could turn back time to that day when she was blissfully unaware of her love for the Major. Though not so much unaware as in deep denial, she considered.

Trying to force her thoughts back to the present she glanced down at the bomb in her hand, only then noticing that the clock on it was far more advanced than it should be.

3...

Andrea gaped at it – *how had that happened?*

2...

Shit!

1...

Desperately Andrea flung it away, the device exploding spectacularly in the sky mere feet from her. The blast wave cannoned into her immediately, knocking the breath from her body and sending her hurtling towards the ground. She crashed forcefully into the turf, driving across surface, digging up the grass in a great gash for about fifty feet before she finally came to a halt.

It took her a couple of minutes to come to her senses, opening her eyes to see the blue sky above her. Tentatively she sat up from the muddy hole she now occupied, noting that her clothing was still steaming from the after effects of the explosion. She was covered in muddy streaks and her jacket was ripped in a number of places. Luckily she herself didn’t seem to be hurt, apart from a slight ringing in her ears. Once more she was grateful for her denser bone structure – if it had been anyone else they would most likely have broken every bone in their body falling from that height.

Looking around at the impressive track she had made in the ground, she spotted a group of people running over the grass towards her, among them Lieutenant Chadwick. Seeing him at the head of the bunch, Andrea leapt to her feet, trailing a few loose bits of earth in her wake.

“You fucking tampered with the bomb, you bastard!” she yelled at him as he stopped in front of her.

“I did no such thing,” he replied, meeting her fierce gaze. “You obviously didn’t check it right.”

“Bollocks! I checked it fine.” Though now she wasn’t entirely sure – *had she let her thoughts of the Major affect her concentration?*

“Obviously you didn’t,” repeated Chadwick, “Too busy thinking of your girlfriend were you?”

“Fuck off!” spat Andrea, too annoyed that he might be right to think of anything more intelligent to say.

“I don’t know why you bother,” he continued insidiously, “She’s never going to want anything to do with you - she’s already had one mutie freak.”

Andrea flew at him, surprising him with the suddenness of her action. She managed one good blow to his face before the others who were already close by yanked her off him.

Blood was pouring from his mouth now as he cradled his jaw. “You’re fucking crazy!” he cried, “You can go and report to the Major; let her sort you out!”

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Andrea stood waiting in the centre of the Major’s office, knowing with a horrible sinking sensation that she was in big trouble. *Why had she let Chadwick wind her up again?* Of course it didn’t take much examination to find the answer to that. As if she needed any reminder what the cause was, the door to the office opened now and the Major stalked in, not saying a word as she swept past Andrea and sat down at her desk. She held her mouth clamped tightly shut, her eyes finally swinging up to Andrea with a deathly look in them.

“So here we are again,” she began in a threateningly low voice. “I thought you and Chadwick were going to sort this out, but again you’re brawling on the training ground like a couple of kids.”

Andrea couldn’t help blurting something out, still annoyed from earlier and now having to contend with the way all her emotions spiralled out of control when she got near the Major. “Chadwick’s an arse! He...”

“I don’t care what you think of the Lieutenant!” shouted the Major, shooting back to her feet and firmly cutting Andrea off. “You’re here to do a job, and I expect you to put any personal differences to one side to do that.”

“But it was his fault!”

“Really?” said the Major doubtfully, leaning across her desk with her hands on the surface, “He says you were distracted and didn’t check the timer properly…”

“Oh, I see, taking his side are you?” cried Andrea angrily, “I might have known you lot would stick together!”

“Us lot?” repeated the Major, “Since when have I ever taken sides between the superhumans and the military staff?”

“I don’t see Chadwick in here right now!”

“That’s because he wasn’t the one that attacked a fellow member of staff!”

“I’m telling you, he tampered with that bomb! Oh, and I’m fine, by the way, thanks for asking!”

The Major paused at that, as if realising for the first time that Andrea could have been killed if she hadn’t noticed the timer at the last second. Andrea thought the Major’s face had taken on a definite pale colour, at the same time accepting that it could be due to her continued cold fury with the young woman.

When the Major did speak again, her voice was still harsh, though slightly more controlled. “So you want me to believe you could be so distracted as to allow Chadwick to alter the timer on a device you had previously checked, with you right there beside him? And pray tell, what was it that diverted your attention to such a degree?”

Andrea was stymied, unable to confess that she had left Chadwick alone for a moment while she had been preoccupied with thoughts of the Major herself.

“No, no more to say?” prompted the Major.

Andrea averted her eyes, hearing the Major uttering a long sigh as she sat back down in her chair the creak of the leather audible in the hushed room.

“Sit down,” ordered the other woman stiffly.

Andrea remained where she was, stubbornly refusing to obey. She still couldn’t understand how the Major could believe Chadwick over her.

“Please?” said the Major more softly this time.

Reluctantly Andrea sat in the chair, unable to refuse the request now the Major had resorted to using her quietly persuasive voice. Andrea gazed down at the floor, able to see the tips of the Major’s black boots beneath the desk, trying to concentrate on those to still her racing heart.

“What’s going on, Andrea?”

The Major's voice was now quiet and cajolling. Andrea swallowed nervously, the sound of her name passing the Major's lips doing a whole range of strange things to her insides.

"Going on?" managed Andrea in reply, not daring to look up, "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean with you," explained the Major, "And your attitude."

"I don't have an attitude," said Andrea far too quickly to make the claim plausible.

"Really," stated the Major, having obviously caught it too.

The office was quiet as the Major left an inviting gap for Andrea to fill. All the normally imperceptible background noises of the office filled Andrea's ears. She could hear the gentle hum of the air conditioning, the low buzz of the computer, the faint whisper of the wind outside the window, the sound of the Major's breathing. She noted the last of those ruefully, marvelling at how everything always seemed to come back to the other woman. The silence stretched on interminably and Andrea could resist the urge to look up no longer, desperate to see what the Major was doing.

Her eyes were met by the Major's regarding her thoughtfully across the desk, her chin resting on an upturned palm as she observed Andrea. Having now looked up, Andrea could do nothing but maintain the gaze, drawn in by the immense power contained in it. The sounds of the room had long since faded, all Andrea's concentration on the face before her. When the Major did speak Andrea almost jumped, so entranced was she.

"If there's something wrong you can talk to me."

Andrea found herself unable to speak. *What could she say anyway?* It wasn't like she could admit her feelings.

"I'm just worried," continued the Major gently, "You seem withdrawn, distant, like something's troubling you. If there's a valid reason for this aggressive behaviour I would like to know."

Andrea looked down at the desk, crinkling her brow as she fought hard to keep back the tears that were threatening what was left of her composure. *When was this torture going to end?*

She heard another slow exhale from the Major, sensing the other woman leaning back in her chair once more. "Fine," she said with an air of resignation, "In that case you leave me no alternative but to punish you for your transgression."

Andrea's eyes shot up again. "What?" she cried.

The Major's tone was business-like once more. "I can't allow members of my staff to be physically attacked," she outlined, "Consider yourself confined to your quarters for a week."

“You’re *grounding* me?” said Andrea incredulously.

“If you will behave like a child, then you will receive appropriate punishment.”

Andrea stared at the Major, considering the restriction imposed on her. She didn’t really care that she wouldn’t get to do any training, or talk with any of her friends, or even leave her room. The only thing that really bothered her was the fact that it meant she wouldn’t see the Major for a week.

“You’re dismissed,” the Major added.

Andrea opened her mouth to speak, but caught herself. She desperately wanted to explain herself, tell the Major everything, but she knew that was impossible. Instead she got to her feet and left the room without another word.

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The Major heard the small click from the door as it closed behind Andrea, somewhat surprised by her timid exit. She had half expected Andrea to storm out and slam the door off its hinges. But then again nothing Andrea did seemed to make sense anymore.

The Major leaned back in her seat, trying to fathom what was going on with the young woman. She was convinced something was wrong, and she’d got the impression that Andrea was almost going to tell her what it was, but there was something holding her back. The other strange sense she’d got was that whatever that something was, it was to do with the Major herself. That concept troubled her no end – that she could somehow be responsible for Andrea’s marked shift in behaviour. As the Major’s thoughts went round and round trying to shed some light on the conundrum, she began to wonder at her own feelings.

Why *was* she so bothered with what was wrong with Andrea and what the young woman thought of her?

And she knew that she was bothered, almost irrationally so. Ever since they’d got back from the mission her thoughts had been occupied by the young woman much more than was reasonable or necessary.

She rubbed roughly at her temple when suddenly a disturbing thought hit her. She tried to ignore it but it was there now, dancing in her face, taunting her until she gave in and examined it. With no small degree of consternation she wondered if the reason she was so concerned about how Andrea felt towards her was because she in turn felt something for the other woman. And that something wasn’t just what she felt for the other people under her command. She cared about all of them, of course, but none of them seemed to have the effect on her that Andrea did. None of them caused her to lose her cool as easily as she did with Andrea and she certainly didn’t feel the urge to spend most of her free time with Tom, or have late night discussions with Bel, or dance round the room with Harry.

She stopped herself as she wondered where the last scenario had sprung from. Did she really want to dance round the room with Andrea? Thinking of it she couldn't help recalling the time they had danced together after the cup final victory. However, whereas before in her recollections she had always concentrated on what an idiot she must have looked, now she found herself assessing what it had actually felt like. It had felt good she realised. More than good – wonderful. How had she not noticed at the time? A ridiculous, giddy rush shot through her as she remembered holding Andrea in her arms, their bodies pressed together in all sorts of places normal decorum dictated they shouldn't be.

The Major shot to her feet in shock.

This was bad. This was very bad.

Shaking her head, she told herself she couldn't be heading down this path again. She didn't even want to voice what the path was, let alone go anywhere near it. But it was there anyway, tempting her to take it. Shaking her head she knew there was no way she could head down that road marked 'getting involved with someone under your command.'

It was patently ridiculous to consider it anyway. Even if she did feel 'something' for Andrea, the degree of which she wasn't even going to start to examine for fear of what she might find, then to think Andrea returned it in any way was absurd. She decided she would just have to ignore her troubling feelings and emotions and hope they went away.

That would be harder said than done, though, she soon realised as she crossed to get a drink. Out of nowhere the image of Andrea from the changing rooms had appeared in her mind, walking across the room in just a towel, pushing her wet hair from her face.

The Major in turn tried to push the mental picture away, but more nagging thoughts wormed their way into her brain. Was it really so absurd to think Andrea might feel something too? She had certainly been exhibiting some strange behaviour herself recently. The Major had assumed that Andrea was annoyed at her for some reason, but now she analysed it she realised that Andrea's actions could be attributed to someone who was attracted to another person but felt the need to repress it. That would certainly explain why Andrea had been avoiding her so much, if she found it hard to be in the Major's presence.

The Major laughed to herself. *Talk about wishful thinking!*

Here she was casting herself as some great irresistible lure; one that Andrea could barely control herself around. Her original presumption of some undetermined offence was much more likely. She supposed she would just have to try and find out what that was so they could at least get back to being friendly, even if the Major's mind was conspiratorially screaming at her that it knew she wanted much more than that.

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The following week passed with agonising slowness for Andrea, cooped up in her quarters with only Gerry for company. Left to her own devices, she couldn't help going over what she had recently realised regarding her burgeoning feelings for the Major. As she did, many a time she would wish for the other woman to drop by on any pretext, even if it was just to punish her further.

The only other thoughts that preoccupied her were those regarding the warehouse accident and what had subsequently happened to Maria. They were much more unpleasant and she did her best not to dwell on them, though her nightmares still persisted in making that difficult. Even when thinking of the accident, she managed to bring those ruminations around to the Major by wondering how the officer's investigations were going.

To try and distract herself from everything she had played her violin, re-read many of her books and played endless games on the playstation. She had even attempted some writing, though that only served to remind her of the Major again by bringing to mind the pages of her novel that Andrea had caught sight of.

The desperate loneliness she felt at missing out on even the barest of interaction with the Major, led her to realise that trying to ignore her feelings just wasn't going to work any longer. After hours of agonised thinking, she concluded that left her with two options - either she could tell the Major how she felt and face the consequences or she could leave the island and try to forget about the other woman.

A week alone had given her plenty of time to try and decide which one to pursue, though she swung between each of the choices from one moment to the next. At times she would resolve to talk to the Major the first chance she got, while the next minute she would be filled with doubt, thinking she would look like a fool if she did.

If only she had some inkling how the Major herself felt it might have helped, but Andrea didn't have much to go on. On the plus side was the fact that the Major seemed to have been disappointed by Andrea's recent distant behaviour and had noticed enough to comment on it. There was also the way they had been spending so much time together before Andrea had distanced herself, time the Major seemed to enjoy and relish. Andrea was sure she had detected sparks between them on a number of occasions now she looked back on it with a critical eye, though at the same time considered it could just be her wishful imagination.

Had she been the only one to get those strange tingling sensations whenever they touched? Had she been the only one to feel that fluttering in her stomach when their eyes met?

On the down side of things was the looming spectre of Adam Dixon, making Andrea think the Major would be highly suspect about getting involved with anyone under her command. The other big stumbling block was the fact that Andrea was a woman and as far as she knew the Major was well and truly straight. Though how someone who was straight could give off quite the vibes she got from the Major she didn't know.

As she stood with her hand on the door she knew the time for prevarication was over, she had to pick and stick to her decision. Finally she realised that if she didn't say anything then she would most likely regret it forever. If she did tell the Major and things went horribly wrong, then she could always leave anyway, but at least she wouldn't be left thinking about what might have been. Having made her choice she opened the door and strode from the room.

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The Major walked along the corridor to the base exit, Sophie McAllister striding along breezily next to her. Her friend's visit that morning had been a pleasant surprise, given how the Major had been feeling all week. Even more surprising was to find that Sophie had taken a transfer to the Intelligence Corps and now knew exactly what it was the Major had been so cagey about regarding the base. Not that Sophie would be stationed on the base itself, but at least it meant they would probably see each other around much more often.

Maybe it was Sophie's excitement over her transfer, but for once the dark-haired woman seemed less than perceptive when it came to the Major's emotional state. Normally she was first to pick up anything when the Major was out of sorts, but not that day. The Major supposed that she herself could equally just be getting better at covering things up. It was amazing Sophie hadn't noticed anything, considering that inside the Major was a nervous wreck.

Ever since she had started wondering about her feelings towards Andrea a week ago, those feelings had started to build in a seemingly unstoppable fashion. The Major had found herself thinking about Andrea at the most inopportune moments, having to mentally shake herself more than once in meetings with Lieutenant Chadwick and Dr Todd. It was getting very hard to ignore the fact that she was attracted to the young woman.

"A penny for them."

The Major's face swung to her friend who had now stopped in the sun-drenched lobby. "Huh?"

"Something's obviously on your mind if that's the best you can manage," noted Sophie.

The Major guessed that Sophie wasn't as imperceptive as she had assumed. Knowing it would be hard to pull the wool over the other woman's eyes now, she decided to use her friend as a sounding board. "You know last time you were here, you said something about Andrea..."

"Andrea?" queried Sophie, trying to place the name. "Oh, tall, blond and gorgeous! What about her?"

"What you said about her liking me – were you just joking or did you really mean it?"

“Oh, I meant it! Though I think the term I used was ‘fancy’,” she corrected with an amused half-smile on her face. “Hang on a minute,” she added, her face now taking on a suspicious look, “Why are you interested all of a sudden? Last time you couldn’t wait to get off the subject and now here you are bringing it up.”

The Major glanced guiltily away at the window for the barest of moments.

“Oh my god!” cried Sophie, her hand flying up to her mouth, “You like her don’t you!”

“I do not!” the Major replied automatically, looking around nervously and noting with some relief that there wasn’t anyone else in the lobby area.

“You do! You do!” cried Sophie, bouncing excitedly on her feet. “My god, someone has finally done what I could only dream of, they’ve shown Kate Jarvis the light!”

“Will you keep your voice down,” hissed the Major. “It’s nothing like that,” she continued, “I’m just trying to work out some of her behaviour.”

“Really,” said Sophie doubtfully, “And why might you be interested in behaviour that centres around whether or not she’s attracted to you?”

The Major was finding it increasingly hard not to blush under Sophie’s intense scrutiny. “She’s been behaving oddly, and I was wondering if it was because she felt...something for me. If that’s what it is then at least I might be able to do something about it, whereas at the moment I’m in the dark.”

“Oh yeah, and what exactly might you be doing about it if it is true?” asked Sophie arching her eyebrow.

“Will you stop it!” cried the Major in exasperation, despite the fact that her own mind had also come up with a few lewd suggestions of its own. “I want to know so we can go about re-establishing our friendly relationship, because at the moment she’s pretty much avoiding me.”

“She’s been avoiding you?”

“Yes.”

“And have you noticed anything else. Strange irrational behaviour? Short temper? Prone to flying off the handle?”

“Yes, on all accounts.”

Sophie nodded thoughtfully. “Yep, she ‘s got it bad. A first-class crush by the sounds of it.”

“A crush?” repeated the Major, unable to hide the disappointment in her tone at it being classed as such.

Sophie's eyes had narrowed again. "Are you sure you're not more interested than you're letting on?"

"Yes, I'm sure," stated the Major. It was one thing gauging Sophie thoughts on Andrea's feelings, but quite another to have to admit openly that she shared some of them.

Sophie shrugged, the Major thinking that her friend hadn't bought her denial in the slightest. "You know, if you need any help finding out for sure, then I'm your girl!"

"What do you mean?" asked the Major in confusion.

"Nothing reveals someone's feelings faster than a bit of jealousy."

"You want to play some sort of trick on Andrea?" deduced the Major with a touch of distaste.

"Not a trick, more a...test."

The Major regarded her friend doubtfully. "It's all right, I think I'll pass."

"Are you sure?" asked Sophie, sidling up close to the Major. "All it takes is a little touch here while a certain someone is watching," she said placing her hand on the Major's shoulder, "A little stroke there," she added, drawing her fingers seductively down the Major's shirtsleeve.

The Major laughed, catching Sophie's fingers before she decided to put them anywhere else. "I'll manage on my own, thanks."

Sophie brought their entwined fingers up to her lips and lightly kissed them before letting go. "You know where I am if you ever change your mind."

The Major shook her head, laughing again at her friend's outrageous behaviour.

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Andrea dashed back down the corridor, keeping her head down and avoiding making eye contact with anyone as she did, just desperate to get back to the safety of her quarters before her simmering emotions exploded. She could barely believe what she had seen, but it had been there in front of her, plain as day – the Major and the other woman flirting with one another. As her mind replayed the caress of the other woman over the Major's shoulder and down her arm she balled her fist and had to fight hard to stop the urge to drive it into the nearest wall. Rounding a corner she barrelled straight into Tom, who bounced off her onto the ground.

"Hey!" he cried indignantly, but Andrea didn't stop to speak or even help him up. She carried straight on down the corridor and wrenched open the door to her room, slamming it firmly behind her.

Finally in the privacy of her quarters she let out an anguished howl, cursing herself for having waited too long. It was obvious to Andrea now that the Major wasn't interested in her. Not only had she been flirting with the other woman, the recollection of which twisted Andrea's stomach into a knot, but also she was obviously not concerned in the slightest about how Andrea was doing. She could easily have come by Andrea's quarters at any time that morning if she'd really cared in any way, but it was clear that Andrea meant nothing to her beyond being another operative, and a troublesome one at that. While Andrea had been missing the Major like crazy, the other woman probably hadn't given her a second thought.

In impotent frustration Andrea snatched up one of the kitchen stools and brought it down hard on the tiled floor, shattering it into pieces. A few hot tears pricked at Andrea's eyes as she flung the piece she was left with across the room with such force that it embedded itself in the far wall, the end of the metal leg vibrating as it protruded from the concrete.

A querying mewl drew her attention to the floor, where Gerry was regarding her curiously. As she bent down to him he shied away, and she had to make some soothing noises before he would let her pick him up. She cradled him to her for comfort, wishing desperately that it was someone else entirely she held close to her breast. *But that was never going to happen.* With a woeful resignation she knew that all she was left with was the option of leaving the base and trying to get on with her life in some way. Maybe with time and distance she would forget the Major.

Suddenly there was a chime at the door and Andrea's eyes darted to it from her crouched position. She was in no state for visitors and wondered if she could pretend not to be in. The chime sounded again. *Obviously not.* As always the base's monitoring equipment would verify her location.

"Just a minute!" she called out, dumping Gerry on the floor and dashing over to the wall with the metal stool leg lodged in it. With a swift yank she pulled it out, but that left an obvious hole in the paintwork. Andrea tried her best to cover it up by dragging a large pot plant across in front of it.

Taking the leg and retrieving the remaining bits of the stool she shoved them all in the cupboard under the sink, where they joined the other seat she had mangled a couple of months previously when testing out her powers. She splashed some water from the tap over her face before finally turning to the door.

"Come in," she called.

The sight of the Major entering the room did a hundred and one things to Andrea's already fragile emotional state. Her immediate reaction was one of joy, to see the woman she had been thinking about all week there in her quarters. Then she was reminded of what she'd just seen and she was swamped with anger and jealousy.

"I thought you'd like to know that your punishment's over now, you can come and go as you please," the Major said, walking over in Andrea's direction.

"Thanks," said Andrea tersely, "I already knew."

The Major looked at her curiously having no doubt noticed the frosty tone. “Are you all right?”

“Oh yeah, I’m just great having been stuck in here all week!”

“There was a reason behind that though,” the Major reminded her, “You were out of line with what you did to Chadwick.”

“Yeah, whatever,” said Andrea dismissively. “Did you want something in particular or did you just come to rub my nose in it a bit more?”

“I wanted to see how you were, check everything was all right and maybe have a word with you. But it doesn’t seem like now is a good time.”

In her furious state, Andrea completely ignored the first part of the major’s sentence, latching onto the slight frustrated edge to the latter part. “No, it’s not really a good time,” agreed Andrea tetchily.

“Perhaps I should leave you to it,” offered the Major, gauging retreat was most likely the best option.

“Actually I wanted to talk to you about something first,” Andrea leapt in, supposing now was as good a time as any to say what she was thinking.

“Go on.”

“When I first came here you said that if I learned to control my powers then I could leave,” outlined Andrea, “I’d like to leave now.”

“What?” said the Major in a strangled cry. She looked startled, her eyes becoming wide as she gaped at Andrea.

“I’m fed up of hanging round here while my life passes me by,” explained Andrea, “I need to get back to the real world. And I need to find out about that warehouse accident – it’s not like you’ve been making great progress have you.”

The Major frowned at Andrea’s thinly veiled accusation. “I have been making some,” she said, “I’m sure I’m getting close to something. Anyway, I doubt you’ll have much more success. At least I have an inside track.”

“Right!” scoffed Andrea, “More likely you’re colluding with whoever it is to cover it up!”

“That’s ridiculous!” exclaimed the Major, taking a moment before continuing in a more even tone. “What’s really going on here? I thought you were settling in, I thought maybe you were even starting to like it here.”

Andrea shrugged, avoiding the Major’s curious gaze.

“Is this because of your punishment?” probed the other woman, “I was hoping we could just put that behind us now it’s over and move forwards.”

“It’s not that, I’ve just had enough.” Andrea stated flatly. She looked back to the Major, searching her face for something, anything. “It’s not as if there’s any real reason for me to stay anymore is there?”

The Major’s eyes remained fixed on Andrea, though for once she seemed at a loss for words. Andrea determinedly fought down the urge to relent, though the fresh churning sensation in her stomach was making it hard. As Andrea studied the face before her, she realised what the expression she saw was – the Major was sad. Suddenly Andrea was wracked with doubt. Was the Major actually personally concerned that Andrea might be going?

“Is there a reason I should stay?” repeated Andrea, giving the Major the chance to say something to make her change her mind.

The Major’s lips parted minutely then closed again, as if she was trying to formulate an answer. All the time her eyes remained locked on Andrea’s, the young woman almost able to feel the tension in the air. The sound of the Major’s communicator ringing out made Andrea want to rip it off the other woman’s wrist and smash it into small bits. The Major shot her a quick apologetic look before answering. She was being summoned to an urgent briefing, as was everyone else. Realising the moment was gone Andrea went and sat down wearily on her sofa. Once the Major had finished she glanced over to where the young woman was rubbing lazily at her face.

“Are you coming? We’re needed for an urgent rescue mission.”

Andrea sighed, feeling the burden of responsibility pressing down on her shoulders. She supposed she could go and do this mission and then finally get off the godforsaken island after that. With an air of resignation she clambered to her feet and followed the Major out the door.

CHAPTER 15

Andrea hammered her fist into the rock face, watching as the solid wall exploded in a hail of small stones. It felt good to be able to take out her frustrations in the course of her duty.

“Come on!” she called to the men behind her, stepping through the now open gap into the larger cavern beyond, where a few telltale shafts of light broke the gloom.

She turned her eyes upwards to the source of the light, grateful to be out of the oppressive confines of the lower areas of the mine. When she had gone to the briefing at the base she had been surprised to find they were needed to aid in a rescue mission at a mine in Yorkshire – Andrea had thought they’d closed all the coalmines in Britain down long ago. But this one was still active, just unfortunately in the grip of a series of cave-ins and fires. A number of groups of men had been trapped underground, one of which she was presently leading to safety, while the other members of her team carried out other tasks.

Andrea touched the communicator in her ear, checking it was still in place after crawling through the mine. “We’re in the main shaft,” she informed whoever was on the other end.

Ok, we’ll be sending a cage down to pick you up, came back the Major’s response.

Andrea couldn’t help the small flutter in her stomach on hearing the commanding voice, trying to remind herself that she was still meant to be angry with the other woman. They hadn’t spoken at all since they’d left Andrea’s quarters, Andrea sitting silently on her own on the trip from the island base to the mine and then merely listening to her orders and following them once they did get there.

Many of the men around her were taking the chance to rest, a few of them nursing cuts, bruises and broken bones. Andrea looked down at herself – she was absolutely filthy, covered in a layer of soot and grime. She patted at her black vest to shake some of it off, but gave it up as a bad job.

A grinding noise from above indicated the arrival of their means up to the surface, the men climbing aboard in subdued quiet, Andrea being the last to get aboard. She could have flown up under her own steam, but she found herself feeling strangely tired. When they did reach the top they came out into the main factory area of the mine, a large building with huge sections of machinery for processing the coal. A thick fog of smoke still clogged the atmosphere up there and the men didn’t waste any time heading for the nearest exit. Andrea was following them when she caught sight of another group on the far side of the room, fighting one of the still raging fires.

It wasn't so much the fire fighters that had drawn Andrea's attention, but the figure that stood behind, directing operations with a calm authority. The Major looked assured as ever in her combat outfit, barking orders at the people around her, attempting to drive the fire back. A loud creaking noise resounded somewhere above Andrea, pulling her eyes up to the ceiling, seeking out the source of it. The metallic grinding continued until Andrea finally spotted a section of walkway swaying precariously over the Major's position. It omitted one last wrenching noise as the final bolts holding it in place popped from their housings.

"Major! Look out!" yelled Andrea, flinging herself across the room in the officer's direction. She cannoned into a surprised Major, wrapping her arms around the smaller woman's waist and hauling her out of the way of the gantry as it crashed to the floor behind them. Their momentum sent them tumbling to the ground in an ungainly sprawl as it hit, tearing up the metal plating of the floor. Then suddenly Andrea was falling as the whole floor gave way beneath her.

Everything was happening too fast for Andrea to react. She spiralled downwards, banging haphazardly against rocky walls as a barrage of debris followed her down into the darkness. As she finally hit something solid and came to a halt, she realised there must have been an old section of the mine beneath the factory floor. A movement above her permeated the pall of dust flung up from the falling rocks and Andrea's eyes swung upwards in time to see a huge section of floor plunging straight towards her. Scrabbling frantically to her feet she thrust her hands up to catch it before it crushed her. The metal rammed into her palms, Andrea grimacing at the impact and struggling to keep the massive block above her head. She could feel more and more debris landing on the other side of it, adding to the weight all the time and burying her beneath tonnes of rock, earth and masonry.

Eventually the rain of debris slowed, though now Andrea's arms were quivering under the immense weight above her. She could just about maintain her hold, but had no hope of pushing it up so she could escape. Total darkness enveloped her, the young woman unable to see anything in her underground tomb where the air was thick with dust.

"Major?" she called into the darkness, knowing the other woman must be down there somewhere too – she had been right next to Andrea when the floor caved in. There was no answer from the blackness though.

She coughed a couple of times to clear her lungs of the clogging dirt. "Major?" she tried again, still receiving silence as a response.

The first spikes of fear were pricking at her heart now, as she wondered whether the Major had she made it under the safe umbrella of the section she held up.

"Kate!" she cried frantically as horrendous visions of what might have happened if the Major hadn't fallen in the safe area filled her mind.

Suddenly there was a small clicking noise and a luminous green stick-flare flashed into life close by, held up by the Major from her position on the floor. Andrea heaved a great sigh of relief, almost losing her grip on the rough metal in the process. She

locked her arms again; even more determined to hold on now she had the other woman to protect too. The Major rose into a kneeling position, tentatively touching her forehead that had been scraped in the fall. In the dim glow Andrea could see that her face was streaked with dirt and grime, her normally bright hair caked in dust. None of that mattered to Andrea though; all that mattered was that the Major was alive.

The other woman's eyes dazedly tracked up to Andrea, blinking a couple of times to try and clear her head. "Andrea? Are you all right?" she asked rather stupidly.

"Just about," said Andrea, having to grit her teeth as she felt her arms shaking once more, "Though I have to say this is bloody heavy!"

The Major seemed to realise their position for the first time. "Bloody hell!" she cried, clambering to her feet and looking up above Andrea, "Can you keep holding that up?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Andrea, seeing that the Major was having to stoop to stop her head scraping against the floor section now Andrea's arms were starting to falter, "It seems to be getting harder."

"Ok, hang on," said the Major, noticing Andrea's quivering arms too. She put her hand to her ear, to see if she could raise urgent help.

Andrea's arms were really starting to tremble now, the weight above her pushing down unremittingly in a constant reminder of their impending fate if that help didn't arrive soon. Andrea glanced up at the imposing mass above as sweat started to break out on her forehead.

"I don't think I can hold it much longer," she said to the Major who was still in the process of talking on her radio, "I don't understand, I've held up things heavier than this I'm sure."

The Major's brow creased as she considered that, before her eyes widened in realisation. "It's the darkness!"

"What?"

"Your powers," clarified the Major, "They rely on light to recharge your energy."

Andrea saw what she was getting at. "Of course, so when it's as dark as this, the light isn't enough to recharge what I'm expending holding this up. Which means sooner or later my reserves are going to be completely depleted," she added grimly. "When are they going to get to us?"

"Not soon enough," confessed the Major.

"Shit!" cursed Andrea, her eyes searching for some inspiration in the enclosed space. In the faint green glow she spotted a girder lying on the ground. "I've got an idea that might buy us some time," she offered.

The Major followed her gaze to the floor. “You’re going to try and wedge that against the roof?” she queried doubtfully.

“It’s either that or get squashed very soon,” Andrea noted.

The Major pursed her lips and nodded, knowing that Andrea was right. Andrea took a couple of deep breaths, preparing herself to try and grab the girder as quickly as possible. Slowly she removed one hand from the ceiling, the mass crunching down a few inches as she did. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the Major flinch momentarily before the downward movement ceased. Then in one swift movement Andrea darted her free hand to the floor, grasping for the thick girder. It was heavy and it took her a couple of goes to haul it off the floor. The ceiling was creeping ever downwards as she brought it upright, pushing it against the metal of the roof. The girder creaked under the weight and Andrea watched it, holding her breath as she waited to see if it would hold. Fortunately it seemed it would for the time being, and Andrea allowed herself to slump to the floor, succumbing to the aching tiredness she felt. The Major joined her too, leaning back against the rock wall as she sat next to the young woman, giving Andrea’s shoulder a small grateful squeeze as she composed herself. Apart from the girder emitting an ominous creak every now and then the small space was now quiet, Andrea able to hear her own ragged breathing.

It was the Major who broke the silence. “Since we’re stuck here without anywhere to go, we may as well try and finish what we were discussing earlier.”

Andrea swung to the Major, her mind racing as to what she could mean.

“Your request to leave?” outlined the Major.

“Oh,” said Andrea. She had forgotten about that in the adrenaline packed situation.

“I just want to understand what’s behind it,” said the Major gently.

Andrea glanced away, thoughts of what had provoked the request now filtering back into her mind. “I thought I told you earlier?” she said evasively.

“You told me something,” agreed the Major, “But why did I get the impression it wasn’t the full story, that there was something else you weren’t telling me?”

Andrea’s mouth was suddenly dry. She was trapped with nowhere to run, both physically and emotionally. “I don’t know, maybe it was your mind playing tricks on you?” she suggested, trying her best to avoid the probing, “Why do you care what I do anyway?”

“Of course I care,” commented the Major.

Andrea wasn’t sure if it was the soft way the Major had said it, but all of a sudden she was getting the impression that this conversation had taken on a whole different turn.

“I thought we were friends,” continued the Major.

Andrea groaned internally. *Friends? Was that all they were?*

“I want to try and help if there’s something wrong,” added the Major.

“Not all things can be fixed,” said Andrea quietly, her eyes trained down at her feet.

“So there is something wrong?”

“No, it’s not wrong, it’s just...just...” Andrea was getting frustrated at her own inability to confess her feelings. “It doesn’t matter!” she stated in the end. “Anyway I thought you’d be glad to see the back of me?”

The Major looked startled. “Why would you think that?”

“I’ve hardly been the easiest person to have around,” explained Andrea, “Running off the base, causing trouble with the troops. I’m sure things will run much more smoothly without me.”

“Maybe, but it wouldn’t be half as interesting.”

Interesting? Andrea didn’t want to be interesting; she wanted to be irresistible. Though she did note how the Major had made the comment in a fondly amused sort of way.

“I admit that at times you have been...difficult,” said the Major, choosing her words carefully, “God knows how I wanted to give you a slap and tell you to stop acting so petulantly some times.”

Andrea couldn’t help thinking that at least that would have been something – to have ignited some sort of passion in the other woman.

“But then there have been other times when I’ve been impressed by way you’ve acted,” added the Major, “Especially on these two missions. If you hadn’t knocked me out of the way of that walkway and stopped the rock fall god knows what might have happened. It’s hard to think you’re the same person some times. And then there’s how you’ve been behaving recently, avoiding me all the time...”

“I wasn’t avoiding you,” Andrea said quickly, wondering at the same time why the Major sounded so disturbed at the prospect.

“Really,” noted the Major doubtfully. “It’s felt like we’re almost back at square one. I thought we were becoming friends, I enjoyed spending time with you, and then suddenly you were being difficult and challenging again. Why was that?”

Andrea had to fight the urge to roll her eyes as a few possible answers swept through her mind. *Because I want some attention off you? Because you drive me crazy? Because I just want to spark some sort of passion in you, even if it is anger?*

“I don’t know,” said Andrea eventually, “Maybe I just don’t like authority figures.”

“See there you go, doing it again!” cried the Major in frustration. “Are you deliberately trying to provoke me, because you’re doing a pretty good job!”

Andrea could hear the Major’s impassioned breathing, see the flash of anger in her eyes. She found it all incredibly arousing.

“You really do have a certain knack for getting under someone’s skin,” continued the Major, shaking her head, “Half the time I want to knock some sense into you and the other half...”

Andrea studied the other woman’s face. *What did she want to do the other half? What was that almost shy look now crossing her face?*

“You know earlier, when you were asking for a reason why you should stay,” said the Major slowly, “I do have one, though I don’t know how important it is.”

Andrea stared at the Major whose voice had been so huskily low that it sent chills right through the young woman. That, accompanied with the soft, longing look in the other woman’s eyes, left Andrea hanging on the Major’s words. Andrea hardly dared to hope that the Major was going to say what she so desperately wanted to hear.

“The main reason I can think of is that I don’t want you to go.”

Andrea’s heart was hammering so fast now that she found it hard to think of anything beyond the blue eyes that seemed to shine through the gloom of their surroundings. The aching yearning in her chest was all encompassing, as the moment became long seconds that felt drawn out into minutes. Andrea had absolutely no idea how long she had just been staring when the Major started inching towards her. Andrea was like a deer caught in the lights, unable to move as her breath came short and fast.

When the Major’s hands came up and took the young woman’s face in them, Andrea’s breathing ceased altogether. The Major paused minutely before she closed the final tiny distance and placed her lips gently on Andrea’s.

At once Andrea was awash with a tumult of amazing sensations, closing her eyes subconsciously to wallow in them. The Major’s lips were so soft, gentle as they brushed over Andrea’s, the delicate contact sending trickling shivers through her whole body. There was a small moan in the darkness, Andrea only realising after a second that it had escaped involuntarily from her own mouth.

Then as quickly as it had begun it was over, the Major drawing away while Andrea just remained where she was, her eyes still closed, her lips still parted. She wanted more. She needed more.

“Sorry, sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

Andrea heard the Major’s voice but found it hard to concentrate on the words. All she could think about was the heavenly feel of the other woman’s lips and the urge to feel them again, along with so much more of her. All her dreams had never prepared her for the reality of the wonderful arousing sensation of the simplest of kisses.

“Just forget it ever happened,” continued the Major.

Andrea forced her eyes open again to see that the Major was glancing nervously at the floor. “I don’t think that’s likely,” said Andrea.

The Major’s eyes flicked up, still uncertain. “Sorry?”

This time Andrea crept closer to the Major, reaching out trembling fingers to caress the warm skin of her cheek. “I said, I don’t think I can forget it,” repeated Andrea.

The Major’s lips parted invitingly as if to respond and Andrea seized the moment, pressing her mouth eagerly to the Major’s once more. Again the rush was astounding, more instantly erotic than she had ever felt before. Her hand snaked round behind the Major’s head, her fingers gliding into the auburn strands and drawing the other woman close as the kiss deepened. The Major didn’t pull away this time, her own hands slipping round Andrea’s waist, melding their bodies together.

The kiss became more fevered as both women succumbed to weeks of repressed desire. Andrea could hardly contain her lustful urges, fighting hard to take time to savour the wonderful moment. Her hand was roaming down the Major’s back and sneaking up round her front when suddenly there was a loud crunching noise from above.

Both women’s eyes shot upwards in unison as they realised what was happening – their rescuers had arrived. A shaft of light broke through the rock above and the two of them instinctively let go of one another as more of the rock was cut away. The Major’s command presence was back in place as first Tom and then Bel lowered themselves through the opening. Andrea didn’t know how she managed it, she herself was floating somewhere off in the clouds on a high of untold eroticism. If before she had found herself watching the Major more than was appropriate, now she couldn’t tear her eyes off the other woman. She studied every little movement, finding herself unhealthily preoccupied with the Major’s lips.

“Andrea!”

Andrea started, seeing the Major glaring at her, no doubt sensing the theme of Andrea’s thoughts and finding it out of place given the situation. Andrea mentally shook herself, climbing up out the hole to be winched to safety. Once up at ground level she lost track of the Major who had disappeared to organise the remaining rescue efforts. Andrea was fussed over by a medic who she brushed away so she could scan the factory area for the Major. Andrea was disappointed to see she wasn’t nearby, and it wasn’t until she was heading back to their transport plane that she finally spotted the familiar red head in front of her. Andrea’s heart leapt perceptibly and she ran to catch up as the Major went up the ramp into the back of the small aircraft.

“Major!” she shouted eagerly, breathless as she drew level from a combination of the run and the excitement she felt.

The Major's head swung to her and suddenly all Andrea's soaring emotions came crashing back down to earth. The Major looked pensive, worried. "Not now, Andrea," she said in a low voice, continuing towards the plane.

"But..." began Andrea.

"I said not now!"

And with that the Major swept on up the ramp, leaving a confused Andrea where she was. Numbly the young woman followed her on board, taking up a seat in the back as her mind raced. She barely noticed the take-off as her thoughts spiralled through question after question.

What was going on? Why had the Major acted like that? Was she already regretting what had happened?

Andrea prayed that wasn't the case, though growing doubt was filling her. She began to feel physically sick at the prospect of the Major rejecting her just when it had seemed she was so close. Through the flight she tried to control her mounting unease, but as they touched down she knew she couldn't wait any longer to find out where she stood. Andrea let the other superhumans disembark, avoiding their questioning stares as she remained seated. She was thankful to see she had guessed correctly when the Major was last to enter the cargo bay, looking surprised for a second to see Andrea still there before she schooled her features into an impassive expression.

Andrea's emotions were so raw and out of control that she stood up and leapt straight in with what was bothering her. "What's going on? Why were you like that before?"

"Like what?" asked the Major flatly, "I'm merely carrying out my duty, which includes maintaining a professional demeanour."

Andrea couldn't believe the other woman's coldness - it was as if she was trying to pretend nothing had happened below ground. "Oh really?" scoffed Andrea, "And does that include kissing those under your command?"

The Major paused, glancing away now she had been forcefully reminded. Andrea's heart was constricting painfully in her chest as she noticed the reaction.

"That was a mistake."

Andrea wanted to cry in dismay at the plainly stated words, but she held herself together with anger, not wanting to give the Major the satisfaction. "A mistake?" she bristled, "That's all I am - a fucking mistake?"

The Major's eyes finally met Andrea's in a pleadingly apologetic stare. "Andrea, I didn't mean it like that, but I can't do this..."

"Oh just save it!" snapped Andrea. She didn't need to hear any more of the Major's excuses. The Major was reaching out, trying to place a calming hand on Andrea's

arm, but Andrea batted it away furiously. “Leave me alone!” she cried, “Just leave me the fuck alone!”

She turned and ran from the plane, not caring about the loss of dignity with the hasty retreat, only knowing the need to get away from the pain of her unrequited love. She didn't stop running until she made it into her quarters where she could finally fling herself on the sofa and let the tears come. As she lay there, she realised she was back where she had started the day – wondering desperately what her next step was and if there was any hope at all.

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A week later The Major sat at her office desk, trying to bury her head in work and push any other thoughts to the side. Before her were all the reports on the mine accident. They fell into two distinct categories – those produced by the members of her team, which covered all the details, and those produced by the government spin doctors for public consumption that nicely omitted any mention of super powers or secret army units. The Major never ceased to be amazed at the power of the Ministry of Defence's spin machine, able to cover up anything with one swift stroke. She'd watched news reports and read a few newspaper articles on the accident and there wasn't even a hint of her unit's involvement. There was a knock at the door saving her having to read any more of the dry documents.

“Come in!” The Major looked up eagerly from her work hoping she would see a certain blond head coming in her door. Instead the sight of a bald forehead fringed by black hair met her eyes. “Doc,” said the Major flatly, identifying her visitor, “Come in, take a seat.”

The doctor crossed the carpet, taking the offered seat on the opposite side of the Major's desk. “Afternoon, Major,” he said breezily, “I thought I'd come and give you an update on activities, since we haven't seen you downstairs much this last week.”

“I've been busy, you know how it is,” she remarked, rifling absently through some of the papers before her to show what she meant, “I'm sure Lieutenant Chadwick has been keeping an able eye on things in my absence.”

“Indeed, he's been his usual mix of attentive and annoying.”

The Major wasn't really listening to the man, thinking about the real reason why she hadn't been out of her office much – Andrea. Everything was such a mess and she knew it was all her own fault. The kiss they had shared had been amazing, sensuous, mind-blowing and a million other wonderful things. That was despite the fact that her heart had been thumping ten to the dozen at the time, so erratic that she could hardly think straight. It had seemed so right to take Andrea's face like that, and then the sensation of her warm inviting lips...

Even now the Major felt the corresponding warmth spreading through her at the thought of it. However, it hadn't taken long for the doubts and worries to start afterwards. Foremost amongst those was recollections of Adam and what had

happened last time she had allowed herself to fall for someone. That time she had been cruelly betrayed and she knew she couldn't let that happen again, even if it meant she had to shut herself off. In the end it had seemed easier to say that it was all a mistake. If she thought that would be the end of it - that she would easily be able to banish Andrea from her thoughts - then she had been totally wrong.

“Major?”

The Major stared at Doc, who was regarding her curiously. “Sorry?”

“You looked like you had drifted off there,” he remarked, peering at her through his spectacles.

“Sorry,” she said with a wave of the hand, “Go on.”

“It must be catching,” he noted under his breath before he did.

“What?”

“This easily distracted malaise,” he clarified, “It seems you aren't the only one affected.”

“Oh?”

“Andrea has been acting strangely all week,” Doc explained, “Since you got back from that last mission at the mine.”

The sound of Andrea's name caused a small flip in the Major's stomach and she knew without a doubt that she had it bad. It had certainly been a surprise to find she was attracted to another woman, but there was just something about Andrea that she found fascinating – that strange mixture of fiery passion and cool, intelligent aloofness. Not to mention the fact she was utterly gorgeous.

When Andrea had fled from the plane, the Major had restrained the overwhelming desire to chase after the young woman and try and explain things. She had been certain that Andrea would leave the base completely at that point and the Major would have only herself to blame, but then Andrea had confounded her by staying put. That small fact gave the Major some hope that she hadn't completely blown things, though at the same time Andrea had avoided her all week, as much as she had avoided the young woman in return. The Major considered their reasons were most probably different, though. Andrea was no doubt still upset and furious with the Major, while she herself felt guilty for toying with the young woman's emotions and didn't even know where to begin apologising.

Doc continued on, breaking the Major's thoughts. “She's been performing her duties all right though,” he informed her, “Completing her training, doing everything we ask of her.”

That was some small consolation to the Major who was worried about the affect her offhand attitude might have had. It had been unfair to lead Andrea on like that when

she had a strong inkling as to the young woman's feelings. Andrea's reaction only served to affirm the Major's prior suspicions that Andrea was attracted to her and maybe also held even stronger emotional feelings. Yet the Major knew she could never give Andrea what she wanted if that was the case. That wasn't because she didn't want to; in fact she wanted to with a fiery passion so strong it surprised the Major. But there was still that small rational part of her mind overriding her more base desires. That part that told her she couldn't become involved with anyone under her command.

"But at the same time it's like..." Doc cast around for the right words, "She's not all there, like she has something on her mind."

"Right," said the Major, thinking Andrea wasn't the only one with something on her mind. It had gotten so bad, that it was actually affecting her work and her performance - she just seemed unable to concentrate properly and sleeping was proving difficult too. She knew she couldn't go on the way she was - she had to talk to Andrea even if it was just to tell her that there could never be anything between them. At least that would hopefully clear the air. "I'll have a word with her," she said to Doc, "See if I can find out what's troubling her."

"Good," he noted. "Anyway, everyone else is doing fine, which brings me onto the next point of business."

The Major glanced at him as he paused, staring expectantly at her. "Oh god," she said, rubbing her hand roughly over her face, "Is it that time again?"

Doc nodded. "You know how the Colonel is when it comes to his reports. He needs to keep those government guys happy and satisfied that everything here is under control."

"I'm not sure I like the allusion that I might not be in control," noted the Major, with a warning edge.

Doc squirmed slightly in his seat. "You know I think you're doing a fantastic job, but we don't want to give these people any ammunition to shut us down do we?"

"I suppose not," agreed the Major ruefully, "Though I think our two successful missions will have gone some way to proving our worth. But I'll do the report like a good officer."

"You'll need to get some fresh readings..."

"I know what I have to do," the Major interrupted, "I'll arrange that too, all right?"

"Ok, I won't go on," said Doc, sensing that was an end to it. "On another note, I do have some good news."

"I could certainly use some of that right now."

“You know I told you before that I didn’t find any signs of tampering with my energy device, the one I tried using on Andrea.”

The Major nodded, indicating she knew what he was referring to.

“Well, something was bugging me about it, so I took it apart again and I found something.”

“Really?” noted the Major, knowing that could be good news - if they could find their potential saboteur then that would be one less thing for the government officials to hold over her. Plus it would be safer for everyone on the base. So far no one had been seriously hurt, but it was only a matter of time before one of these ‘accidents’ ended fatally.

“I found a single fingerprint on one of the components,” Doc informed her, “It’s strange, because I could swear I checked the component involved before, but there it was, plain as day.”

“And have you run this print?”

“The guys in the surveillance room are doing it now.”

“Then let’s get down there and get our results,” suggested the Major.

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Andrea took another long, slow swig from her drink, allowing the liquid to ease down her throat, burning the whole way. She grimaced as she swallowed, coughing a couple of times once it had gone down. Normally she wouldn’t touch whiskey, but it seemed somehow appropriate since it was the Major’s tippie of choice.

It appeared she couldn’t get away from the other woman no matter what she tried to do, so she had decided she may as well embrace her fate of being in love with someone who didn’t love her back. Andrea hadn’t even seen the Major since their brief argument on the plane, yet the other woman still occupied most of her waking, and non-waking, thoughts. The rest of those sleeping thoughts were filled with her nightmares that had returned with a vengeance.

Seeking its numbing qualities, Andrea picked up the bottle and sloshed another good helping of the golden liquid into her tumbler, spilling some of it on the coffee table in the process. Then she leant back into the sofa and poured it straight down her throat.

How many was that now? Five? Six?

She staggered to her feet, crossing to the window in a zig-zag line, having to lean against the pane when she got there to keep her balance. It was still light, despite the fact it was nearly nine in the evening, the sun just disappearing over the horizon out to the west of the island. Staring out over the landscape, her mind started to drift back to thoughts of the kiss, a moment she had replayed a thousand times since it had

happened a week ago. Her fingers subconsciously brushed over her lips, and she closed her eyes to recall the fantastic sensations she'd experienced. Her head and heart were floating again as she could practically feel the soft touch of the Major's lips. Suddenly Andrea was swaying and before she could stop herself she had slumped to the floor in an ungainly heap. Crawling across the room she heaved herself back onto the sofa.

The bottle of whiskey still sat invitingly on the table and she helped herself to another of her own measures that were much larger than anything available in a pub. She considered that the only way she was going to be able to stop thinking about the Major was to drink herself into oblivion. The glass was just at her lips when a sound resounded around the room.

What the bloody hell was that? thought Andrea through the fog of drink, looking round the room in confusion. All she was met with was Gerry watching her accusingly from a safe distance. "And you can sod off!" she told him, though he didn't budge.

The sound came again and she realised it was the door chime. "Bugger off!" she called out in the general direction of the door.

Her caller was persistent though, ringing the bell for a third time. "Oh for Christ's sake," muttered Andrea, "All right, come in!"

Andrea was lounging on the sofa as the Major crossed the threshold into the dim room. There were no lights on, and she had to squint across the distance to where Andrea sat. "Is there any reason you're sitting in the dark?"

"Because I like it?" offered Andrea obstinately. She attempted to clamp down on her mutinous thoughts that were suggesting all sorts of possibilities for what she could do with the other woman in her quarters.

The Major ignored the blunt response. "I thought you might like to know we've found out who was responsible for the sabotage."

"I hope you threw the book at that wanker!"

"Who?"

"Chadwick of course," said Andrea as if that much was obvious.

"Lieutenant Chadwick wasn't the one responsible," the Major stated evenly, "Doc found a fingerprint on his equipment which we traced to Sergeant Patterson."

"What?" cried Andrea, "You've got to be kidding me? Then Chadwick must have put him up to it or something. It was him, I'm telling you."

Andrea was noticeably slurring her words and a curious Major came towards the sofa, flicking on the lamp that sat next to it. Andrea blinked a couple of times in the bright light, the Major studying her the whole time.

“Have you been drinking?” asked the army officer.

“Yes, I have,” said Andrea without shame, offering the other woman a drunkenly smug grin.

The Major came closer now, noticing the near empty bottle on the table. “Have you drunk all of that?” she asked incredulously

“What are you, my mother?” spat Andrea, snatching up the bottle and walking towards the window once more. She didn’t quite make it, having to slump down in a chair halfway there.

“Bloody hell, Andrea!” cried the Major in consternation as she followed her part of the way, “You can barely walk.”

“So? It’s not like you care is it?” Andrea said bitterly, trying to focus on the other woman as she loomed blurrily into view.

“Of course I care. I don’t like seeing you doing this to yourself...”

“I’m not doing anything to myself,” seethed Andrea, sitting forward in the chair to glare balefully upwards, “*You* were the one who fucked me up, Kate!”

The Major’s face fell noticeably at Andrea’s harsh words, though she kept her mouth tightly shut.

“Oh, it is all right if I call you Kate isn’t it?” asked Andrea sarcastically, “Only I like to be on first name terms with everyone I’ve snogged!”

The Major sighed, starting to back away. “Maybe I should go, come back another time when you’re more capable of holding a halfway intelligent conversation.”

“That’s it run off,” Andrea called after her, leaping to her feet, “Ignore me as always!”

The Major stopped near the door, her back still to Andrea.

“Come on, stay, have a drink, Kate” suggested Andrea, waving her glass in the air, “It is your favourite after all.”

The Major didn’t answer, though she was still hovering on the far side of the room, slowly turning back to face Andrea. If Andrea had been halfway sober she would have spotted the deathly stare she was receiving and been quiet. Unfortunately she was nowhere near sober.

“No? Don’t want one?” said Andrea with a shrug, walking back over to her low coffee table and placing her glass down uncertainly. It took her a couple of goes to aim the bottle of whiskey in the right direction, allowing her to pour the last of it into the tumbler. Seeing it was now empty, Andrea haphazardly dropped the bottle onto

the table allowing it to roll off onto the carpet. She straightened up, wobbling slightly as she raised her glass. “Here’s to mistakes!”

She downed a large portion of the liquid in one go. “So was that all you wanted to tell me about, the saboteur? Or did you come to survey your handiwork too and have a good gloat?”

The Major had stepped closer again, standing within the soft glow cast by the lamp. “No, I actually wanted to talk to you, see how you were. I do still care what happens to you...”

“Ha! That’s rich!” said Andrea petulantly. “*Now* you care about me! You didn’t seem that bothered last week.”

The Major answered slowly, with consideration. “I reacted badly; I know that. I didn’t think at the time”

“And now you’ve thought about it?”

“I still think we shouldn’t have done what we did but I wanted to try and explain why.”

Andrea rolled her eyes, some of her drink sloshing out onto the carpet at the same time. “Come up with a whole load of excuses you mean? Sweep it all under the carpet as if nothing happened? Pretend all you like, but I know you felt it too when we kissed, that instant chemistry.”

“I never said I didn’t,” said the Major quietly.

Her better judgement compromised by drink, Andrea slowly slinked towards the Major, lowering her tone too. “Then why deny it?” She was within reach of the Major now, her fingers reaching out to stroke down the Major’s arm. Though her uniform shirt covered it, Andrea could still sense the warm flesh beneath the stiff material. “Why turn your back on what you feel?” asked Andrea as seductively as she could manage given her inebriated state.

“Who are you to presume to know what I feel?” asked the Major, her eyes flicking up to meet Andrea’s. Her breath was hot as it tickled out across Andrea’s face.

Andrea quirked an eyebrow questioningly. “Then why are you here late at night talking to me?” she asked, with a sly grin. She was still brushing her fingers across the Major’s arm. “I know you want this, why are you fighting it?”

Andrea stepped even closer, well within the Major’s personal space now as her hand continued its upward path, across the Major’s collarbone and then tracking downwards over her shirtfront.

A brief “Oh god” slipped from the Major’s lips before her hand shot up to stop Andrea’s roaming digits. “I can’t do this.”

The Major dropped Andrea's hand and took a few steps away from the young woman, placing a more appropriate distance between them. Andrea's arousal quickly turned to fury now she had been spurned.

"Oh I see, you can't do it with me," she spat furiously, "But you could do it with Adam Dixon?"

All colour drained from the Major's face as she stared at Andrea in shock. "How did you know about that?"

"How did I know?" repeated Andrea, "Everyone bloody knows! Though it seems I was one of the last to, and then I had to hear to from Tom and Harry. Why didn't *you* tell me about it?"

The Major's eyes narrowed warningly. "I didn't realise I had to tell you everything about my private life."

"No I guess you don't," agreed Andrea, "Since you obviously don't give a toss about me. Certainly not like you did about Adam, eh? I bet he really did it for you didn't he?"

"Andrea, stop this," the Major said, her tone still even but carrying an undercurrent of threat. "I know you're angry but..."

"Angry? Angry? Of course I'm fucking angry!" screamed Andrea, gesticulating wildly in the Major's direction as she fumed. "You kiss me...*you* kiss *me*...and then you tell me it was a mistake and expect me to forget all about it! You can let yourself get involved with a wanker like Dixon, but I get cast aside without a second thought. You'll tart yourself around with anyone won't you, like that dark-haired woman who was all over you last week!"

"Dark-haired woman?" The Major was confused for a moment. "Oh, you mean Sophie!" she said in realisation, "She's just a friend of mine, she was kidding around. Not that I have to justify her behaviour to you!"

"Indeed you don't! So is this what you do with everyone, suck them in, get them to like you and then drop them from a great height. Maybe I should find this Dixon guy and congratulate him for being the one to do the same to you."

A small muscle jumped in the Major's jaw as Andrea's comment hit home, the other woman's mouth being held firmly shut while she silently fumed. Andrea noted the reaction with perverse satisfaction, not bothering to say anything else.

Finally the Major broke the pained silence, obviously having to fight to restrain her temper as she spoke. "That's not how it was with you, and you know it. I didn't suck you in, or con you. I did like you...as a friend."

"Did', so now you don't like me?"

"You're making it pretty hard..."

“Oh pardon me for being pissed off!” stated Andrea obstinately.

“I don’t know why I bother!” said the Major, throwing her hands in the air as her exasperation began to show, “I’m sorry if I led you on and made you believe otherwise, but there can never be anything between us.”

“Ha! You’ve got dibs yourself!” cried Andrea scornfully, “Who said I wanted anything from you anyway?” Even Andrea knew her words didn’t make much sense, but she was hardly at her most rational at that point. It was obvious from her prior comments and her whole attitude that she had feelings for the Major, but she continued on unabated anyway. “I could have any woman I wanted, what makes you think I’d want anything serious with a dried up old has-been like you? You can’t even carry out a simple thing like an investigation into an accident properly. In fact I think you’ve been deliberately dragging it out so I’ll stay and make your little mutie group look good!”

“Because you’re doing such a good job of that now, a fine example!”

“I never wanted to be anyone’s example!” yelled Andrea, fast losing any semblance of control, “I never asked to be given these fucking powers!”

“Will you listen to yourself – wallowing in self pity,” noted the Major disdainfully her own ire rising to meet Andrea’s now, “I know I hurt you, but you need to get a grip.”

“I don’t need to do anything you fucking say!” challenged Andrea, staggering across the room and banging into the kitchen counter before she managed to negotiate her way around it in the direction of the fridge.

“You do when you’re on my base,” the Major reminded her in steely tones.

“Yeah, well that can be remedied,” Andrea remarked, diving into the fridge in search of something else to drink.

“And where are you going to go?” asked the Major, standing behind her at the entrance to the kitchen area, “What are you going to do?”

Andrea swung round holding a bottle of beer. “None of your bloody business!” she cried. “Maybe I’ll go back to the police, anything’s better than hanging around here with you arseholes!”

The Major shook her head, seeing that Andrea had another drink. “I really think we should discuss this another time,” she suggested.

The alcohol-fuelled red mist had fully descended over Andrea. “No! I want to discuss it now!” she demanded, bringing the bottle she was holding down on the work surface next to her with a crash. It shattered spectacularly into tiny pieces, the beer dripping down the side to pool on the tiles.

The Major merely stared at the enraged young woman. "I'm going now," she said stiffly. "*You* might want to get someone to look at that hand," she added, indicating Andrea's bleeding palm with her eyes. Andrea hadn't even noticed the drops of red splattering over her floor.

Without another word the Major turned on her heel and disappeared out of the room. Andrea followed her for a few steps before she sank to her knees bashing her bloodied fists against the carpet in a mixture of rage and frustration at her own stupid behaviour. Reaching up she ripped the power regulator off her left arm and threw it across the room before continuing to drum her hands on the floor, deliberately using her super strength. When the seizure came it was a blessed relief to let the darkness consume her.

CHAPTER 16

There was a noise ringing through the haze of Andrea's brain, painful and persistent. She opened her eyes, quickly screwing them shut again when the harsh light of morning almost blinded her. She was still slumped on her living room floor, where she had collapsed the night before. The carpet was welcomingly soft against her face and she wasn't sure she could get up, even if she wanted to.

"Fuck, Andrea, what the hell have you been doing?"

Andrea craned her head up to see Tom standing over her prone form. She tried to speak but found her mouth strangely reluctant to form any coherent sounds. Finally she managed to croak something out. "How did you get in here?"

Tom bent down to help her up, though she was like a dead weight as he helped her back up into a sitting position on the sofa. "I have my ways," he said, "Good job too, looking at the state of you."

"I just had a couple of drinks," said Andrea defensively, trying to smooth down her rumpled clothes, noting that she stunk rather unpleasantly of alcohol.

"A couple?" asked Tom picking up the empty bottle from its discarded position under the table. "Is that a couple of bottles?" he asked, holding it up accusingly.

"All right, all right, maybe I did have one too many," she conceded, rubbing at her head as it started to spin again. It was then she noticed her right-hand was caked in dried blood, the image of her smashing the bottle darting through her adled brain.

"Let me guess," said Tom, sitting down next to her, "The Major."

Andrea let out a long sigh and nodded her head, knowing it was hopeless trying to deny it any longer.

"Oh Andrea, I thought we warned you about getting any ideas..."

"I couldn't help it," wailed Andrea, swinging her eyes up to him pleadingly, "I love her!"

"Fuck me!" stated Tom, plainly surprised, "I knew you fancied her but I didn't realise it was that bad."

"It's more than bad, it's terrible. I've made a utter prat of myself!"

"Why don't you start at the beginning?" offered Tom gently.

Gathering herself, Andrea launched into an explanation of how her feelings had built until her startling realisation that she was in love with the Major; how after that she couldn't stop thinking about the other woman; how they had shared a magical kiss underground at the mine. Through that part of the story she had a wistful faraway look on her face, while Tom looked even more startled than he had before. Then she told him what the Major had said afterwards, finally recounting the events of the night before.

"Oh god, I acted like such an idiot," moaned Andrea, holding her thumping head in her hands, "I wouldn't be surprised if she never wants to speak to me again."

"You couldn't have been that bad," said Tom diplomatically.

"I was horrendous!" insisted Andrea, not even wanting to recall it, but unable to think of anything else, "I was stumbling round the room, swearing, insulting her."

Andrea rubbed roughly at her face while a strange gurgling sensation built in her stomach. It started off as mildly disconcerting, but then bubbled up further towards her throat. Andrea's hand shot to her mouth, and she dashed from the room frantically seeking out the toilet. Once she had deposited the contents of her stomach in it, she staggered uneasily back into the lounge where Tom was still waiting, eyeing her with slight amusement.

"Feeling better?" he asked

"Not at all," she stated ruefully, flopping back down on the sofa.

"Here, try some of this." Tom handed her a glass of water with one hand and her power regulator with the other, having obviously retrieved it from its discarded location.

Andrea accepted both, tentatively bringing the glass to her lips. She took the barest of sips, checking it wasn't going to cause her to retch again.

"I'm sure the Major won't hold it against you," Tom suggested, "She'll realise you were drunk and upset, that you didn't really mean what you said."

"Maybe she might forgive me eventually, but if I did have any faint hope of something happening between us then I've pretty much put paid to that," noted Andrea grimly, pushing her bedraggled hair from her eyes.

"Maybe it's for the best," offered Tom, "I don't think she would ever have gotten involved with anyone under her command again after Dixon."

Andrea still found herself bristling whenever his name was brought up. "That man has a lot to answer for."

Tom nodded sympathetically as she rose to his feet. "I'll make some excuse as to why you can't make it to training," he suggested, "You should get some sleep. That is presuming you're sticking around?"

"Yes, I'm staying," confirmed Andrea, "I'm going to keep my head down and just get on with things, try and forget all this ever happened."

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Andrea managed to do as she had decided for the next few days, though the after effects of her drunken episode continued to weigh heavily on her. The argument cast a similar pall over the Major herself, and it was with a heavy heart that she sat in her office five days later, reading the words on the papers before her on the coffee table, but not really taking them in. It may have been five days, but she was still smarting from her confrontation with Andrea, the young woman's harsh words still painfully fresh in the Major's mind. The irony was that the Major had gone there with the intention of trying to apologise and make peace with Andrea, but as soon as she'd seen the bottle of whiskey on the table she'd known it was pointless. All she'd wanted to do then was extricate herself as quickly as possible. Not that it had stopped Andrea getting in a few below the belt jibes, particularly about Adam. The Major wasn't sure if it was the uncomfortable reminder of his betrayal that was most hurtful, or the shame she felt knowing Andrea knew about it.

The whole incident had been profoundly disappointing, the degree of her present despondancy making her realise just how much she cared about what happened between her and Andrea. She'd tried to allow for the fact that Andrea was obviously upset and worse for wear but that didn't really take away the sting of the words. Fearing a repeat, she hadn't been able to face the prospect of talking to her again, at least not yet.

Sighing she wondered to herself how things had gotten so bad between them. It was only a month ago that they had been happily sharing coffee and banter on the roof and now things had deteriorated to the point where they couldn't even be in the same room together without it degenerating into an argument. She knew it was partly her fault, she had handled the whole situation badly, but it didn't help when Andrea was so hot-headed and stubborn. Rubbing her eyes wearily she looked out to the sky for inspiration, just as there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called instantly, trying to put on her best composed officer face.

When she saw who her visitor was she let it slip away again, she didn't need to put on a mask for this particular person. "Sophie," she said, getting to her feet as her friend crossed the room, "Good to see you."

"Hi Kate, good to see you too," greeted Sophie, giving the Major her customary hug, "Though I have to say you look like shit!" she added, pulling back and giving the Major the once over with her eyes.

"Thanks," said the Major ruefully, "It's nice to know who your friends are."

“Hey, if a friend can’t tell you when you look like a pile of crap, who can?”

“So delicately put,” noted the Major, sitting back down and offering Sophie a cup of coffee which she gratefully accepted. “To what do I owe this pleasure then?” asked the Major as she took another sip from her own steaming mug.

“No reason in particular,” said Sophie slowly, “I thought I’d just pop by and see how you’re doing.”

“Pop by?” said the Major doubtfully, “Right, because the base is so close to anywhere else you might be going.”

Sophie tipped her head to the side in acknowledgement that she’d been caught out. “All right, I wanted to know if there’d been any progress?”

“Progress?”

Sophie sighed, now fixing the Major with a pointed stare. “Oh come on Kate, don’t play dumb, you know full well I mean with Andrea! When I last saw you a week and a half ago you were going to speak to her, find out what was going on. So, did you?”

The Major shifted nervously. “Sort of”

Sophie wasn’t letting her get away with any evasion though. “What does that mean, sort of?”

“Well we did talk a bit and then…”

“And then what?” Sophie pressed, on the edge of her seat now.

“And then I kissed her.”

“Holy shit!” exclaimed Sophie almost spilling her coffee in shock. “Holy bugging shit!” she repeated thinking it best to put her cup down on the coffee table before it went everywhere in her excitement. “You sly dog! So how was it, how did she react, what’s going on now?”

“Slow down! One thing at a time!” said the Major trying to check her friend’s unfettered enthusiasm.

“How was it?” the Major continued, repeating the question to give herself time to think of an answer. *Amazing? Mindblowing?* “It was…fantastic,” she settled on.

Sophie grinned broadly. “Really?” she said suggestively, quirking her eyebrow in an invite for more more details.

The Major ignored it, moving on to address the other questions. “How did she react? She kissed me back.”

Sophie couldn't contain herself again "Brilliant!" she cried, bouncing on her seat. "I can't bloody believe it, here you've been maintaining to me for years that you're as straight as the proverbial rod and all the time you've been hiding this secret little dyke inside!"

"I would hardly classify myself as a 'dyke'," corrected the Major.

"But you are attracted to Andrea?"

"Yes," agreed the Major slowly, "But this has never happened to me before. I've always been attracted to and been out with men in the past, yourself excepted of course. And that was just a bit of juvenile experimentation."

Sophie frowned at the assessment of their extremely brief fling. "You make me feel so good about that every time you bring it up."

"Sorry, but you know what I mean," the Major tried to explain, "It wasn't anything serious, for either of us"

"All right, point taken," conceded Sophie.

"So, given my track record, why all of sudden at the age of thirty-five do I discover I have hidden lesbian tendencies?" the Major asked, genuinely confused as to where these feelings had developed from.

"Maybe they've been there all the time and you just haven't met the right woman?" suggested Sophie before chuckling to herself as she realised her own words. "Listen to me, I sound like my gran in reverse... 'hello Sophie dear, how are you, have you met a nice man yet?'"

The Major smiled wanly too, though she wasn't really in the mood for jokes. "I guess you could be right."

"You guess?" said Sophie incredulously, "I would say kissing someone is a fair indication of attraction! Talking of which, after the kissing, what happened next?"

The Major avoided Sophie's eager stare, tellingly looking down at her hands in her lap.

"Uh oh, what did you do?" asked Sophie, seeing the guilty look.

The Major took a breath and then looked up to her friend. "Afterwards I told her it was a mistake," she admitted ruefully.

Sophie theatrically thumped her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Kate!" she moaned, "You...are...hopeless!"

"I panicked!" confessed the Major plaintively, "All I could think about was what happened with Adam and how disastrously that turned out."

“I bet Andrea took your announcement it was a mistake well.”

The Major felt the guilt rising again, saying her next words quietly as if that would make them less harsh in some way. “She ran off and then I didn’t speak to her for a week.”

“This just gets better and better!” cried Sophie, rolling her eyes.

“I didn’t know what to say,” admitted the Major, “I felt bad about how I behaved but at the same time I didn’t know how to make it any better for her.”

“You could have told her you didn’t mean it?” offered Sophie reasonably.

“The thing is I’m not sure whether I meant it or not,” the Major said, rubbing her head tiredly as the same conflicting questions that had bothered her all week returned.

“Part of me was saying it was mistake, that I can’t allow my command to be compromised or distracted from again, especially not if I want to keep my job. Plus there’s the whole ‘woman’ thing,” she added.

Seeing Sophie looking like she wanted to interrupt, the Major quickly went on, “And before you say anything, all I mean is that it’s all a bit strange and confusing for someone who’s just assumed they were straight their whole life.”

“Ok, I won’t bug you about it, but you said that it was part of you that was insisting it was a mistake, what about the other parts?”

The Major laughed ruefully. “They were telling me that it was wonderful and that I should just go with it and enjoy it.”

“Hell yeah! Listen to those parts!” agreed Sophie enthusiastically.

The Major shot her a dark look, immediately quietening her. “That is not exactly helpful advice. You can understand my reticence can’t you?”

“I suppose so - Adam certainly did a pretty good number on you,” agreed Sophie, “But isn’t it a bit unfair comparing Andrea to him without even giving her the chance to prove otherwise? Adam was a first-class bastard, I never understood what you saw in him.”

“We’ve been over this before,” the Major said with a sigh, “It was a...difficult time for me, with what happened in Iraq still so raw in my mind.”

“You mean he took advantage - wanker!”

“Yes, ok, don’t remind me,” the Major remarked with regret, “But we’re not talking about Adam are we?”

“My point precisely!”

“Ok, you may be right,” the Major allowed, “Maybe it’s not fair to assume the same thing might happen again, but it seems safer to keep things this way, with my work life and personal life separate.”

“What personal life?” noted Sophie under her breath.

“I heard that!”

“Sorry, but you have to admit you’ve not exactly been putting it out there since Adam.”

“It was only seven months ago,” the Major reminded her.

“That’s long enough – it’s time to forget about him and move on. You have this gorgeous woman offering herself up to you and you’re dithering about, leaving her hanging,” noted Sophie, not pulling any punches, “I bet she’s cursing herself for falling for a straight woman – you’re always such hard work.”

The Major’s brow creased slightly at the blunt words. “Thanks! I did actually try and talk to her last Friday.”

“That’s something,” allowed Sophie, waiting for more information.

“However, when I went round there she was drunk,” the Major recalled, “And not just a little tipsy, absolutely steaming, falling down smashed. I’ve only ever seen her like that once before and that was when her friend died.”

“Uh-oh.”

The Major wasn’t sure she liked Sophie’s tone, especially not when coupled with the sucking in of her lips. “What?”

“I think I may have made a mistake when I said I thought she had a crush on you,” said Sophie thoughtfully.

“What?” exclaimed the Major disbelievingly, “That’s just great! I’ve made a complete fool of myself, wrecked my relationship with Andrea and now you’ve changed your mind?”

“Not entirely,” Sophie quickly said, “I don’t think ‘crush’ is the right word at all. I hate to use the ‘L’ word glibly, but I think she’s in love with you.”

The Major’s mouth dropped open dumbly as Sophie’s words made it to her ears, without fully registering in her brain. “In...love...?” she repeated stupidly.

“With you, yes.”

“But...but...how?” stuttered the Major, still finding it hard to grasp the concept, “She hardly knows me.”

“You’ve spent pretty much the whole of the last three months together on this small island,” pointed out Sophie, “I think she’s probably got a fair idea. As hard as it may be for you to comprehend, some people do find you attractive for a whole host of reasons.”

The Major couldn’t help blushing at the implied compliment. She knew that the ease with which that had happened was just another sign that she had badly lost control of her emotions. Chiding herself, she realised she had to get a grip – she was meant to be an army Major after all.

“But I’m not here to boost your ego,” continued Sophie, “What you really need to ask yourself is how do you really feel? Forget the obstacles and problems regarding your career and the base - how do you actually feel?”

“You mean do *I* love *her*?” deduced the Major.

Sophie studied the Major intently, her dark eyes boring into her as she turned the question back on the other woman. “Well...do you?”

The Major merely stared back at her, finding herself experiencing an emotion she wasn’t used to. She was scared. Not only that, but what she was scared of was her own feelings, so terrified in fact that she didn’t even want to examine them in case she was unprepared for what they would tell her.

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Andrea peered through the foggy haze that swirled round her in the confines of the training building, but it was no use – she couldn’t make out any of the others at her current location. To make matters worse her earpiece seemed to be on the blink and she’d lost radio contact with them and the command centre. In frustration she pulled it from her ear, the small device dangling uselessly over the shoulder of her black uniform from its curly wire. The only sound she could hear was a faint electrical humming coming from somewhere in the building and a far off constant dripping noise. To add to the spooky atmosphere was the ever increasing pall of smoke, no doubt part of the exercise, but annoying nonetheless. Andrea could barely see two feet in front of her due to the combination of dark and smoke and decided it was best to head for the nearest exit and then work out what had gone wrong with communications once she was out in the fresh summer air.

As she stumbled back the way she had come, her mind inevitably drifted back to the drunken night in her quarters, the recollections not getting any better with repeat viewing. It may have been nearly a week since then, but she was still ashamed by her own behaviour and had been too embarrassed to even attempt talking to the Major in the intervening period. However, as time went on, it became harder and harder to summon the courage to approach her to apologise.

It was an uncommon desire for her, to want to apologise to someone, yet she desperately wanted to say sorry for all the hurtful things she had said to the Major. She wanted to try and explain that she didn’t normally do and say stupid things like

that, but that she had just been so hurt by the Major's rejection that she had lost it. The Major's dismissal of what had happened in the mine had been difficult to take, but it had hardly been fair to say what she had. With gut-wrenching clarity she could recall her terrible comments about Dixon, along with the Major's pinched reaction. And as for smashing the bottle...Andrea couldn't believe she could have been so petulantly childish. No wonder she'd not seen hide nor hair of the Major for five days, the other woman probably didn't even want to be anywhere near her.

As her mind wandered, Andrea suddenly realised she had gone off course. Stopping for a moment she tried to gauge where she was in relation to the walls and doors. The building was derelict and consisted of a number of rooms of varying sizes and states of decay. Andrea herself was currently in one of the largest, a cavernous chamber that reminded her uncomfortably of the warehouse where she had lost her police colleagues. The fact that smoke filled the room only heightened her sense of *déjà vu*, and when there was a sudden sparking noise behind her, Andrea nearly jumped out of her skin. She whirled round to see a loose electrical wire, dangling from the ceiling, emitting sparks every now and then.

She took a deep breath trying to calm her racing heart. With all that had been happening with the Major, she hadn't been to her counselling sessions for a couple of weeks. Now she wished she had continued to combat her fears surrounding the events of that fateful day in the warehouse. Trying to push those haunting thoughts aside, she noticed a shift in the smoke, thinking she saw a figure through the gloom.

"Hello? Is there someone there?"

There was no reply, and Andrea dashed over in the direction she thought she had seen the movement, the smoke parting as she swept through it. She was by a wall now, but as she spun round on the spot there was no sign of anyone else in the room. Maybe it had been her mind playing tricks on her? Maybe the mysterious shadowy figure from her dreams was now following her around in her waking hours? Though she had resolved the conundrum of the owner of the black boots, she had still yet to catch up with the watcher on the gantry during her nightmares, despite trying several times.

She shook her head to bring herself back to the present, only then noticing something that had evaded her senses before. There was a strange smell. Andrea sniffed at the air, trying to identify it. As she did her eyes scanned the room alertly too, falling upon a section of piping that rang along the ceiling above her head. There was a crack in it, and she reached up to feel the rough edges. It looked like the gash had been deliberately made, and recently too, the detritus on the floor beneath it freshly fallen. With her fingers lingering there, she could feel the faint drift of something from the pipe. Suddenly it hit her what the smell was – gas.

Andrea swung round desperately to look at the wire she had spotted moments before. It wavered once in the draft before it contacted the far wall. The spark flared instantly and Andrea barely had time to get her hands up in a futile attempt to protect herself from the ensuing explosion before everything went black.

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The Major came charging into the sickbay disregarding any need for decorum in her urgency. Her eyes swiftly scanned the room and as soon as they fell upon the pale figure on one of the beds the crushing sensation in her chest was like a body blow. She was thankful there was no one else present to see how she staggered uneasily to Andrea's bedside, having to brace herself against the mattress as the sickening feelings continued to sweep through her.

When the Major had heard about the accident, she had dropped what she had been doing and immediately rushed to the medical bay, having to fight down her fear the whole way. During that agonisingly long walk she had realised that the prospect of losing Andrea was almost too much to bear. The Major hadn't answered Sophie's question the day before regarding her feelings towards Andrea, but then and there she knew she could deny it to herself no longer. She *was* in love with Andrea.

The Major studied her face now, thinking the young woman looked peaceful enough, though there were a few telltale grazes across her skin as evidence of the explosion. The Major glanced anxiously around, seeking out Doc who was nowhere to be seen. Frowning to herself, she supposed Andrea couldn't be in any immediate danger if he was absent. A monitor beeped rhythmically by the bedside, much slower than the Major's own racing pulse.

Slowly her fingers snaked out towards Andrea, though she paused almost frightened to touch her. *What if she was cold? What if the monitor was lying?*

Suddenly she closed the remaining distance, desperate to banish her doubts. Her fingers found the skin of Andrea's face reassuringly warm and the relief that washed through the Major was followed by a long sigh of gratitude. She gently brushed her fingers over Andrea's cheek, lovingly tucking away some loose strands of blonde hair. Gazing down on Andrea's sleeping face the swell of emotion in her heart was almost overwhelming. The Major reached up to her own eyes, the digits coming away damp. She stared dumbly at her fingers, surprised to see the teary droplets there.

She swallowed hard as the implications of her feelings filtered through to her brain. The love she felt was so raw and powerful it almost outweighed any other thoughts altogether, but deep down she knew that was exactly why she couldn't succumb to it.

No matter how much she might love Andrea it was pointless to think it would or could go anywhere. For a start she herself couldn't let that happen, it just wasn't right in her position. There was also the small point of how badly wrong things had gone when she had disregarded her better judgement before. Her experience with Adam cast a long shadow over her heart, and though she knew it was cowardly in a way, she would rather remain safely detached than risk that sort of pain again. For she knew that if she did give in to her feelings, then Andrea would have the capacity to hurt her, infinitely so.

The Major withdrew her hand from Andrea's face, crossing her arms instead as she tried to convince herself that this was the right decision for both of them. The Major reasoned that Andrea's attraction to her was probably only a temporary thing anyway – far better that she find someone more suitable and appreciative of her affections

than the Major who was constrained in what she could return by her duty and fears. A brief thought crossed her mind, questioning why she felt so bloody awful if this was the right choice, why her heart ached with a cold, numbing pain.

“Major, I didn’t hear you come in.”

The Major whirled round, quickly wiping away any remaining tears and slamming down her best composed command face.

“I wanted to check how Andrea was personally,” she informed Doc as calmly as she could manage.

He regarded her curiously for a second, the light from the monitoring equipment reflecting off the lenses of his glasses. “She’s bloody lucky, is how she is,” he replied eventually, moving past the Major to check his readings, “She was blown straight through a wall by the explosion. For any of us it would have most likely been fatal, but her denser bone structure saved her. It was a good job she was flung outside though, since no amount of denser bones would have protected her from the inferno in the building.”

The Major nodded, though each word that outlined how close Andrea had come to being killed caused fresh painful spasms in her chest. “But she’ll be all right?” asked the Major, struggling to maintain her composure.

“Yes, she’s got a few scrapes, bumps and bruises but otherwise there’s no lasting damage. I should be able to release her to her quarters when she comes round. Is there any word on how it happened?”

“Not yet, I came straight here when I heard,” replied the Major without thinking, too distracted with staring at Andrea again. Noticing the look Doc gave her at the piece of information she quickly sought to qualify it. “I’m going out to the training ground now.”

“You don’t think it’s more sabotage?” asked the medic.

“I’m not making any assumptions,” the Major said, “Remember we discovered that it was Patterson who tampered with your device and he’s safely locked up now. This could just be a random accident.”

“Maybe,” allowed Doc, “Though it’s amazing how many of these ‘accidents’ happen to Andrea.”

The Major was only too painfully aware of that fact, though she tried not to let it affect her reasoning. That was precisely one of her fears about allowing herself fall under the spell of her emotions. The Major found she had an irrational urge to find whoever was responsible, if there was a someone, and hurt them in return. The depth of the violent urge was not a little scary to her, though at least she was aware enough of it to be able to control it. For now.

“Right, I’m going out to the training area, keep me informed of Andrea’s condition,” the Major requested, making for the door, though it was a wrench to tear herself away.

Doc seemed surprised she was leaving. “You’re not going to wait until she wakes up?”

The Major regarded him evenly. “Is there any reason I need to?” she asked. Of course she wanted to stay, but she didn’t want to give the impression of anything untoward – Doc’s reaction suggested there were some people who had already noticed her closeness to Andrea.

“Er...no...of course not,” he replied.

“Good,” the Major noted, “And let’s keep this little visit between ourselves, shall we?” she added, thinking she needed to make sure she nipped any gossiping in the bud.

“Whatever you say,” he answered, turning back to his patient as she turned for the door again.

The Major hovered briefly in the doorway, now Doc’s back was safely to her, taking one last longing look at Andrea. Steeling herself for the days and weeks of concealing her feelings that lay ahead, she finally forced herself from the room.

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Andrea’s recovery progressed over the weekend, the young woman not attending the usual meetings and training sessions, but instead taking things easy in her quarters. Come Monday evening though, Tom convinced her that she’d been ‘moping about’ in her quarters for long enough after the training accident, and that she should attend a reception being held in the rec room. It was for a group of government officials who had been touring the base all day and the reception was supposed to be a relaxed and informal get together for them at the end of it, though Andrea herself felt anything but relaxed.

She ran her fingers along the back of her collar, feeling decidedly warm in the rec room that was currently occupied by a selection of visiting officials and some more of the higher ranking base staff. Not that her pale blue shirt was particularly tight around her neck, she just felt uncomfortable in the presence of all the stuffed shirts, having to put on a smiling face for their benefit.

The only reason Andrea had finally agreed to Tom’s incessant badgering was that she hoped to see a certain someone in attendance. She knew it was silly considering they’d hardly even acknowledged each other’s existence for two weeks, but the power the Major held over her thoughts and emotions was still as strong as ever. Despite her best efforts to study everyone present, as always Andrea found her eyes naturally drawn to the other woman. She hadn’t seen the Major in more than passing during the past week, and the longing ache in her heart now was evidence of how deeply she felt the loss.

The Major on the other hand didn't look particularly bothered that Andrea was maintaining a discrete distance on the opposite side of the room, in fact she hadn't even looked over once. Andrea knew because she had been surreptitiously watching the other woman the whole time, noting how commanding and downright gorgeous she looked in the uniform she wore for official occasions. Andrea particularly liked it because it came with a skirt that revealed a healthy dose of leg. Whenever a fresh person tried to talk to Andrea, she managed to position herself so she could keep an eye on the Major's actions. They were depressing viewing though. Not only did she show no sign of even being aware of Andrea, but also she looked at ease and happy to be enjoying the reception.

The Major's dismissive attitude towards Andrea had extended to her not even bothering to visit her over the weekend, to check she was all right after the accident. A procession of other people had dropped by – Tom, Harry, Bel, Doc, even Dr Todd. However, none of their well wishes could make up for the lack of a visit from the one person she really wanted to see.

She knew she could hardly blame the Major for not wanting to speak to her after her horrendous behaviour of a week ago. Getting drunk had been stupid, and Andrea was being careful to stick to orange juice now, not wanting any repeat of that incident. Not that she could imagine the Major wanting to come to her quarters any time soon for that to happen.

Glumly Andrea wondered if there was any hope of a reconciliation. Though she'd intimated otherwise to Tom several times, she desperately clung on to the hope that maybe the Major would come round. That maybe they could be friends again, possibly even more. It was the only thing really keeping her at the base. Andrea just couldn't forget the kiss they'd shared and prayed that in time the Major might realise it hadn't been a mistake, that she did want more.

Andrea was placing her drink down on a table and gathering her courage to go and attempt speaking with the other woman when she felt a presence beside her.

"It's Andrea Hallstrom isn't it?"

Andrea turned to the speaker in surprise. It wasn't often she heard anyone talking to her in Swedish, not since she'd stopped talking to her parents. Next to her was a short, officious looking woman. She wore a smart and immaculate grey suit, her blond hair neatly tied back while her green eyes were behind a pair of thin metal framed glasses.

"Yes, and you are?" Andrea said in reply, also speaking in her parent's native tongue. She was a bit out of practice but it wasn't likely she was going to forget how to speak it after it had been drummed into her from a young age.

"Anna Kaminski." The other woman introduced herself and offered up her hand, "I'm attached to the secretary of state's office."

Andrea took the small hand, careful how hard she gripped it. "And do you often speak Swedish to random people at receptions, Miss Kaminski?"

“I just like to practice sometimes,” admitted the other woman, switching to English without a flicker, “It saves me from getting rusty.”

Andrea caught the barest of accents in the other woman’s English speaking voice, but couldn’t quite place it. It could have been Eastern European of some kind she thought. “You’re not Swedish though are you?” Andrea noted, continuing on in English herself.

“Did the accent give it away?” asked Miss Kaminski, with the touch of a smile, “But you’re right, Swedish is just one of my languages.”

“One? Sounds impressive” said Andrea, raising her eyebrows. “So you’re ‘attached’ to the secretary of state are you?” she commented, recalling the other woman’s choice of words, “In what way exactly, or is that secret, as are most things around here?”

The shorter woman didn’t answer, just giving Andrea a knowing look as if to confirm that it was indeed secret in some way. Andrea couldn’t put her finger on it, but she didn’t think she liked the government official. It was nothing obvious, just a strange vibe she got from her.

“So how have you been finding things here?” asked the other woman, turning the conversation back to Andrea.

“Fine,” remarked Andrea evasively. Given her reservations about the woman, Andrea wasn’t about to reveal anything until she found out precisely what it was for.

“No problems at all?” continued Kaminski, obviously fishing for something, “The command of the base has been acceptable has it?”

Suddenly it was clear to Andrea what the other woman was after. “You want me to dish some dirt on the Major?” she stated bluntly in distaste.

“I wouldn’t put it exactly like that,” said Kaminski diplomatically, “But if you do know of anything...”

Andrea merely stared back into the impassive eyes. Though she might have had some recent differences with the Major, Andrea certainly wasn’t about to stab her in the back. “No, I have no issues with the way the Major runs the base,” she stated, “And even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Kaminski’s face took on a pinched look, her eyes narrowing with the barest flicker of annoyance. “I see,” she noted through tight lips, “Major Jarvis does seem to engender this strange loyalty in people. Strange yet misplaced.”

Andrea was liking Kaminski less and less. “Maybe some people appreciate the job she does here,” she suggested.

“Maybe some people do, but there are others that think she should never have got this job, let alone kept it after that debacle last year.”

Andrea was starting to feel the first stirrings of anger at the other woman's lack of respect for and belief in the Major. Kaminski was meant to be one of the Major's colleagues, yet it seemed the other woman was more than happy to bad mouth her to others. "She's managed to prove she's more than capable of running this place since then," Andrea pointed out, "Everyone here holds the Major in high regard. Now if that's all I think I have a much more pressing engagement at the bar."

Andrea quickly moved away from the woman, remembering vividly why she didn't like politicians and beauracrats – they always had a hidden agenda of some kind. Recalling the course of action she had been set upon before she'd gotten waylaid, Andrea searched out the familiar red head amongst the crowd, her heart beating faster in anticipation as she did. When her eyes did finally locate the Major, it was just in time to see Kaminski collaring her too.

Kaminski's words came back to Andrea as she briefly watched them, noting the Major didn't look best pleased to find herself talking to the stern-faced official. From what Kaminski had said, it was obvious the Major was under pressure from above. In which case she wouldn't be risking her career by getting involved in anything that could bring her ability to command into question. Any kind of romantic involvement certainly fell into that category. Pursuing something like that would be handing someone like Kaminski ammunition to use against her on a plate, especially after the events of the previous year.

Andrea realised she was clinging onto a dream, one that was never going to come true. It was clear to her that she had to resign herself to the fact that the Major could and would never feel the same as she herself did. Maybe they could still be friends – at least that way Andrea would still have the other woman in her life, even if it wasn't how she wanted. At that moment though, that prospect offered her scant comfort, and unable to watch any longer she quickly left the room to be on her own.

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The Major tried not to obviously follow Andrea's departure, though she was much more interested in where the young woman was going than she was with what the person in front of her had to say. It had been a pleasant surprise to see Andrea there so soon after her accident. Doc had been keeping the Major closely informed regarding Andrea's welfare, though he had questioned several times why she didn't just go and see Andrea herself to find out how she was. The Major managed to fob him off with some excuse about being busy, though the truth was far different. In reality she didn't want to go and see Andrea because she was afraid she wouldn't be able to control her emotions, especially not if they were alone together. The Major took pride in her famed self-control, a control that was severely threatened around Andrea. So she had kept her distance, though it had been unbearably hard.

Then Andrea had swept into the reception and the Major had been completely enraptured. Her eyes had tracked Andrea all the way across the room, the young woman seeming to be a shining beacon amongst the dullness of the others present. Only when Andrea had stopped and started to turn did the Major force herself to look away and concentrate on the latest official she was conversing with. It had been hard

keeping her eyes focussed on the man, remembering to smile and ingratiate herself at all the right moments.

“Am I boring you, Major?”

“Of course not, Miss Kaminski,” said the Major, switching her eyes back to the petite woman who was actually shorter than the Major herself, “It’s always a pleasure to hear your thoughts on the base,” she added, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I know you think that because I’m not in the army, that I don’t know what I’m talking about,” noted Kaminski, “That I’m some pencil-pusher out to close you down.”

“You’re not?” asked the Major pointedly. She really wasn’t in the mood for verbal sparring with Kaminski. Normally she would relish the challenge, but that day she was far too pre-occupied to concentrate. As soon as she’d seen Andrea was at the reception she’d wanted to go and speak to her, but had been cornered by one person after another until it was too late and the young woman was leaving.

“You think because you’ve had two successful missions that everything is going well? Let me tell you that it’s been bloody hard keeping your antics away from the prying eyes of the press.”

“That’s your job though isn’t it, covering things up? We don’t want you to get bored do we?”

Kaminski shot her a withering look. “If I had my way you wouldn’t be out doing things in the public eye, this is meant to be a secret facility.”

“Lucky we’re not doing things your way then,” noted the Major bitinglly, “Since we saved the lives of those miners, not to mention the passengers on that jet a few weeks ago. The Ministry wanted us to start producing results, take a more active role, and that’s just what we’re doing.”

“I think some of us had a slightly different role in mind.”

The Major was curious, but tried not to show it too obviously. “I just bet you did, sorry we couldn’t accommodate you,” she said, not sorry in the slightest.

“There’s still time,” commented Kaminski.

“Not while I’m in charge,” shot back the Major, “My people aren’t going to be puppets in whatever power game it is you’re playing.”

“And you think your position is safe do you?”

The Major laughed ruefully. “Oh no, I’m sure you’re just waiting for me to trip up in some way,” she replied.

“I never thought this project should have got off the ground in the first place,” continued Kaminski in disparaging tones, “Especially with someone like you in charge.”

The Major had to restrain herself from rising to the obvious bait. She knew Kaminski was a wily customer, and she'd probably sensed the Major's earlier distraction, no doubt hoping to capitalise on it some way. “You would rather we left our operatives to your tender mercies?” asked the Major, deciding to fight back with her own cutting remarks.

“As a matter of fact, yes. I've always said we're being too soft on these...people.”

Kaminski's distaste was barely concealed, the Major bristling at the anti-superhuman sentiment being expressed.

Kaminski continued on with outlining her bigoted views. “We should be studying them in labs, not letting them run around free,” she added.

The Major held onto the bottom of her jacket to stop herself slapping the other woman. “Fortunately not everyone thinks like you,” she said coldly, “I hear the minister himself is very interested in the unit.”

The immediate annoyance that flashed across Kaminski's face brightened the Major's day no end. The Major had heard through the grapevine that the Secretary of State For Defence was starting to take a personal interest in the Superhuman Research Unit and it appeared that it was true. Obviously Kaminski wasn't pleased at the prospect of her boss getting involved in what she saw as her own private fiefdom.

The Major swiftly extricated herself from talking to the officious woman now she had made her mark, fed up with her company. In fact she was pretty fed up with the reception as a whole. She wasn't fond of these sorts of things at the best of times, and now the only reason for staying there was gone there seemed little point hanging around either apart from the fact that it was the done thing to do.

Once she had seen Andrea there, the Major had hoped the reception might provide a good opportunity to speak on neutral ground, until Andrea had departed suddenly and robbed her of the chance. She had wanted to at least try and clear the air since things had been unbelievably tense between them. Not that the Major had changed her mind from the decision she had made at Andrea's bedside – she knew she still couldn't succumb to her feelings. However, that didn't mean they couldn't talk and she wanted to apologise for her avoidance over the last two weeks, even if that meant she would have to use a few half-truths and white lies to explain why she had distanced herself. Having built up her courage she knew she couldn't leave it at that, and quickly making up her mind she made her excuses and hurried from the room too.

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Andrea shuffled despondently along the corridor in the direction of her quarters, trying not to let her despair overcome her. She wondered if things would ever get better - would she ever get over this all-consuming and unrequited love? It was just

too painful being on the base with the object of her affections so close yet unattainable. It was slowly eating away at her, making her morose and depressed and so unlike her normal confident self. To make matters worse she now found that a few tears were slipping down her cheeks and she furiously brushed them away and tried to steel herself. Luckily it was quiet in the corridors and she made it back to her door without encountering anyone who would witness the fragile state she was in. Her hand was on the handle when she sensed a movement out of the corner of her eye. Looking to her side her heart almost leapt into her mouth. It was the Major, walking briskly along and heading straight for Andrea.

Andrea didn't dare speak, not trusting herself while her erratic emotions were still so close to the surface. Instead she waited for the Major to reach her, the other woman looking slightly out of breath as she did. It occurred to Andrea that either she had been walking very slowly or the Major must have run to catch her up.

"Andrea, I'm glad I caught you," began the other woman, "Could I have a word?"

Andrea couldn't engage her mouth immediately. The Major actually *wanted* to speak to her? That was certainly a turn up for the books. "Er...yes...come in..." she managed eventually, opening the door and gesturing her inside.

Andrea felt incredibly uneasy with the Major in her room, her mind spiralling off at all sorts of tangents that involved everything from grabbing her and kissing her right there in the kitchen to painful recollections of what had happened last time they were alone there together. Trying to regain some sort of control she kept her back to the other woman as she headed into the kitchen.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked, thinking that was a fairly safe way to start.

"Thank you, a coffee, black," replied the Major.

Andrea could sense the Major hovering behind her but didn't dare glance round and look into those blue eyes, fearing she would lose herself in them. After several uncomfortable moments of silence the Major finally spoke.

"How have you been, after the accident?" she asked.

Andrea restrained her first bitter response, which was to wonder why the Major hadn't come to ask her that before. "I'm fine," she answered instead, concentrating hard on the getting the coffee granules in the mug in front of her without spilling them everywhere from her shaking hand.

"Good," replied the Major simply. Andrea thought she detected an uncharacteristic uncertainty in the other woman's voice, though obviously she couldn't confirm that by studying her expression. "I'm sorry I didn't come to see you before now," added the Major, "I've been...busy."

"Of course," noted Andrea blandly. She couldn't be bothered to challenge the obvious lie, knowing things would just be easier if she could keep her interactions

with the Major on a calm, even level. That way there was less chance of her emotions spilling over into either fury or, even worse, passion.

“I also wanted to apologise,” added the Major, “For what happened at the mine.”

Andrea couldn't help swinging round then, curious as to what the Major meant. As soon as she saw the blue-grey eyes regarding her intently from just a few feet away her heart started thumping faster in her chest, her mouth aching dry. She had to glance down to avoid being sucked in completely by the entrancing gaze.

“I...didn't mean to be so callous in the way I treated you,” continued the Major slowly, Andrea listening without interrupting. “It was wrong of me to speak so bluntly and push you away like that, though the sentiments I was trying to express with those actions were what I felt at the time.”

“Oh,” was all Andrea could manage. For a moment she had ridiculously hoped the Major was going to say she hadn't meant it. She berated herself for continuing to hold such fanciful notions.

The Major was taking a few slow breaths now, no doubt trying to find a kind way to put what she had to say. Andrea didn't really want to hear it, but knew she had to if they were going to move on in any way. Feeling the urge to put some physical space between them just as the Major was driving in the emotional wedge, Andrea wandered over to the lounge window, leaving the Major's coffee for her on the kitchen work surface on the way. Andrea turned back to face the other woman once she got there, satisfied she was far enough away to stop the unnerving physical reaction the Major's proximity had generated.

“You were saying,” prompted Andrea.

The Major took a sip of her coffee, before carefully placing it back down. It looked like she was finding it hard to summon the words, that fact small comfort to Andrea who braced herself for the inevitable.

“I take full responsibility for what happened in the mine,” continued the Major, “I took advantage of my position and that was wrong of me. I'm sorry if I played with your emotions, but that wasn't my intention.”

The Major paused again, surprising Andrea by licking her lips nervously. Then suddenly she was walking towards Andrea who was too disarmed to move away, rooted to the spot as the Major neared. For a second Andrea thought she wasn't going to stop, but she eventually came to a halt about a foot away. The Major's eyes tracked up to Andrea's face a soft apologetic expression in them.

“I don't like what's been happening between us the past couple of weeks, and I was hoping you could forgive me. I'd like us to at least try and be friends again.”

Andrea wanted to scream at the suggestion, and was unable to resist giving it one final try - it wasn't as if she had anything else left to lose. “Just friends?” she asked quietly, avoiding the Major's eyes as she did.

“Sorry?”

“I said is that all we can be, friends?” Andrea repeated with more conviction, looking up to plaintively search the face before her.

The Major looked faintly surprised that Andrea would be suggesting there could be anything more than friendship, as if she hadn't been expecting it. Her next question confirmed that. “You want more than friendship then?” asked the Major.

Andrea snorted a laugh. “Of course I do! I thought that was obvious.”

“Not exactly. I thought that...,” the Major had to search for the right words, “...that you weren't too happy with me after what happened. That you didn't even want to speak let alone spend any time together.”

Andrea had to concede she could have given that impression, it wasn't as if she'd been approachable or welcoming that last time they had spoken. Now she was sober, though, she could see that the Major looked sad when she spoke of the distance between them, and her eyes were so soft and enticing as she did. Suddenly Andrea realised she was in danger of letting herself get carried away with hopes and dreams again. She had to face up to reality sooner or later.

“Of course I want to spend time with you,” said Andrea, trying to keep her trembling voice even, “I've missed spending time with you. But I know that you have your duties as base commander to attend to, and that those also prevent you getting too...close to anyone under your command. I understand why what happened in the mine was a mistake for you.” Andrea was amazed she could say the words so calmly, but she cared about the Major too much to allow her to take the full burden of responsibility for what had happened.

The Major shook her head ruefully. “You're right, there are a hundred and one reasons why it just isn't prudent for me to get involved with someone under my command...”

Andrea nodded and managed another faint, “I understand,” before she had to turn away, not wanting to display her dejection to the Major. The lump in her throat was almost too big to allow her to breathe, and as she tried to swallow she realised that tears had started to slip down her face again too. Unable to stop them now they had started, she only hoped that the Major wouldn't notice if she kept facing away, staring numbly at the window.

When the hand touched her shoulder she almost jumped in her agitated state. “Andrea, what's wrong?” asked the Major gently.

Andrea couldn't speak. Even if she had known what to say, she wasn't sure she could make her lips say the words. They were trembling as she fought hard to keep from breaking down completely.

“Andrea, please...” said the Major again, urging her to turn round with the hand that still rested on Andrea’s shoulder.

The touch was gentle yet powerfully enticing, encouraging her round. Andrea’s breathing was becoming shallower as she fought hard to resist but it was hopeless, the Major was irresistible. Suddenly the barrier that had been holding all of Andrea’s feelings back shattered, unable to contain the force of them any longer. Andrea whirled round to fix her eyes on the Major. Andrea knew everything she was feeling was plainly obvious on her face, so she realised might as well say the words out loud too.

“Don’t you get it?” said Andrea beseechingly, her voice breaking with the emotions tumbling out of her, “I love you! I’m totally, utterly, completely in love with you!”

Andrea’s stark words hung in the air of the silent room as the Major stared directly back at her, her eyes wide in shock. The tears ran freely from Andrea’s own eyes, welling up and spilling over now the dam had broken.

“I know you can’t return my feelings,” continued Andrea despondently since it seemed she had shocked the Major into speechlessness, “So please, just go.”

Andrea turned away wretchedly, folding her arms across her chest as a small sob bubbled up in her throat. She wished the Major would just go and leave her to it, give her some dignity at least and allow her to submit to her misery alone. Yet there was no telltale sound of movement behind her, the Major remaining exactly where she was. Perhaps Andrea had shocked her so much with her confession that she had forgotten how to.

When the Major’s hand came to rest on her shoulder for a second time, Andrea actually did jump slightly. *What was the Major doing? Why hadn’t she left when she had the chance?*

Slowly the Major turned Andrea once more, the young woman allowing herself to be guided back round though she kept her head bowed. Unperturbed, the Major’s fingers slipped across from Andrea’s shoulder and under her chin, tilting her face up. Andrea didn’t have the will to resist, meeting the gaze of the soft blue eyes with her teary own one. As she did, it was her turn to be surprised when she saw the tiny half-smile on the Major’s face.

Andrea had barely started contemplating the reason for that when the Major’s fingers continued on their path, tracking up Andrea’s cheek to wipe away some of the tears that marred it. Andrea gasped at the intimate contact, the smile on the Major’s face growing as she noticed the reaction.

“You know you didn’t actually let me finish what I was saying before,” the Major said, her voice low and husky as she spoke.

Andrea couldn’t even begin to formulate a sensible response as the Major’s thumb brushed over her skin.

“I was saying that it’s not prudent for me to entertain this sort of thing, but we can’t always do what’s prudent. Sometimes we have to go with our hearts rather than our heads. I’ve tried hard to deny my feelings, tried to pretend I can ignore them and they’ll go away. But it’s no good, it’s eating me up inside having to hold it all in.”

Andrea could barely believe what she was hearing - it seemed like one of her dreams. She feared that at any moment she was going to wake up and find herself alone in her bed as always.

“You’re all I think about,” continued the Major, her eyes on Andrea the whole time, “If being with you would affect my command, than being without you is ten times worse. I spend my days wondering how you are, what you’re doing and wanting to be sharing whatever it is with you. I’ve missed you so much these past couple of weeks that there have been times I thought I might go mad. Then last week when you got hurt it was almost more than I could bear. It was then that I realised just how strong these emotions were. That’s the real reason I didn’t come to see you, I was scared to admit what I was feeling, scared to face up to it.”

Andrea finally found her voice though it was small, still unsure if she could trust the words she heard. “I thought it was because you didn’t care that you didn’t come to see me.”

The Major shook her head. “Nothing could be further from the truth – if anything it was because I care too much. I thought I could turn my back on that, and even when I came here this evening that was my intention. But seeing you I knew almost immediately that I couldn’t go through with it. How can it be right to deny something so precious and wonderful and amazing?”

Andrea was quiet again, drinking in every word the Major said, letting them warm her previously chilled heart.

The Major stopped her wiping of Andrea’s tears, cupping the young woman’s face instead. “What I’m trying to say in this completely rambling way is that I love you too, Andrea.”

Andrea knew her mouth had dropped open, but she couldn’t even engage those smallest of muscles to close it.

The Major actually looked worried at the way Andrea had frozen. “Did you hear me? I said I love you.”

“Y-yes, I heard,” stuttered Andrea, “I just didn’t dare believe it was true.”

The Major’s lips curved into a smile. “You should.”

The Major drew the young woman towards her and placed her lips lightly on Andrea’s own. The touch was delicate at first, as if seeking confirmation that it was all right to do so. Andrea made a small whimper of pleasure coupled with relief before yielding to her arousal and wrapping her arms around the Major to pull her

close. All her pent-up frustrations exploded in a kiss of utter wanton desire, the Major responding in kind.

Breathless, Andrea pulled back for a second, her eyes scanning the Major's face to seek confirmation that this was really happening. "You're not about to say this is a mistake are you?" she asked warily

The Major made a small laugh as she stood in Andrea's arms, a laugh that sent shivers of excitement down Andrea's spine. "No, I'm not going to say it's a mistake," she replied earnestly. "I'm sorry I said that before, I was confused and I'm not afraid to admit that I was also a little scared. I never thought I'd fall in love with another woman, but here you are capturing my heart competely."

Andrea felt a fresh thrill skitter through her as the Major said the word 'love' and grinned broadly at the words. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say that."

All of a sudden it was as if everything was right in the world, all Andrea's doubts and fears were gone and she was left with this wonderful moment. She pulled the Major to her once again, taking the initiative this time as her confidence in the situation grew. The Major let out a small, guttural moan as Andrea kissed her, enflaming Andrea's desire even more.

She could contain herself no longer, caving into the heat as the kisses became more fevered, the hands that roamed over the Major's back more urgent. They stumbled back across the room, their lips locked together the whole time, before they banged into the kitchen counter. Neither of them cared about the forceful impact, Andrea far too busy tugging at the shiny buttons on the Major's uniform jacket in a frenzied attempt to get it off. She eased them through their holes and pushed the jacket back over the Major's arms, letting it drop to the floor at her feet.

Then it was the Major pushing Andrea backwards, the pair of them crashing into the back of the sofa, nearly falling over it. All the time the hungry kisses continued as the Major's hands moved up onto Andrea's shirt, quickly undoing it and flinging it way across the room with abandon. As the Major's hot fingers caressed her bare flesh, Andrea let out a ragged gasp, the barest touch sending her into paroxysms of ecstasy.

Needing to touch the Major back she pushed away from the sofa, guiding the two of them in the direction of the bedroom. Only in her passion-crazed state she missed the doorway, the Major's back thumping into the wall instead. She grunted but didn't let up with the exploration of Andrea's bare torso, slipping her hand between them to tease a single nipple through Andrea's bra. Andrea groaned as the nipple immediately stiffened, her own hands coming up to fumble with the Major's buttons.

Finding it trickier than the jacket she glanced up to the the Major's face. "How much starch do you use on this exactly?" she asked, raising a single eyebrow.

The Major merely smiled back, the lop-sided smile that always sent a tiny thrill through Andrea. Only today it meant so much more, sending a resounding pulse of arousal shooting straight through her. Giving up on getting it off the proper way,

Andrea roughly yanked on the shirt, the buttons pinging off onto the floor as it ripped open. Andrea stared down at the skin exposed to her, the small, perfect breasts just aching to be touched. So she did, slowly at first, trying to curb the wanton urges within.

The Major's head tipped back against the wall, a low moan issuing up from her throat at the touch. Andrea leant forward, placing her lips along the Major's neck, brushing them delicately up the soft skin. Her tongue flicked out to swirl along the Major's jawline, before heading back down her neck.

Andrea forced herself back from the wall for a second. "Shall we go into the bedroom?" she suggested in a ragged whisper.

The Major's eyes met Andrea's, the raging desire evident in them. "I think that would be a very good idea."

They spiralled into the other room, stumbling across the carpet, bodies pressed together the whole way before tumbling down onto the duvet. As they hit a loud screeching noise almost made Andrea fall off the bed. She just had time to see a furry blur streaking out the door in a hurry.

"Gerry," she said in recognition.

The Major was laughing as Andrea drew in a relieved sigh. The Major toppled back onto the duvet her auburn hair splaying out across the pale blue cover. The sound of her laughter was amazing to Andrea, so full of genuine warmth and she flopped down next to the Major, stroking her face for a moment, as she studied every detail about the other woman, following the contours of her face with her fingers.

"You are so beautiful." Andrea thought the words were wholly inadequate.

The Major was blushing though, Andrea surprised by the reaction. "Stop it."

"You are!" insisted Andrea, leaning closer to whisper her next comment. "And even better, you're all mine."

Then they were kissing again, arms and legs and bodies entwining in a mass of heated flesh. Somehow Andrea got the Major's bra off, kissing all over her skin when she did, sucking and teasing her nipples. The Major's corresponding moans were long and low and full of desire. The Major's hands in turn fumbled across Andrea's back, undoing the clasp on her bra. Andrea eagerly shook it off onto the floor before turning back to the Major whose hands immediately came up to squeeze the newly exposed flesh. Andrea groaned at the nimble fingers caressing her skin. Gazing down into the brilliant blue eyes, something suddenly occurred to her.

"Have you ever done this sort of thing before?"

"What, fondled the breasts of one of my subordinates?" The Major asked cheekily.

Andrea pouted, though it was hard to maintain a mock stern expression when the Major was continuing to tease her nipples so distractingly. It was hard to think, let alone do anything else. “You know what I mean,” she managed, “With a woman.”

“Let’s say I have had some...experience.”

Andrea was surprised, but didn’t press further. She didn’t know why she had asked in the first place. She didn’t care what the Major had done in the past, all that mattered was that here and now she was on Andrea’s bed and Andrea had never been happier.

“Shall I show you?” asked the Major invitingly, raising a single eyebrow.

“Oh yes,” agreed Andrea.

Before she knew it she was on her back, the Major having rolled her deftly over. Her body slid against Andrea, the other woman’s hot breath whispering out past her left ear, tantalising in its caress. The Major’s tongue slipped around the ear, swirling round in a slow tormenting dance.

“Oh, Major!” gasped Andrea.

Suddenly the tongue stopped, the Major pulling back. Andrea could barely force her eyes open to see the Major, with both eyebrows raised, regarding her dubiously.

“What?” asked Andrea, desperate for her to continue, her body humming with pent up frustration.

“You know I may have to punish you if you insist on calling me that,” noted the Major with her best serious face, though Andrea could sense the underlying playfulness.

“Is that meant to dissuade me?” she asked honestly.

The Major’s pretend stern face crumpled into a laugh. “Maybe not,” she conceded, “But anyway, I think we can do away with ranks, since I seem to have done away with most of my clothes.”

“All right, Kate,” said Andrea testing out the name, though it still sounded slightly odd, even with the other woman before her in a state of undress. She pushed herself and the Major up from the bed into a sitting position, her eyes drawn to the other woman’s legs. “Though I think we need to do something about those remaining clothes,” she noted.

Andrea slowly slid her hand up the Major’s bare leg, and under the hem of her uniform skirt, stroking the smooth flesh of her thigh. The Major groaned at the intimate contact which was getting ever closer to the juncture of her legs.

Andrea leaned towards her, feeling the heat radiating off the Major while her fingers continued on their upward path. “Or maybe I’ll just leave it on,” she remarked softly, “Since you look so incredibly sexy in a skirt.”

“And you just look incredibly sexy all the time,” replied the Major, wrapping her arms around Andrea’s shoulders and pulling her down to kiss her.

As they fell back onto the bed, Andrea used both hands to push the Major’s skirt up over her thighs, hardly able to control the rampant lust surging through her now. She wanted to explore everything about the Major’s body, discover what touches would make her tremble, what touches would make her moan and what touches would push her to the heights of ecstasy and beyond.

However, the heat coursing through her was too much to allow for further rational thought, and Andrea was acting purely on instinct and her overwhelming desire for the woman that lay beside her. Her fingers travelled magnetically downwards, seeking out the warmth between the Major’s legs. The lightest brush over already damp knickers was enough to send a small shudder through the other woman. Then Andrea was easing them aside, not bothering to remove them as she slipped a single finger under the material and into the inviting hot, wetness beneath.

The Major gasped, grabbing onto Andrea’s shoulder and hauling her downwards into a frantic kiss. Andrea knew her own underwear was already soaked, the feel of her finger inside the Major enough to drive waves of arousal through her body. The Major bucked as Andrea slid another finger inside the knickers, the Major’s fingers digging sharply into the skin on Andrea’s back, the minor pain only serving to heighten the thrill of the moment. Having the Major lost completely under her touch as Andrea curled her fingers within her was unbelievably erotic - to know she could make this powerful woman lose control so utterly.

The Major’s gasps grew louder and more frenetic as Andrea slipped her fingers in and out in a gently rhythm. It seemed she wasn’t the only one having trouble holding back their desire as the Major thrust urgently in time. Andrea guided her thumb under the hot material too, brushing it ever-so slightly over the Major’s hard clitoris. Instantly the Major let out a juddering cry, surprising Andrea with the loudness of it. Then suddenly her whole body was shaking too, her hips pushing hard against Andrea’s fingers that were being squeezed tightly by the Major’s muscles.

“Fuck!”

Andrea could only marvel at the profanity escaping normally polite lips. The Major had collapsed back onto the bed now and Andrea slipped down next to her.

“Are you all right?” she asked, knowing the other woman wasn’t particularly used to this sort of thing.

The Major’s head slowly tipped to Andrea, the smile broad upon her face. “Oh yes,” she agreed huskily, “I am definitely all right.”

Andrea just had time to smile back before she found herself flipped over, the Major clambering on top of her and fumbling with her belt buckle. After a couple of seconds of tugging at Andrea’s jeans, she looked to Andrea in exasperation. “Get these bloody things off!” she ordered.

Andrea laughed and offered an over-elaborate salute. “Yes, ma’am!”

The Major moved aside so she could quickly pull the jeans and her knickers off, throwing them on the floor with the rest of the clothes, the Major doing the same with her skirt. She was about to comment when the Major pushed her back onto the duvet, hungrily devouring her mouth.

At the same time the Major’s hands seemed to be everywhere, teasing, tantalising, tormenting. Andrea couldn’t focus on one thing, everything merging into one overwhelming mass of sensual delight. However, she couldn’t miss the delicate fingers slipping inside her.

“Oh god!” she cried, flinging her head back against the bed.

Then she was lost again as the Major’s tongue slid across her chest, her teeth seizing onto a nipple and pulling it inside her mouth where she flicked the sensitive tip remorselessly. The Major’s head didn’t stop there, tracking a trail down over Andrea’s abdomen, her hair tickling across Andrea’s skin, each strand like its own lover’s caress.

When her tongue slipped down between Andrea’s legs, Andrea thought her head was going to explode with the rush of heat to it. She had no idea what the Major was doing with the combination of her fingers and tongue, only that it was the most amazing thing she had ever felt.

She hovered on the edge of oblivion for one perfect moment, her body held in the aching anticipation of ecstasy. And then she was over and falling fast, unable to hold back the unstoppable wave any longer. As she came crashing down, she could still feel Kate’s fingers, held fast within her. When she attempted to move them, Andrea couldn’t help quivering anew, her whole body so sensitive to the barest touch.

Finally she eased them out, and Andrea lay back on the duvet unable to move or think, just breathing hard and fast. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep, satisfied breath. This was how things should be; this was what she had been waiting for these last few months, maybe her whole life.

She felt the warm arm sliding across her stomach, opening her eyes again to see the Major by her side, smiling softly at her.

No, she told herself, that was wrong. It wasn’t the *Major* by her side it was *Kate*. Now she had finally had the privilege of seeing the woman underneath the uniform it was most definitely Kate.

Andrea grinned back, slipping her own arm around the smaller body and pulling Kate even closer, feeling the welcome melding of their flesh. Kate merely rested her head on Andrea’s shoulder, seemingly content not to say anything further for now. Andrea felt the same – what else was there to say when you had experienced something so wonderful? Words wouldn’t be able to do it justice or better reality. Instead they lay there, drifting off in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER 17

Kate felt an unfamiliar warmth pressed up against her as she swam into consciousness, having to take a moment to deduce what it was. Slowly her mind recalled the night before and her eyes peeked open to see that Andrea was fast asleep next to her. While Kate lay on her back, Andrea was up against her side, an arm haphazardly draped across Kate's stomach, her golden hair tickling against her shoulder.

Kate thought she should be more perturbed by the waking vision, but she couldn't help smiling as she felt Andrea's breath brushing out over the naked skin, slow and rhythmic.

The perfect moment was rudely disturbed by a chirping sound from somewhere on the floor, and Kate quickly rolled out of bed to try and silence whatever it was before it woke the slumbering Andrea. She rooted through the discarded clothes, flinging them round the room before she finally found her communicator nestling in one of the cups of Andrea's bra. Retrieving it she perched back up on the edge of the bed as she answered the call.

"Yes?" she answered shortly in a hushed voice.

Major? came Chadwick's voice in response.

"Yes, you were expecting someone else?" she answered sarcastically. Sometimes he could be rather dense.

No, of course not, you just sounded a bit...strange.

Just as Kate was about to comment she felt a warm hand snaking across her back and sliding round her waist, pulling her back against a soft bosom. She let out a small gasp at the arousing contact.

What was that? asked Chadwick, thinking he had missed something.

"Er...nothing..." Kate managed, though it was hard to concentrate now that Andrea was kissing along her shoulder. "Was there something you wanted?"

I was wondering where you were - we had a meeting scheduled for 0900.

Kate's eyes flicked to the bedside clock which tellingly revealed that it was already quarter past nine.

"Sorry, I got..." Kate had to pause as Andrea's tongue slid along her ear lobe, "...waylaid with something else," she quickly finished. "I'll...I'll see you at eleven instead."

Kate immediately cut the signal, dropping the communicator back on the floor as she spun round to face the grinning Andrea. Kate wanted to be annoyed but she couldn't manage it when faced with the vision of beauty before her. Not to mention the seductive look apparent in the piercing blue eyes that held her gaze expectantly.

"You think you're going to make that meeting do you?" asked Andrea, her fingers creeping across the duvet and up onto Kate's exposed thigh.

"Are you trying to prevent a member of Her Majesty's army from carrying out their duty?" queried Kate as the fingers continued on their upwards path.

Andrea smiled. "Absolutely."

After Andrea had demonstrated her best distraction tactics they lounged contentedly in the bed, neither having the will or energy to move. Andrea's fingers were absently tracing across Kate's bare skin, and she caught them, brushing her thumb lightly over the back of Andrea's hand.

Andrea's eyes drifted up Kate's face. "You're not having any second thoughts yet are you? In the cold light of morning?"

"No," stated Kate emphatically, though a few doubts did start to creep into her mind even as she said it. In particular she wondered about what would happen when everyone found out, worrying how it would affect her command of the troops respect. She had almost lost it completely after Adam, having to fight hard to maintain it through hard-work and dedication. For her to be seen to be having another relationship within someone on the base so soon afterwards might be seen as a return to that weakness.

"But?" prompted Andrea, seeing the thoughtful look.

"Nothing, I'm just a touch concerned about how this might be perceived round the base," said Kate honestly.

"Who cares? Let them think what they want," said Andrea, shrugging where she lay against Kate.

Kate sighed, stroking her hand through Andrea's hair. "Unfortunately it's not so simple, not after what happened last year. I can't be seen to be allowing my emotions affect my command again."

"You don't want anyone to know about this," deduced Andrea

Kate nodded solemnly. "Not for the time being, no."

"And it's nothing to do with being ashamed to be with me, embarrassed that people might find out that you're seeing a woman?"

“Not at all,” stated Kate, “God, anyone would be proud to be considered as being with you. No, I just don’t want to give anyone an excuse to call my professional abilities into question. I’m already on my last chance, even the faint whiff of scandal and I could be out on my ear, and then you’d be left with Chadwick running the show.”

Andrea sucked in a breath, Kate feeling the cool intake across her shoulder blade. “Now there’s a good reason to keep things quiet,” concurred Andrea, “I suppose there’s no harm in keeping this between ourselves for now.”

“I thought you might agree with that reason at least,” noted Kate, “There’s no sign of things thawing between you two then?”

“I’m convinced he’s up to no good,” Andrea explained, “Even if you did supposedly catch someone else for the sabotage.”

“The evidence was pretty damning,” Kate remarked.

“But it didn’t stop the accidents did it?”

“You mean the explosion last week?” queried Kate. “That was just an unfortunate accident, the building hadn’t been properly checked for safety. A fact which I took Chadwick to task over, I assure you.”

Andrea paused for a moment before she continued. “There was something else I didn’t mention at the time…”

“What?” asked Kate, sitting up straight against her pillow as the conversation took a more serious turn.

Andrea sat up too, pulling the duvet up with her. “Just before the explosion, I found a broken gas pipe. Deliberately broken.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, someone had tampered with it. I thought I saw someone else in the room, but it was hard to tell with all the smoke.”

Kate was aghast. “Why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

Andrea looked at her sheepishly. “We were hardly on speaking terms as it was, I didn’t think you’d want to hear any more of my accusations about Chadwick.”

“Someone tried to kill you for god’s sake!” cried Kate, “Of course I want to know about it!”

Andrea brushed her hand over Kate’s cheek in an effort to calm her, but she was far too agitated for it to register immediately. Her mind was racing with thoughts of whether someone was deliberately out to harm Andrea, and what she would do to them when she caught them.

Andrea kept her fingers where they were until Kate's breathing slowed. "Luckily I was all right, but it's nice to know you care."

Kate held the warm hand to her face before bringing it round to kiss Andrea's palm. "You don't know just how much I do care," she revealed, "I know it seems ridiculous after we've only known each other for such a short time, but I can't imagine my life without you."

"Me either," agreed Andrea, "That is I can't imagine my life without you, not my life without myself obviously."

Kate laughed at Andrea's awkwardness, the young woman playfully pushing her against her pillow in return.

"It's your fault, you know," said Andrea indignantly, "Turning me into this stuttering idiot! I was perfectly capable of sensible speech before I met you."

Kate smiled again. "It's certainly flattering to know I can have such an effect, especially on someone as cool and collected as you."

"Are you kidding? I'm sure you have the same effect on everyone, you just need to turn that imposing stare on them and...poof...they're putty in your hands!"

Kate chuckled at Andrea's assessment. "I hope they don't all harbour similar feelings to you too, though," she noted.

"I hope not either, or I might have to have a word," Andrea replied half-jokingly.

"I've been wondering," said Kate slowly, "How long exactly you've been hiding these feelings?"

Andrea met Kate's eyes, the cool blue stare penetrating in its intensity. "Honestly? I don't think I can pinpoint exactly when it started. Maybe it was right back at that first time I saw you sitting at that desk in the interview room."

Kate barked an incredulous laugh. "If it was then you're even better at hiding an attraction than I gave you credit for! I thought you couldn't stand me."

"They do say there's a fine line between love and hate," offered Andrea, "Perhaps part of the reason I was so antagonistic towards you was because there was this underlying desire."

Kate turned the words over in her mind. "Underlying desire, I like the sound of that."

Andrea grinned at Kate's seductive tone. "I think it just grew slowly from there, lots of little things building up until before I knew it I was in love. I tried to fight it for ages, but that night of the cup final, that's when I finally realised the truth."

Kate's brow creased for a moment as she tried to recall the evening in question. "On the dancefloor, when you suddenly left..." she finally deduced.

Andrea nodded.

“But why did you run off?” asked Kate, “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Oh yes, I’m sure that would have gone down well. ‘Thanks for the dance, Major, by the way I’m in love with you.’ Harry and Tom had already told me all about Dixon, plus I thought you were straight. I just assumed it was all a one-way thing from my point of view, that any sort of romantic overtures would not have been welcome. That was kind of proved that day in the mine.”

Kate cringed at the reminder. “God, I made a right cock up of that didn’t I?”

“Why *did* you kiss me that day?” asked Andrea fixing her gaze on Kate once more, curiosity evident in it.

Kate wasn’t entirely sure herself, trying to put into words what had really been something instinctual. “It seemed like the right thing to do at the time,” she explained, “We were sharing that intimate, if dangerous, moment and it just seemed...natural. Not to mention the rather...disturbing thoughts that had been building about you before then.”

Andrea shifted closer. “Do tell.”

“For a long time I maintained that we were just friends, that the inordinate interest I took in you was because you were our newest operative...”

“But it wasn’t?”

“No,” agreed Kate, “Looking back on it, I think it was the first seeds of my attraction to you. As you yourself said, even right back in those early days there was just something about you that I found...intriguing. Maybe it was partly the challenge you presented, someone almost as strong-willed as myself.”

Suddenly Kate found herself hauled down her pillow so she was flat on her back, Andrea clambering on top of her and pinning Kate’s arms up next to her head. “Almost?” she repeated with a wicked grin.

Kate made a show of considering her answer, trying to ignore the flood of arousal between her legs. “Equally?” she offered instead.

Andrea lowered herself further so that her breasts were pressed up against Kate’s chest, her long blonde hair falling over her shoulders and tickling across Kate’s collarbone. “Are you sure I can’t make you change your mind?” she whispered before dipping her head to start nibbling up Kate’s neck.

Kate closed her eyes at the erotic touch, desperately trying to resist. “Ah...ah....no,” she managed, “Definitely only equally as stubborn.”

Andrea pushed herself up for a moment to look Kate in the eye. “Oh, now it’s stubborn is it?”

“I don’t think I’ve met anyone more obdurate in my life.”

“Ha!” scoffed Andrea, “For this one I don’t mind conceding the crown to you.”

“Me?” asked Kate innocently.

“If I hadn’t told you I loved you, would you ever have said anything?”

“I might have done.”

Andrea laughed. “Liar!”

Kate just had time to give Andrea an apologetic smile before her lips were covered in a sensuous kiss.

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The Major closed the door behind her, checking there was no one in the corridor to see her departure from Andrea’s quarters. Not that there was anything wrong with being seen leaving one of her operatives rooms at what was now quarter to eleven, she considered. However, the fact that half the buttons were missing off her uniform shirt might have added extra suspicion. She had no idea where they had gone, and after some fruitless searching she’d just had to pull on her jacket and hope it covered the shirt sufficiently.

The Major had made it to the end of the corridor with the intention of popping back to her quarters to get a fresh shirt before her meeting with Chadwick, when she almost walked straight into Tardelli coming the other way.

“Morning, Major,” Tardelli said breezily, seemingly thinking nothing of the Major’s presence.

“Morning, Bel,” replied the Major, trying to pull her jacket closed even more without being too obvious about it.

Unfortunately her nervous manner didn’t go unnoticed. “Is everything all right, Major?”

“Yes,” she replied, attempting to get a grip on herself. It wasn’t as if Tardelli knew what she had been doing only minutes before, despite her inner guilt.

Tardelli was peering curiously at her now though, studying the Major’s face intently. “Only you look a little flushed,” added Tardelli.

The Major ignored the comment, though now Tardelli had drawn attention to it, she was finding it increasingly hard to control the burning in her cheeks. “I’m in a hurry

actually,” she informed the younger woman, “I have a meeting. So if you don’t mind...”

Tardelli stepped aside. “Of course not, catch you later.”

The Major nodded and hurried past, thinking she needed a quick cold shower before she faced the Lieutenant.

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A few hours later Andrea picked her tray up off the counter and cast her eyes round the canteen for a seat. Nearby she could see Tom and Bel sitting with their lunch, huddled close in hushed conversation and decided it was best to leave the two lovers alone. Thoughts of lovers led her back to earlier that same morning and she allowed herself a small satisfied smile as she recalled what had happened with Kate. She wished that every day could start so wonderfully. She was about to bypass Tom and Bel to go and sit with Dr Todd instead when Bel shot up from her seat.

“Andrea, why don’t you join us?”

Andrea regarded her curiously, surprised by the over-enthusiastic invite. “Are you sure I’m not intruding?” she asked, looking down to Tom for confirmation. He had a mischievous grin on his face, suggesting it was fine.

“Not at all,” confirmed Tardelli.

Andrea lowered herself into the seat opposite the pair of them, feeling like she was sitting down in front of an interview panel such was the way they watched her every move like hawks. As Andrea picked up her own sandwich, Tardelli tried to continue with her meal too, but it was obvious she was itching to ask Andrea something. She was practically bouncing up and down in her seat. In the end, she could resist no longer.

“So...um...how are you?”

“I’m fine,” replied Andrea, thinking that wasn’t the real question at all, “And you?”

“Good, good,” nodded Tardelli dismissively. “Had any interesting *meetings* lately?”

“Meetings?” repeated Andrea, rather confused, “I had a session with Doc before I came here if that’s what you mean. I wouldn’t exactly call it ‘interesting’ though.”

“Right, so...er...no other...*sessions* today?” questioned Tardelli, using Andrea’s own words.

Andrea was getting increasingly wary of where Tardelli was heading, though she considered she could just be paranoid. It wasn’t as if the other woman could know what had happened the night before and earlier that day. “Nothing official,” she replied evasively.

“Oh, so the Major being in your quarters this morning was a personal matter was it?” asked Tardelli nonchalantly.

“How the hell did you know about that?” blurted Andrea in shock.

“So she *was* in your quarters?” cried Tardelli triumphantly.

Andrea immediately realised her mistake, deducing that Tardelli had probably seen the Major in the corridor and made some leaps of reasoning. Ones that had turned out to be correct, as it happened. “I didn’t say that,” said Andrea desperately trying to backtrack. She looked pleadingly at Tom, since he already knew of her feelings towards the Major, but he merely shrugged apologetically, unable to stop Tardelli now she was intent on her course.

“Don’t try and worm your way out of it,” Tardelli said, leaning conspiratorially across the table so she could speak in quieter tones, “And you really need to get a grip of that blushing if you’re going to try and lie like that.”

Andrea’s hand shot up to her face, feeling that her cheeks were indeed hot.

“So come on, why was the Major paying a personal visit to your room so early in the morning?”

“10am isn’t early,” Andrea reasoned.

“It is when the Major’s acting shifty and wearing the same dress uniform as she was yesterday. Plus I’m sure her shirt was missing a few buttons too.”

“You didn’t mention that bit!” cried Tom suddenly, swinging to Tardelli in surprise before looking back at Andrea. “Can I take it there have been some positive developments?”

Now it was Tardelli’s turn to be surprised. “Hang on a minute, developments?” she interjected, regarding Tom with extra interest. “Was there something to develop from?”

Tom stammered under the demanding gaze. “Uh...well...I...”

Andrea started to rise from her seat, sensing her chance to escape while the other two engaged in debate.

Unfortunately Tardelli spotted her before she got too far. “You stay right there!” she instructed loudly.

Andrea glanced round the room anxiously, seeing a few turning heads. She sat back down wanting to avoid any kind of scene.

“Right, someone better start telling me what’s going on here,” Tardelli insisted, “Before I have to get loud again.”

Andrea groaned internally. This was all she needed after Kate had told her to try and keep things quiet – the base’s biggest gossip knowing all the details.

“I really can’t tell you,” she tried one last time

“Then I’ll have to speculate,” Tardelli noted, “Very loudly,” she added raising her voice.

“All right, all right,” said Andrea, reaching over to place a staying hand on Tardelli’s arm. “I’ll tell you, but you have to keep this quiet, you can’t go spreading anything round the base.”

“Ok, ok, I get it,” insisted Tardelli sensing she was close, “Now spill!”

“Well, The Major and I we...er...we....um....”

Andrea wasn’t sure of the least titilating way of explaining it, offering Tardelli a look to try and make her point without words.

It seemed to have the desired affect. “Jesus Christ!” exclaimed Tardelli before reigning in the hysterical level of her voice. “You shagged the Major!” she hissed in amazement.

“That’s one indelicate way of putting it I suppose.”

“Well pardon me for offending your sensibilities, but I hardly think you’re in the position to be getting picky,” Tardelli noted. “Fuck! I can’t believe it. You and the Major...and you knew about this?” she asked Tom accusingly

“Not about the shagging part!” he insisted, his eyes wide as he looked across the table, “Last I heard Andrea had a bad case of unrequited love.”

“Not so unrequited after all then,” remarked Tardelli.

“It seems not,” he concurred.

Both their eyes were on Andrea again now, the young woman squirming in her seat. “What?” she asked.

“Shit! I just can’t get my head around this,” said Tardelli, shaking her head, “Who would have guessed the Major was a closet dyke.”

“She’s not necessarily a dyke,” Andrea corrected, “She just happens to love a woman.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Tardelli, seizing on the words, “Did she actually say that, that she loved you?”

Andrea mentally kicked herself for letting the offhand comment slip out. It was just a turn of phrase - she hadn’t necessarily meant that the Major had said it, though of

course she had. However, nothing got past Tardelli, and now she had asked the direct question, Andrea found it hard to deny it. She found it hard to cover up anything where the Major was concerned. Her feelings were just too intense to hide them effectively. Her current delay in answering was more than enough for Tardelli to come to her own conclusions, though.

“Fuck me! She did, didn’t she?”

Andrea thought that things couldn’t get much worse, not only had she had to reveal that her and Kate had indeed slept together, but now the depth of their feelings were obvious too.

“Please, you have to keep this quiet, you can’t go telling anyone else,” Andrea pleaded desperately.

“Right, my lips are sealed,” Tardelli agreed, making a show of zipping them up with her hand.

“I mean it,” insisted Andrea, “Not Harry, not Doc, no one. After what happened with Dixon she doesn’t need any more trouble.”

“Ok, I understand,” repeated Tardelli, “Mum’s the word. So did you say it back?”

Andrea considered that Bel would have a good job in the police force waiting for her if ever she felt the urge. She certainly wasn’t afraid to ask what was on her mind, and it was hard rebutting such directness. “I...did,” she confirmed looking down nervously at her half-eaten sandwich. She wasn’t sure exactly why she was so anxious. Perhaps it was the reminder of just how much in love with the Major she was and how vulnerable that made her feel. It was an unusual and not entirely pleasant sensation for her.

“My god!” muttered Tardelli to herself.

“I think it’s sweet,” Tom whispered, “Another case of true love.”

Andrea glanced up at him to see he was offering her a genuinely fond look.

“Thanks.”

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Though Andrea had hoped she had successfully impressed the need for secrecy on Tom and Bel, it wasn’t long before she started to fear for their ability to keep their promise. Later that afternoon all three of them were sitting in one of the briefing rooms, along with Harry, awaiting the Major’s arrival. As usual Tom and Bel sat next to each other, their heads huddled close in conversation that Andrea couldn’t quite catch. She could guess the subject though, since their eyes would flick to her every now and then.

When the Major entered the room, Andrea's own eyes were drawn to her immediately, unable to keep visions of the night before encroaching on her thoughts. Visions such as the Major's head tipped backwards in ecstasy, Andrea's name issuing from her lips. Andrea had to force herself back to the present to see The Major catching her eye briefly, a tiny smile edging at her lips. The brief look caused Andrea's heart to do a somersault in her chest.

However, when the Major reached the desk in the centre of the room, Andrea spied Tom and Bel chuckling to themselves and glancing between her and the Major. Andrea buried her head in her hands not daring to look. She wondered if the pair of them could have made it any more obvious if they tried. Her only hope was that the Major might just take the whispers and giggles for Tom and Bel's usual high spirits and not make the connection to herself.

As the Major tried to continue on with her briefing, though, Tom and Bel's sniggers could be heard every so often. Finally the Major placed down her pointer and fixed her eyes on the dark-haired young woman.

"Is there something the matter, Miss Tardelli?" she asked pointedly.

"Not at all, Major," replied Bel nonchalantly, "We were just saying you were looking a bit tired, that you must have had a long night."

The sinking feeling engulfing Andrea's stomach was painful, and made all the more so when the Major's eyes flicked to her in a dark look. Andrea could quite happily have got up and throttled Bel with her bare hands.

"I'm touched by your concern," the Major said coolly back to Tardelli, "But I am perfectly fine. Now, if you and Mr Parsons can remain quiet for more than five minutes we can get on with this."

And with that she turned back to the chart she had been illustrating before, not deigning to look at Andrea again. Andrea shot an angry look at Tardelli who showed no remorse for her indiscretion in her calm expression. When the meeting finished the Major left the room immediately, Andrea having to hurry out to catch her up in the corridor.

"I'm sorry about that," she said as she drew level with the striding woman.

The Major came to an immediate halt, Andrea having to pull up sharply too. The Major swung to face Andrea, regarding her ferociously, but not saying a word to begin with. Her stormy eyes bored into Andrea who felt about as big as a gnat.

Finally the Major spoke through clenched teeth. "In my office, now."

The Major didn't say another word as they made their way there, Andrea's sense of foreboding growing the whole time as she saw the other woman's stiff walk and infuriated demeanour. Once they got inside the room, the Major crossed to her desk so that it was between her and Andrea, though she didn't sit down.

“Would you care to enlighten me as to what that was all about?” she said, turning to Andrea, “Because I got the distinct impression that Bel knew something she shouldn’t.”

Andrea decided that honesty was the best policy. “I’m afraid she does know something she shouldn’t.”

The Major’s face showed the barest signs of despair. “Tell me you didn’t tell her about us?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly *tell* her...” said Andrea uncertainly.

“Not exactly? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She kind of worked it out for herself,” Andrea tried to explain.

“How the hell did she manage that without some sort of help?” demanded the Major, her tone rising in anger. “Jesus Christ! I ask you to keep this a secret and you couldn’t even manage that for one day. Hell, you couldn’t even manage it for a few hours!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to tell her...”

“Oh well, that’s all right then,” scoffed the Major sarcastically, throwing her hands in the air, “It doesn’t matter that the woman with the biggest mouth in the whole of Britain knows our intimate secrets, just as long as you’re sorry!”

“If you’ll let me get a word in edgeways!” snapped Andrea, her own temper sparking. “She saw *you*, as it happens, in the corridor this morning, not doing a very good job of looking inconspicuous. Her and Tom were pressing me on it, and I had to tell her to stop her causing a scene in the messhall.”

“The messhall?” repeated the Major incredulously, “Bloody hell, this just gets better. You may as well have broadcast it on the tannoy system!”

“I’m not the one who was sneaking round the corridors with my uniform disarrayed!”

The Major stared balefully back at Andrea, her lips held firmly shut. Finally she let out a long sigh, lowering herself into her chair and rubbing at her temple in resignation.

Andrea sat in the chair opposite, leaning on the front of the desk. “I’m sorry that Bel found out, I really didn’t want to tell her but it seemed the only way out of the situation. I made her promise not to tell anyone.”

“And you seriously believe she’ll keep that promise?”

“We can but hope,” offered Andrea, “I did impress upon her how important it was, but I’ll have another word with her.”

“I’m just getting this horrible feeling that we won’t be able to keep a lid on this very long,” remarked the Major ruefully. Andrea was thankful to see that her momentary anger had passed. Kate’s initial reaction had scared her more than she cared to admit. Andrea was so worried that sooner or later Kate would realise this was more effort than it was worth. She hated the insecure feeling, but couldn’t seem to banish it.

“You could be taking too pessimistic a view of how people will react,” Andrea suggested to try and put a positive spin on things, “You might find people are actually pleased for you. Tom certainly thought it was sweet.”

“He did?” asked the Major as a smile crept across her face. “I always liked Mr Parsons,” she added. “I suppose you could be right, though at the same time there are always going to be people waiting to use something like this against me.”

“But only if you give them just cause to,” offered Andrea, “If you keep performing your job as well as ever then they can hardly say it’s affecting your ability to command the base can they?”

“Right, so all I have to stop my mind wandering to thoughts of you every five seconds while I’m working?” noted the Major sarcastically, “Talk about asking the impossible.”

“Believe me, I know how hard it is too. Even this morning when I saw you in that briefing, all I could think about was ripping that uniform off...”

“Oh god, don’t...” pleaded the Major.

“I can’t help it,” said Andrea, rising up from her chair and leaning across the desk, “You look so damn sexy in it.”

Andrea braced herself on the desk, stretching forwards to place her lips on the Major’s. The other woman let out a small moan before her hands came up to Andrea’s face to pull her closer, the kiss deepening.

Suddenly though, the Major pulled away, leaning back into her chair. Andrea almost fell face first onto the desk with the sudden loss of contact.

The Major exhaled slowly, looking up to the ceiling. “We can’t,” she said closing her eyes for a moment, before looking back to Andrea, “Not while I’m on duty. Remember I have to keep performing my job to the same standard.”

“You’re right,” agreed Andrea regretfully, knowing she had just made that point. She sat back into her own chair, though all she wanted to do was clamber the rest of the way over the desk and carry on where they had left off. “I guess I’ll just have to control my impulses until later then,” she added with a feral wink.

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Two days later the Major was back in her office attempting to get on with some paperwork. Placing her third cup of coffee of the morning down on her desk she rolled the sleeves on her informal barrack-dress shirt up as a way to try and engage her brain by showing she meant business. Sitting down, she picked up the first report, trying her best to concentrate on staff assignments and not think about the sight of Andrea's naked body sprawled in her bed the night before. A knock at the door jolted her out of her reverie and she called out a quick "come" to grant entrance. The door was opened by her good friend Sophie McAllister who also wore the shirt sleeves on her identical open-necked olive shirt up. The Major assumed it must be a warm day outside, though she hadn't had a chance to find out yet. She did have a lunch rendezvous with Andrea arranged and was trying hard not to count the hours until then.

The Major smiled as she quickly got up to meet her friend, receiving a warm hug of welcoming. Eventually Sophie pulled back from the hug and glanced round the room a couple of times, as if searching for something.

"What is it?" asked the Major, bemused by her friend's behaviour and following her gaze though she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary in the room.

Sophie's eyes finally settled back on the Major, now looking her up and down. "I was just looking for the real Major Jarvis since this one seems a whole different person to the last time I was here."

The Major rolled her eyes. "Very funny."

"Seriously though, what's happened to put you in this good mood?" asked Sophie, studying the Major suspiciously. Before the Major could answer Sophie's eyes started to widen. "Oh no...wait a minute...you haven't..." Sophie paused, seemingly unsure if she was on the right track. She looked to the Major for confirmation. All she could do was make a small tilt of the head and a sheepish half-smile of acknowledgment.

"Oh...my...god! You have! You got laid!" cried Sophie in amazement. The Major wondered if this was what had happened to Andrea with Tardelli and Tom – was it really that obvious to all and sundry what was going on?

Suddenly Sophie grabbed the Major into another tight hug of congratulations. After almost squeezing the life out of her she pulled back. "It was with Andrea wasn't it?"

"Of course it was with Andrea!" cried the Major indignantly in return, "What do you take me for?"

"I did take you for a straight woman, since you kept insisting to me that's what you were. I hope you didn't blurt out any stupid comments about it being a mistake afterwards."

"You're the real comedian today aren't you," noted the Major, "No, I didn't make any such statements this time."

"Good," said Sophie with a nod. "So...?" she added invitingly.

“So what?” replied the Major obtusely.

“So - tell me everything! I want all the juicy details!”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“What?” exclaimed Sophie. “That’s just because you haven’t been doing any kissing recently! You can’t suddenly tell me you’ve switched sides and then just leave it at that.”

“I most certainly can,” insisted the Major, seeking some way to divert the conversation. “You seem to have lost a star by the way,” the Major pointed out, indicating Sophie’s rank slide, “No doubt when you were crushing me.”

“Don’t try and change the subject,” chided Sophie, “All right, if you’re not going to tell me the specifics of what happened you can at least tell me all about Andrea. She must be some woman to have this affect on you.”

“She is...” replied the Major dreamily.

“Oh god, you’re not going to go all gushy on me and tell me how much in love you are, are you?”

“You were the one who asked!”

There was a loud beep from the Major’s communicator just as she spoke.

“Look’s like we’re both saved by the bell,” remarked Sophie, taking the seat in front of the Major’s desk and casting her eyes round the floor in search of her missing rank insignia.

The Major had a quick conversation with Doc who needed her urgently for something. She considered it most probably wasn’t urgent at all – he did have a tendency to get over-excited, but supposed she may as well go and find out what it was in person. At least that way Sophie might have forgotten what they were talking about when she got back.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said to Sophie, feel free to help yourself to a drink.

“I look forward to it!” replied Sophie with a wink, making the Major think her hopes were extreme wishful thinking.

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Andrea strode down the corridor an extra bounce in her step. Of course she’d heard people saying such stupid romantic guff like how they felt they were walking on air when they were in love, she just never thought it would happen to her. It had only been three days since she had confessed her love to the Major, but her life before that

seemed like a whole other lifetime now. Ever since she had said those words she had felt different. It was like she had finally admitted her inner desires and now she was free to experience them. And she was certainly experiencing them. Considering Kate was pretty new to the concept, she didn't seem to have much trouble when it came to two women having sex together. In fact, if anything she was actually the dominant one a lot of the time. Andrea was more than willing to go along with that, as long as she could turn the tables occasionally. They'd spent every spare moment together after hours, talking and laughing and just enjoying each others company. And having lots of sex of course. Andrea allowed herself a small smile – who would have known the Major could be quite such an animal in bed under that cool, authoritative exterior.

They still had to work too unfortunately, though Kate had suggested that perhaps they could get away one weekend, maybe take another sailing trip since the weather was so much better now it was summer. Andrea thought it was a great idea – they would finally get some time alone together where they wouldn't have to worry about the rumour mill being sparked into action round the base.

Andrea had spoken to Bel again after the incident in the briefing room and told her in no uncertain terms that if she did something so stupid as that again then Andrea would rip her a new orifice. Bel had huffed and puffed a bit, but she knew she was in the wrong and had eventually conceded the point. So far it seemed no one else was any the wiser, though how they could miss all the looks she and Kate now exchanged she didn't know. And those looks didn't just stay at eye level. More than once she had noticed Kate's eyes drifting towards her chest area when they were supposed to be having a serious work discussion.

When Andrea had finished her morning briefing with Dr Todd early, she'd had only one thought on her mind – to come and see Kate. They'd arranged to have lunch and Andrea knew she was far too early for that, but she didn't care. She was sure she could come up with some plausible excuse for her presence.

Reaching the landing outside Kate's office, she noted that the soldier-cum-secretary who normally sat outside was absent. Andrea carried straight on to the office door, knocking a couple of times but getting no response. She hesitated for a moment before she let herself in, being greeted by the sight of a very inviting backside displayed to her from underneath the Major's desk. Guessing the other woman must have dropped something, Andrea carefully crept forwards, bent down and dealt a small pinch to the uniformed rear. There was a loud thump as a head impacted on the underside of the sturdy desk followed by a tirade of colourful swearwords, all delivered in a thick Scottish accent.

Andrea stepped back in surprise as an unfamiliar dark-haired head appeared from beneath the desk. Overcoming her initial shock, she realised the person wasn't totally unfamiliar to her, recalling the woman's face from the time she'd seen her with Kate in the corridor. The time the woman had been stroking Kate's arm.

“You're not the Major,” stated Andrea frostily.

“That much I know,” replied the woman, rubbing her head as she knelt on the floor before Andrea clutching a small brass object in the other hand. “You often greet her like that then do you?”

Andrea was caught off-guard, not quite knowing how to explain herself. She knew Kate wanted her to try and keep a lid on things and didn’t know how much this woman already knew. She was saved from answering by a voice from the door.

“Now this is a pretty picture.”

Andrea’s eyes shot to the Major who was already heading across the room towards them having closed the door behind her. Andrea could see the obvious amusement on her face; it looked like she could barely contain her mirth. From her expression Andrea surmised that the woman on the floor wasn’t someone they needed to be careful what they said around. When the Major reached them she offered her hand to the still crouching woman.

“I thought you’d decided that throwing yourself at their feet wasn’t the best way to pull women?” the Major asked the dark-haired woman jokingly.

The woman took the Major’s hand and clambered to her feet. “It seems quite effective actually. I might use it more often if it means I get my bottom fondled.”

“I wasn’t *fondling* it,” Andrea quickly interjected when both the other women’s eyes slid to her, “It was more of a...a...,” she couldn’t really think of a suitable way to put it, “...a light pinch.”

The other two women just maintained their gaze, waiting for further elaboration, as if they were enjoying watching Andrea squirm.

Andrea looked beseechingly at the Major. “I thought it was you...” she attempted, though her statement sounded faintly ridiculous when faced with the two women before her. Apart from the fact that they both wore identical uniforms, they looked nothing alike – the Major was shorter and more compact than the stocky other woman who was only marginally shorter than Andrea herself. Where Kate’s hair was a lustrous auburn colour, cut into a neat bob, the other woman sported short dark hair. The Major folded her arms, giving Andrea an amusedly doubtful look.

“She was obscured by the desk...” added Andrea by means of explanation before deciding she was on a hiding to nothing. “I should give up, shouldn’t I?”

“It’s probably a good idea,” agreed the smiling Major, “Before that hole gets any deeper. Since there’s already been bottom touching, I suppose I ought to at least make some formal introductions,” she added, making Andrea think it was going to be a while before she lived this one down. “Andrea, this is my old friend Sophie McAllister, Sophie this is Andrea Hallstrom.”

Andrea took Sophie’s offered hand, squeezing a little bit tighter than was necessary as an image of her flirting with Kate flashed through her mind again. Sophie made a small grunt in response.

“That’s quite some grip you have there,” she noted, taking back her hand and rubbing it gingerly.

Andrea caught the brief reproachful glance Kate shot her, raising her eyebrows unapologetically in return. Kate’s mouth was just opening when she was cut off by the sound of her communicator again.

“Oh for god’s sake,” she muttered in exasperation. “What’s wrong now?” she asked into it.

As the Major carried on her conversation, Andrea eyed up Sophie who met her appraising stare in kind. It was the Major who interrupted them, else they might have been staring silently at one another all day. “I have to go back downstairs again for a minute,” she said apologetically, “Is it safe to leave you two alone?”

Andrea wasn’t sure if Kate was jokingly referring to the earlier bottom-pinching incident, or whether she was concerned about the obvious frosty atmosphere between her and Sophie.

“Sure, Andrea and I can have a nice chat,” said Sophie nonchalantly.

“That’s what I’m worried about!” exclaimed the Major, “God knows what you’ll be telling her.”

Andrea was intrigued as to exactly what secrets Sophie might divulge. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad being left alone with her after all.

“I’m sure you’ve already told her everything there is to know…” said Sophie.

Andrea noted how Kate’s eyes narrowed warningly. “Right, I shouldn’t be more than a couple of minutes,” she said to both of them.

As she left the room Andrea wondered what it was Sophie wasn’t supposed to tell her. She switched her attention back to the other woman who had crossed over to the drinks cabinet and was happily helping herself to a glass of water as if she owned the office. When she turned she couldn’t fail to see Andrea staring at her disapprovingly.

“Would you like to take this outside?” asked Sophie.

“Sorry?” said Andrea, totally confused.

“It’s just that you look like you’re about to challenge me to a duel, like I’m some sort of rival for Kate’s affections.”

Andrea didn’t reply, though Sophie had been far too close to the mark for comfort.

“You don’t have to worry,” insisted Sophie, “Kate and I are just good friends.”

“You often stroke and caress your friends like you want to go to bed with them do you?” asked Andrea bluntly.

“What?”

“In the corridor,” outlined Andrea in a low, threatening voice, “A few weeks ago, I saw the two of you.”

A light finally went on in Sophie’s head. “Oh, that!” she remarked, laughing to herself. She stopped when she saw that Andrea was still fixing her with a deathly stare, not amused in the slightest. “We were joking around,” Sophie explained more seriously, “We were talking about you at the time actually.”

Andrea was completely knocked off her combative course. “You were?”

“Yes, Kate was unsure what was going on between you two and I was trying to give her the benefit of my experience. She didn’t want to approach you directly, so I was attempting to persuade her to try and find out how you felt by other means.”

“By making me jealous, to see if I reacted,” deduced Andrea.

Sophie’s brow creased. “Yeah, it doesn’t sound so good when you put it like that,” she admitted, “I didn’t actually realise you were there at the time, and Kate didn’t want to have anything to do with such game playing I hasten to add. She decided she’d rather flounder on in her own way - it’s a miracle you two ever got together!”

“Just lucky I guess,” commented Andrea, not really wanting to discuss her feelings with this woman. “What was that chat you wanted then?” she asked instead, “Want to check my intentions do you?”

Sophie lowered herself onto the couch by the window, crossing her uniformed trouser legs. “Something like that,” she agreed.

Though the pose was very similar to how Kate often sat on the same couch, and Sophie gave a passable impression of cool command, Andrea considered she didn’t quite have Kate’s presence. Perhaps that was why Sophie was only a lieutenant still. Andrea sidlined the uncharitable thoughts, getting back to the topic at hand. “I’m sure Kate is more than capable of handling herself,” she pointed out.

“Maybe,” allowed Sophie, her eyes following Andrea as she crossed the room towards her, “But after what happened last year, I just don’t want to see anyone fuck her over again.”

Andrea stayed standing since she was less than happy with Sophie’s tone. “I seriously hope you’re not comparing me to Adam Dixon.”

“Should I be?” questioned Sophie, “I don’t know you well enough to make any judgements yet. Consider this a friendly warning that if you do anything to hurt Kate then I’ll kill you.”

Andrea couldn't help making a rueful laugh. "I'd hardly call that a friendly warning."

Sophie shrugged, leaning back on the sofa. "Take it how you want to."

Andrea was starting to get really annoyed with the way Sophie was poking her nose in. Looking out for Kate was one thing, but making out that Andrea was likely to do the dirty was something else. "I really don't like the implication you're making," she informed Sophie icily, "From what I've learned of Dixon he was a selfish bastard who used Kate. I love Kate, I would never do anything to intentionally hurt her."

"Then we shouldn't have any problems," said Sophie evenly.

Andrea stared down at her, wondering how upset Kate might be if she punched her friend in the face. Even when they had been staring at each other silently for what must have been a good few minutes Andrea refused to look away, determined not to be the first to back down.

It was Sophie who eventually broke the eye contact, laughing to herself. "If you love Kate with that same fierce determination then she's a lucky woman," she noted, "And I have to admit that I like you a lot more than that Dixon creep."

As always Andrea was curious about Dixon. "If he was such a bastard, why did Kate start seeing him?"

"Maybe you should talk to her about it," suggested Sophie, "But let's just say that everyone makes mistakes. And he was one big mistake!"

Andrea didn't get the chance to extract any more details from Sophie as Kate came back into the office at that moment, cursing Doc and his experiments. It seemed he'd had some sort of accident that Kate needed to go and sort out. Thinking she didn't really want to spend any more time with Sophie, Andrea excused herself and headed back to her quarters, still hopeful Kate might be able to join her later.

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Luckily Doc didn't waylay Kate as much as she had first feared and she was able to make it to Andrea's quarters for lunch as planned. Andrea was lounging on her sofa afterwards, feeling decidedly stuffed, as Kate got up to fix some drinks. She tracked Kate's progress to the kitchen, appreciatively noting the cut of her trousers over her bottom.

"Where are your mugs?" asked the Major, searching around the kitchen.

Before Andrea could answer she saw Kate rising up from one of the lower cupboards, a piece of broken metal in her hand.

"Is there any reason you have two broken stools under your sink?" asked the Major waving the leg in the air.

"Um...I'm starting a collection of damaged furniture?" offered Andrea.

The Major eyed her doubtfully. “Dare I ask what riled you so to inflict this kind of punishment on your stools?” She turned the wrenched metal over in her hand, flicking off a few flecks of paintwork that were still attached from where it had formerly been embedded in the wall.

“The first time was just me being stupid,” Andrea explained, recalling her unsuccessful attempt at using her powers, “The second...well...that was you.”

“Me?” asked the Major in surprise.

Andrea had come over to the kitchen now, taking the broken piece of stool from the other woman. “It was just after I’d been confined to my quarters for a week,” she started to explain, recalling the difficult time.

“Ah, yes, I remember,” nodded the Major, “That week was hard, though I didn’t fully understand why at the time.”

“For me too,” agreed Andrea, “The only reason I’d started that fight with Chadwick in the first place was because he was making suggestive remarks about you and me.”

“You never told me that.”

“How could I have done without revealing my feelings for you?” reasoned Andrea, “And then you confined me to my quarters and it was worse than anything Chadwick could do. Not being able to see you for that week, knowing you were so close but out of reach - it was agony.”

Kate took Andrea’s hand gently. “I’m sorry, it wasn’t easy punishing you like that. Maybe if you’d explained things to me I wouldn’t have been quite so hard on you.”

Andrea squeezed Kate’s hand softly in return, before bending down to put the stool remnants away again. She kept her back to Kate, since it was hard admitting what she had to say next. “Anyway, by the end of that week,” she continued, “I’d resolved that I was going to come and tell you how I felt, only then I saw you and Sophie in the corridor. She was...flirting with you and I just saw red. I’m not proud of losing my temper, but at least it was just some inanimate objects feeling my wrath.”

“You do seem to have quite the temper, that’s for sure,” remarked Kate from behind her, “I’ll have to be careful!”

Andrea shot up from where she was stowing the stool back in the cupboard. “I would never hurt you,” she declared earnestly, “I can control myself and my powers when I need to.”

The Major reached out to gently stroke Andrea’s face. “I know you wouldn’t hurt me, I was just joking – badly it seems.”

“Forget it, it’s just me being sensitive,” said Andrea, “The mugs are up here by the way,” she added opening a cupboard.

Andrea made her way back over to the sofa while Kate finished off in the kitchen. When Kate finally did bring the tea over, Andrea offered her a warm smile of gratitude, moving along as an invite that the other woman happily accepted, snuggling up next to her. Waiting for her drink to cool, Andrea absently stroked her fingers through the fine strands of Kate's auburn hair where it rested on Andrea's shoulder. Something was on Andrea's mind, something that she knew she just had to ask.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," replied Kate immediately.

Andrea paused for a moment, trying to find the best way to put it. She gave up and decided on short and simple. "You and Sophie, did anything ever happen between you?"

Kate pushed herself up slightly so she could turn to look at Andrea. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't know, lesbian intuition?" offered Andrea. "That and the way she still looks at you like she's carrying some sort of torch for you."

The Major looked genuinely surprised. "She does?"

"Take it from one who knows," remarked Andrea.

The Major digested the comment for a moment. "I didn't realise she still held any feelings like that, if she does."

"So something *did* happen between you?"

The Major held Andrea's gaze for a couple of seconds, perhaps determining how much to reveal, before dipping her head in acknowledgement. "Yes, it was ages ago, when we were at Sandhurst. It was a very brief fling," she outlined matter-of-factly, "I think I just wanted to see what it was like - a bit of experimentation to see if it was for me. Which I quickly decided it wasn't."

Andrea nodded in understanding, averting her eyes as a few unwelcome thoughts of Sophie and Kate sprang to mind. She knew she shouldn't have asked if she didn't want to hear the answer. She supposed she should console herself with the thought that Kate hadn't attempted to lie about it, that she had told her the truth.

"At least I thought it wasn't for me," added Kate, her voice dropping to a huskier tone as she shuffled closer to Andrea again, "Until now..."

Andrea could feel the warmth from Kate's body close to her own, feel the accompanying heat from her gaze that lingered on Andrea's face, waiting for her to look up. As she did, Kate immediately took her face in her hands and kissed her with aching tenderness.

When she finally pulled back Kate was still studying Andrea's face. "You're not jealous are you? It was a long time ago."

"Honestly?" asked Andrea, "Maybe a little bit, but don't worry I'm not about to take her outside and beat her up," she insisted though there was a little part of her mind devilishly suggesting that wasn't such a bad idea. "So is she that experience you were talking about or has there been any other women?" she asked curiously, banishing the insistent inner demon.

"No, that was it, the one time," admitted Kate, "After that it was various men, until..."

"Until Dixon," Andrea finished for her.

"Yes," confirmed Kate simply.

Andrea could sense the shift in mood, Kate's posture taking on a distinctly defensive shape. "We don't have to talk about him if you don't want to, I know he hurt you." Though that's what Andrea had said out loud, she was desperate to know more about Dixon, not the least of which was why on earth Kate had ever been with him. At the same time Andrea realised she could end up hearing something she'd rather not, as she had with the previous revelation about Sophie.

"He did hurt me," continued Kate, her face taking on a wistful sadness as she recalled it, "Though now I have a bit of time and distance, I think the pain was more my wounded pride, mixed with annoyance at my own stupidity, rather than a broken heart."

Andrea found herself perversely pleased at that - it sounded as if Kate hadn't ever really loved Dixon. Not the way she hoped Kate loved her.

"Looking back on it I realise I still wasn't over my father's death at the time I took charge here," added Kate, "What with that and the difficulty of settling into my new job and responsibilities, I needed someone to lean on and he was conveniently there. A little bit too conveniently as it turned out."

Andrea could feel her anger simmering below the surface. Not anger directed at Kate, but at Dixon, the man who had treated her so badly. "I'm sorry he hurt you," she said, rubbing Kate's arm comfortingly. "You know I would never do that, don't you?" she asked, feeling the need to reassure Kate now they were on the prickly subject of relations with subordinates.

"Of course," agreed Kate sincerely, "You two are nothing alike."

Andrea heaved an internal sigh of relief, happy that Kate had made a clear distinction between the two of them, even if certain other people like Sophie hadn't.

"So what about you?" asked Kate, switching the topic of conversation, "Have you ever been with man?"

“No, I’m one hundred percent lesbian and proud of it,” declared Andrea, glad for the shift too. Talking about Dixon was uncomfortable and she could only handle so much at once.

“You’ve never even been tempted, not a little bit?”

“No, men just don’t do anything for me, not in that way. Not that I’m a man-hating lesbian or anything, well not all men anyway.”

Kate’s eyebrows creased, wondering at the reference.

“Whereas some men just rub me up completely the wrong way,” clarified Andrea, “In particular certain snide army lieutenants.”

“Ah,” commented Kate, realising that Andrea was talking about her second in command.

“Have you found anything else out about the explosion in the training house?” asked Andrea.

Kate shook her head. “No, there wasn’t much left to analyse. If that pipe was deliberately broken, then it’s long gone now.”

“So Chadwick gets away with it again,” noted Andrea in annoyance.

“You don’t know it was him,” Kate tried to reason.

“Right! And bears don’t shit in the woods. It was him.”

“That’s purely speculation on your part...”

“You mean you don’t believe me,” stated Andrea, disturbed at the thought that it might be the case.

“No, I didn’t say that,” Kate replied, still keeping her voice calm and even, “I’m in a difficult position. Of course I want to back you up, but I can’t without proof.”

Andrea suddenly remembered that she’d never told Kate about the time in her quarters when Chadwick had pulled her power regulator off and left her as she had a seizure. She hadn’t wanted to at the time partly because she feared Kate wouldn’t believe her and partly because she’d look like a fool for letting Chadwick goad her. However, she considered that maybe now was the right time to bring it up. She was just thinking of the best way to introduce it when Kate beat her to the punch.

“How about we don’t talk about Chadwick anymore, since we always seem to end up arguing about him?”

Andrea paused – should she still say what she was going to?

“Please?” asked Kate.

Andrea sighed, supposing it would keep for another time. She considered that maybe she should start carrying out her own investigation into the Lieutenant, see if she could dig up anything, since no one else seemed to suspect him. Thinking of investigations reminded her of the other one that was still unresolved.

“How about talking about our other favourite subject then?” suggested Andrea.

“Sex?”

Andrea couldn't help laughing at that, especially when Kate was resolutely maintaining an implacable expression. “All right, our second favourite,” conceded Andrea, “What I actually meant was the investigation into the warehouse accident, though now you mention it perhaps sex is a more suitable a topic...”

“And so much more fun,” agreed Kate. “But I do have some news as it happens, I wasn't going to say anything until I had something more solid to tell you, but I've discovered that one of my old colleagues is on the investigation team. Now all I need to do is try and get in touch with him without his superiors knowing.”

Andrea was heartened. “That's good then - a lead at last!”

“Yes, I was beginning to think the investigation had disappeared off the face of the earth before I had this breakthrough.”

“Someone certainly wants to keep it that way it seems,” Andrea noted thoughtfully. “Why is it all so secret I wonder? And does that have anything to do with me and these powers?”

“I don't know,” admitted Kate.

“It's just so frustrating not knowing,” Andrea tried to explain, “My powers are such a big part of who I am now, and I don't really know the full story behind how I got them. It's like something's missing and I need the answers to fill that gap. And of course there's what happened to all my colleagues and finding out who was responsible.”

Andrea suddenly realised that Kate had gone very quiet as she'd been speaking and now she looked at the other woman she saw that Kate was looking down at her hands, looking unusually anxious.

“What is it?” asked Andrea.

Kate glanced up, the apprehension in her features obvious. “I have something to tell you,” she said slowly.

Andrea could feel a disquieting ache settling in her stomach as she noted Kate's pensive tone. “What is it?” she asked, unsure if she wanted to know the answer or not. She'd never seen Kate looking so uneasy, especially not around her.

“It’s nothing to do with you, or us, this is to do with me,” Kate added seriously, “But I think it’s something you should know.”

“Ok, but now you’re really starting to worry me,” said Andrea, trying to control her rising dread. What could this something be to affect Kate so?

Kate kept her eyes fixed on Andrea who didn’t dare look away, practically holding her breath as she waited on tenterhooks for the bombshell.

“I hope you’ll understand why I never said anything before, but if this is going anywhere I need to tell you the truth.”

“The truth about what?” Andrea fought hard to keep the panic from her voice.

“The truth about why I’m here, why I’m running this place,” replied Kate, “You have to promise me that you’ll hear me out before you pass judgement. I want you to know that I was ordered never to tell anyone about this and I mean anyone. To do so now is a direct violation of orders. I only say that in hope that you might understand, or at least appreciate why I never said anything before. But at the same I’ll also understand if it changes your opinion of me, if you can’t forgive me, even if you end up hating me.”

Andrea didn’t think that was possible, though at the same time couldn’t help speculating what could be so bad as to make Kate think that.

“All right, I’m listening...”

Kate was quiet for a moment, seemingly uncertain of her course again. Her eyes silently searched Andrea’s face, seeking a way to begin perhaps. Andrea tried to give her a reassuring, encouraging look, though inside her stomach was filled with butterflies. Kate took a long, slow intake of breath before opening her mouth to speak.

Beep!

It was Kate’s communicator.

“Leave it,” whispered Andrea, barely able to find her voice her mouth was so dry.

Beep!

“I...can’t,” said Kate regretfully, picking it up and answering it.

CHAPTER 18

For the entire helicopter ride to their mission, Andrea sat quietly, going over her conversation with Kate, looking for any clues as to what the other woman had been about to reveal. Her anxiety only increased as she turned it over and over in her mind, wondering what it was that could be so terrible. It didn't even register that they had touched down until Tom shook her shoulder to rouse her. Andrea forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand, thinking there would be plenty of time to speak to Kate later.

As she stepped from the helicopter she was almost knocked off her feet by the force of the wind. They had landed on a hillside above the small Cornwall village of Bancastle. Given that it was summer, the village would normally be a haven for tourists, its picturesque seaside setting making it a popular stop for those coming to the westernmost county in England. Its tea and gift shops should have been bustling with visitors disgorged from their coaches for the day. However, that particular day was a different story altogether.

Unluckily for the local residents of Cornwall, and Bancastle in particular, the county had been hit by some very unseasonal weather. The storm had swept in during the early hours, bringing with it more rain than normally fell in the entire month of June. That amount of water arriving in one go had been more than the ground could cope with and it wasn't long before the floodwaters had started to rise. Bancastle's position made it particularly susceptible, since it sat in a natural valley leading down to the sea, and it had been engulfed by flash floods and mudslides.

The windswept hillside where they had landed was the closest they could safely set down. Andrea had to shield her eyes from the driving rain as she gazed down at the village below, just able to make out the rooftops through the sheets of rain that swept over the valley. Closer by were a whole host of emergency service vehicles, among which which were a number of other military ones. The overall scene was one of organised chaos, with a multitude of police officers, paramedics, firefighters and soldiers dashing back and forth. Andrea thought it unlikely that their presence would cause any kind of stir amongst the frantic hubbub.

One beacon of calm amongst the tumult was Kate, who was currently standing in a group of emergency workers, commanding their full attention as she got the lowdown on the situation. Andrea watched admiringly as Kate took charge, ignoring the elements as they buffeted her and whipped at her clothes. Her hair was already sodden from where it poked out from underneath her cap, the droplets running off it and over the standard issue army jacket she wore. She made one final nod, sending a fresh cascade off the peak of her cap before returning to brief the others.

“All right, we're here to assist the emergency services in any way we can,” shouted the Major over the squally wind. “As you can probably see there's a fair amount of

property damage and we have a number of pockets of people trapped on rooftops and elsewhere by mud, floodwater and landslides. With all that's going on no one's going to be too bothered how we get the job done, but let's not try and make things too obvious regards your powers. We're still trying to keep things as quiet as possible and we don't want to give our friend Miss Kaminski any extra work do we?"

Andrea wasn't sure about that, thinking it might be quite amusing to get the government official out from behind her desk and slogging through the mud of some remote Cornish field to try and tell some local farmer that the human-like object he'd seen in the sky was in fact a very large bird. Andrea was brought back to the present situation when she realised Kate had turned to her specifically.

"Andrea, I want you to head down to the beach. There have been reports of people trapped by a combination of rockfalls and the tide. See if they're true and help out where you can."

Andrea nodded her understanding and made her way over to a nearby copse of trees, hoping to find a surreptitious spot to take to the sky from. She took a final glance back across the hillside, finding a pair of blue-grey eyes meeting her gaze through the storm. Kate smiled briefly, a small reassuring one that caused a welcome prickle in Andrea's chest. Andrea returned the smile with her own before making a last check that the coast was clear. Gauging that no one was paying her any attention, she pulled her goggles down over her eyes and leapt into the grey skies.

The air was turbulent up above the village and Andrea had to fight hard to maintain her course against the raging storm. She swept down over the houses in the valley, able to see the great slicks of mud that had pummelled the buildings from her high vantage point. The river that ran through it had long since burst its banks, the streets swamped below the floodwaters. At the far end of the village the river opened out into the sea, and Andrea soared out over the churning waters before turning back to land to see what the situation along the coastline was. She hovered in the air being battered by the wind, her only company a few hardy seagulls. Imposing, dark cliffs rose high either side of the small beach formed at the river's delta, stretching out along the coast in both directions. Infrequent pockets of shingle were dotted along at the foot of the cliffs where there were natural coves. Andrea could immediately see a group of people huddled in one of those coves, cut off from the village by what looked like a fresh rockfall. Andrea started down towards them before assessing what her options were. Supposing she could hardly swoop in without causing a stir and noting that there were far too many of them for her to carry all at once anyway, she shifted direction and landed on the village-side of the rockfall instead.

As she landed on the empty beach, Andrea had to take a moment to remove and wipe her goggles, trying her best to re-tie her damp blonde hair away from her face too. The waves crashed onto shore a few metres away, throwing up a cloud of spray that added to the rain that was already drenching her. Andrea could feel the droplets dribbling unpleasantly down her spine beneath her black uniform and a long, hot bath back at the base was suddenly looking very appealing. The thought that she might be joined in the steamy water by a certain someone else only made that image more tempting. Dragging her wandering thoughts back to the present, Andrea sized up the large boulders before her. She stepped forwards and attempted to get hold of the

nearest one. The rock was slippery from the rain and it took a couple of goes before her fingers managed to gain purchase so she could heft it up and away. As she deposited it out of the way she was amazed at how easy it was to lift such immense objects, the boulder as easy to pick up as one of the pebbles under her feet.

A creaking noise echoed out over the beach and Andrea's eyes were drawn to the looming cliffs above, from where the pile of boulders had tumbled. Deducing that there could be more rockfalls at any moment, she sped up her efforts to clear a path to the trapped people, throwing the rocks out of her path as she cut her way through the slip. A well placed punch shattered the final rock and she saw the people cowering next to the cliffs, as far up the beach as they could get, away from the raging sea. Andrea had to wade through the shallows before she could reach the group. She could have flown over, but then that would have been a great show for the people who had now spotted her, and Andrea remembered how Kate had warned against public displays.

"Come on," she called as she got close to the gaggle of about a dozen people, "We've cleared a path through the landslip, but you need to come now before the tide comes in any further."

The people didn't need to be told twice, following her back over the beach and through the jagged path she'd cleared. As they stumbled frantically along a few loose bits of rock tumbled down from above, crashing noisily around them, splintering on the existing rocks. Andrea saw the people all the way back to the harbour in the village, the sea now nearly all the way in and obscuring the entire beach behind them.

Andrea? Are you there?

It was Kate on Andrea's earpiece. She could hardly hear her over the howling wind and Andrea had to cup the small gadget closer to her ear, turning away from the direct force of the storm.

"Yes, I'm here," she yelled back.

Did you find anyone on the beach?

"Yes, I've got them all back to the harbour though, and not a moment too soon. Those cliffs look like they're about to go any minute and the tide's right in. What about..."

Andrea was cut off by someone frantically tugging at her sodden sleeve. She turned to see a bedraggled middle-aged woman, one of the people she'd just helped to safety.

"My son!" she wailed, "He's still back there! You have to help him!"

"Ok, calm down," said Andrea, trying to sooth the woman.

"Please!" she begged.

Andrea? What's going on?

“There’s a woman, she says her son’s still on the beach somewhere,” Andrea told Kate before fixing her attention on the woman. “Are you sure? Are you sure he didn’t make it back here with everyone else and you lost him in the confusion. What does he look like?”

“No! He’s not here, he’s still down there,” she continued hysterically, before getting a vague grip of herself, rattling out a description in quick sentences between sobs. “He’s only seven, he’s got dark brown hair, he’s wearing an orange t-shirt. His name’s Ben.

The description didn’t sound like anyone Andrea had seen. “All right, all right,” said Andrea to placate the woman before addressing Kate again. “She’s adamant he’s still out there. I’ll go and take a look.”

Didn’t you just say the cliffs were about to go?

“I’ll be all right, I do have a means of escape after all,” noted Andrea.

Suddenly the woman was on Andrea’s arm again, tugging beseechingly. “Please, you have to help him!”

At the same time Kate’s voice was in her other ear.

At least wait for backup, we’re only five minutes away from your position.

“He doesn’t have five minutes.”

Andrea...

“I have to go, now!”

Andrea didn’t have time to find somewhere safe to take off from, leaping directly into the sky from the harbour wall and swooping out over the waves again. She flew round to where she had found the group of people, staying low to the waves in case she saw the boy amongst the waters, scared that she might. The huge swell crashed over her a couple of times almost pulling her into its murky depths, but there was no sign of him. Her clothes hung heavy from her body by the time she swept towards the beach.

“Ben!” yelled Andrea as she drew close to the shore, scanning what was left of the shingle. “Ben!” There was no sign of anyone and Andrea drifted down onto the tiny bit of land still exposed at the foot of the cliffs. “Ben!” she shouted one final time into the breeze, growing increasingly worried as to the boy’s fate. The sea pounded unremittingly in her face as she stared back out into the unforgiving waters.

“Help!”

The voice was faint but it just filtered to Andrea’s ears over the sounds of the surf.

“Ben?” shouted Andrea with renewed vigour. “Where are you?”

“I’m here!” came back the small, scared voice.

Andrea tried hard to place his location, but it was difficult with the wind continuing to whip viciously around. Through the rain she suddenly spotted an area she hadn’t noticed before, set back from the beach, a narrow gap between the cliffs. Andrea clambered over the rocks and into the sheltered area, the cliffs towering high above. There in the shadows she could see a tiny figure, hunched on the ground with his knees drawn up to his chest as he shivered from cold.

“Ben?” she said, reaching out to him as she stepped forwards.

He flinched backwards, trembling against the damp rocks. It occurred to Andrea that she could look imposing to a frightened seven-year-old in her all-black outfit and eye-obscuring goggles. She reached up to take them off, hoping a more human face might ease the boy. Kneeling down to his level she held out her arms invitingly.

“It’s all right, I’m here to help you,” she said gently.

He eyed her up for a moment, Andrea offering him a small smile of encouragement. It seemed that was all he needed as he peeled himself away from the rocks and flung himself into her arms. Andrea held his tiny body close, trying to impart some warmth into his chilled bones though she herself was soaked too. They sat there for a moment, entwined together when suddenly a grinding noise broke the relative calm.

Andrea’s eyes shot to the cliffs above her, looming dark against the grey sky. A jagged crack was splitting through a great swathe of the rock, unstoppable in its downward course. With an eerie cracking echoing off the chasm walls, several large sections of the cliff sheared straight off, plunging down towards them.

Andrea instantly knew she couldn’t get away in time. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to run. She pulled the boy close, knowing all that was left was to shield him as best as possible from the deadly rockfall.

Then suddenly out of nowhere Kate was there, standing in front of Andrea, directly in the path of the falling debris.

Andrea’s heart leapt into her mouth. “Kate! No!” she cried from where she crouched helplessly watching.

Kate ignored her plea though. Her hands were up, palms and fingers open, pointing in the direction of the huge chunks of rock. Andrea barely had time to crinkle her brow in confusion, wondering what the hell the other woman was doing, when all of a sudden visible waves of force erupted from Kate’s hands. So great was the power in the cascading ripples as they sped towards their target, that Andrea was buffeted by the displacement of the air from where she knelt, pushed back against the cliffside.

The waves blasted into the debris, and the rock exploded into a shower of dust, blown apart into a million tiny pieces to drift harmlessly down to earth. It was completely

destroyed, crumbling into nothingness like a whisper lost on the breeze rather than the tonnes of heavy rock it had been.

Andrea could only gawp in total and utter astonishment as Kate slowly swung round to her. Andrea's wide-eyed gaze tracked upwards to meet the blue-grey eyes of the other woman. There was an indefinable look on Kate's face, though Andrea thought she could detect a definite hint of trepidation in there. Kate didn't say anything, perhaps not knowing what to say after what had just occurred or maybe waiting for Andrea to go first. However, Andrea's mind and mouth weren't functioning at all, it was just too much to comprehend.

The only cogizant thoughts she could manage was a repitition of the same things over and over.

Kate had powers.

Kate was a superhuman.

Each repitition did little to help the fact penetrate any further into her racing mind.

The only other thing she could do was stare numbly up at Kate who didn't seem capable of moving or speaking either, mutely returning the gaze. Out of the corner of her eye Andrea was dimly aware of others now appearing on the scene. She wasn't sure if they had witnessed Kate's display or not, and she didn't really care at the moment. Finally she managed to engage her mouth, whispering out one plaintive question before the others reached them.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

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As soon as the helicpoter touched down Andrea whipped open the door and started striding for her quarters, not looking back to see what Kate was doing.

The journey back had been a numb blur for Andrea. They'd been enveloped in a hubbub of activity and questions back at Bancastle and she hadn't been able to say anything further to Kate once the others had joined them. She had no idea what to say anyway and was almost grateful for the distraction and then the chance to sit quietly on her own in the helicopter, the noise of the blades and engine pretty much precluding any attempts at conversation. She didn't even care that she was sitting in sopping wet clothes as her thoughts pressed in on her. Left with those thoughts, the implications of what she had seen slowly started to sink in. As it did a whole array emotions started to well up inside her, predominat of which was a sickening sense of betrayal.

Andrea had barely closed the door to her quarters behind her when she heard it opening again. She swung round angrily to see Kate there, coming towards her.

“What do you think you're doing,” Andrea spat, “Get out!”

Kate kept coming towards her, her voice calm and even. “Andrea, please, I just want to talk to you.”

Andrea was having none of it, backing away. “Didn’t you hear me? I said get out!” she cried gesticulating wildly at the door.

“Andrea, listen...”

“No! I don’t want to listen!” shouted Andrea furiously, causing Kate to finally stop in her tracks. “All this time you were a mutant too and you never said a thing? When I was struggling to come to terms with it, face up to it what were you doing? Laughing behind my back?”

“It wasn’t like that...”

“And what the fuck was it like?” demanded Andrea. “Or do you just like deceiving people, is that it?”

“I didn’t set out to deceive you,” said Kate apologetically.

“Well you did a pretty good job of it,” noted Andrea bitterly. “Sucked me right in! Helvete! I can’t believe this.”

“Andrea...”

Kate tried to reach out for Andrea again, to place a calming hand on her arm. Andrea whipped it out of the way of her searching fingers.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t fucking touch me!”

“Andrea...”

“No!” screamed Andrea, all sense of reason gone now. All she could see was that Kate had deceived her, lied to her. That hurt, more than she had ever thought it could and she didn’t want to have to face it anymore. “Just get out! Get out!”

Andrea grabbed Kate’s arm, trying to march her over to the door and throw her from the room.

“Andrea, stop!” Kate was trying to dig her heels in, twisting in Andrea’s grasp, but Andrea was far too strong. As they reached the still open door Kate jammed her hand against the frame.

Andrea clenched her jaw angrily, making to move the stubborn hand when suddenly Kate’s free hand was hovering by her chest. Andrea glanced down just as a ripple of air blew outwards from it, knocking her back a couple of paces. It was only a gentle shove but the open display of Kate’s power only served to infuriate Andrea further. She darted for Kate, but she was hit again in the chest, slightly more forcefully this time. Andrea tried a third time, only to find herself sitting on her backside on the floor.

“So you’re not afraid to use your powers now then!” spat Andrea, clambering back to her feet.

“I’m just trying to calm you down, so I can speak to you.”

“I don’t want to hear anything you have to say,” seethed Andrea, “I can’t believe anything you say anyway, you’ve been lying to me all this time.”

“I haven’t exactly been lying to you…” offered Kate slowly

“Don’t try and worm your way out of it!” said Andrea incredulously, “You’ve had plenty of chances to say something, but you haven’t.”

Kate looked at her pleadingly. “But I wanted to, I desperately wanted to, you have to believe me. It’s been so hard not saying anything all these weeks.”

Andrea folded her arms defiantly across her chest. “Really, then why didn’t you?”

“I was trying to, this morning, before we got called out on the mission.”

Andrea was blind-sided for a moment, recalling the conversation of earlier. “Oh my god. The terrible thing you were going to tell me…this was it. That you were actually a superhuman too?”

Kate merely nodded. “I told you that you might end up hating me, it seems I was right.”

Andrea turned away looking out to the gloomy skies that sat outside her window. It was all too much to take in. How could Kate have kept this secret all this time? Why hadn’t she said something? What else was she hiding? As she stood with those questions and a hundred others racing through her brain she could feel the warmth of the other body behind her. Kate wasn’t actually touching her, just standing very close.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before,” said Kate, her voice low and full of contrition, “But if you give me a chance I’d like to try and explain…”

Andrea sighed, her shoulders slumping along with her head. Without looking at Kate she crossed over to sit on the sofa, not bothered that she was still soaking wet. Only when she was safely there and sitting did she dare to look up to Kate, trying to hold her warring emotions in check. Kate’s eyes immediately met hers holding them in a look of sorrow and regret.

Kate joined Andrea on the cushions, though she kept a discrete distance, maybe sensing that Andrea was going to listen but that was all she was committing to right now.

“Go on then,” said Andrea caustically, unable to help herself, “Let’s hear why you felt it necessary to lie to me.”

Kate ignored the tone, taking a couple of deep breaths as she sought where to begin. “All right, I’m going to tell it from the beginning, so you know I’m not hiding anything else, that this is the whole truth.”

Andrea just scoffed disdainfully but didn’t say anything.

“I suppose it all started last year back in Iraq...” Kate paused for a moment, rubbing at her temple as she tried to gather her thoughts. For the first time since they had entered the room, Andrea took the chance to study the other woman. It occurred to Andrea that she looked tired as she rubbed her face, bedraggled from the earlier efforts in Bancastle, her normally lustrous hair hanging limply about her face. She had removed her jacket somewhere in between the helicopter and Andrea’s quarters, but, like Andrea’s own clothes, the shirt she wore underneath was just as soggy as that had been. There was a strong urge welling up inside Andrea to move closer and wrap her arms around Kate, sooth away those worries that were causing her brow to crease. Andrea had to make a conscious effort to fight the impulse down. She was angry with Kate, she had to remember that.

“No, that’s not strictly right, that’s when things came to a head,” said Kate, breaking Andrea out of her observations. “I’d known that I had these special powers long before that, since I was a teenager in fact. As you can imagine I was pretty scared when I found out, not unlike yourself. I’d never heard of anyone else who could do anything similar so as a kid I was frightened to tell anyone, scared to be singled out as different. Then it just naturally progressed that way into adulthood – it became second nature to hide my abilities.”

“You do a good job of it,” commented Andrea bitinglly.

Kate noted the remark but didn’t comment. “That continued on into the army - I didn’t think my fellow officers or soldiers would take too kindly to some weird mutant amongst them so again I kept it hidden.”

“I’m guessing there’s a point coming where someone finds out?” prompted Andrea, getting slightly impatient. All this talk of being an outsider and having to hide her real self was making her feel increasingly sympathetic towards Kate, not what she wanted to be feeling at all when she had managed to work herself up into such a great fury.

“Yes, there is,” agreed Kate. “At the beginning of last year I was posted in Iraq. Of course even with all the leaps in equal opportunities I wasn’t officially on the front line, though where that ends in Iraq is anyone’s guess. Anywhere and everywhere were equally as dangerous. Anyway, one day I was part of a convoy, delivering some supplies to a squadron of our troops near the town of Basra, a squadron that happened to be commanded by my father...”

Kate had to pause, taking a deep breath to compose herself. Andrea could see the moisture already edging at the corners of Kate’s eyes, knowing to some extent what must be coming next in the story.

“We got there and then...then everything went to hell. We were attacked by some rebel troops, still loyal to Saddam. They seemed to come out of nowhere. They were all over us. We scattered, tried to regroup.” Kate’s account was becoming increasingly disjointed as if the memories were hard to recall in any kind of ordered way. “I lost track of my section in the skirmish. There were bullets and explosions and sand...sand everywhere...swirling around....blowing in your eyes...clogging your throat. I was stumbling around...and then my father was there, as always. He and a small group of his men had hunkered down, were trying to fight back. It was actually working. The Iraqi’s weren’t as highly trained, their attack relying on surprise more than anything else. But then...then...”

Kate faltered, choking on her words. It was all Andrea could do not to step in and hold her, hold her close to banish all these terrible memories. But she had to know the whole story, now Kate had come so far.

“It was a stray bullet; just a stupid stray bullet.” Kate’s eyes were closed now, her brow creased as she recalled the painful memories. “Not aimed, not intended, totally random. But still deadly, oh so deadly,” Kate shook her head, her throat bobbing as she swallowed hard. “He managed to cling on for a moment, ever the fighter. He was looking right into my eyes as the light faded from his. He died, there in my arms in that godforsaken place, his blood running out over my hands onto the sand.”

Kate looked down at those hands now, as if she could still see the blood on them. “But *they* didn’t care!” she cried, making Andrea jump with the sudden change in volume. “*They* were still coming, still shooting. How dare they still be shooting! How dare they!”

Kate’s eyes rose to meet Andrea’s once more, the pain and anguish so plain to see. “And that’s when I lost it. I lost control of my powers. I just started blasting everything that moved, I didn’t care who saw me or what damage I inflicted. I wanted to stop them, punish them for what they’d done. And I was angry – angry with myself for not acting sooner, for not using my powers sooner. I could have saved him, but I was too busy hiding what I was, protecting myself as always. It didn’t take long for me to wipe them out. I killed every last one of them. And you know what? At that moment in time I didn’t care. I was happy that they were dead.”

Kate’s voice was low again now, her breathing ragged, like she was reliving the moment then and there. Like she was as exhausted now as she must have been then, spent after her grief-filled rage had been taken out on the enemy troops.

“And then that’s when I noticed it,” she continued slowly, “The wreckage of the helicopter that must have been passing overhead and got caught in one of my wildly destructive blasts.”

There was another slow, deliberate intake of breath.

“It was one of ours.”

Andrea herself gasped, not realising she had until Kate’s eyes shot to her once more. They held her gaze as her guilt-ridden words continued.

“Four of our men, killed instantly on impact. They didn’t stand a chance,” she said hauntingly. “Friendly fire, that’s what they call it,” she added bitterly, “Friendly goddam fire! There was nothing friendly about those four mangled bodies though.”

Andrea could hold back no longer, whatever rage she had been feeling having been replaced by an unstoppable wave of sympathy. “Oh, Kate...” she said stupidly, not knowing what else to say. Instead she reached out to place a tentative hand on Kate’s shoulder.

Kate’s lip visibly trembled but she held herself together somehow, managing to continue on in a more even tone now the most harrowing part of the tale was over. “The army covered it up, of course, and I was shipped straight back to England. I was in a mess and really didn’t give a damn what happened to me. I half expected to be court-martialled on the spot, and I really wouldn’t have been bothered.”

“It had been nearly three months of what was officially designated as compassionate leave when Colonel Parsons came to see me with a proposal. It turned out that I wasn’t the only person with these superhuman abilities after all, that the government had been investigating them for a while with the intention of setting up some sort of project for further research. The army had gotten involved too, since it needed to be top secret and for some reason they seemed to think that given my...experience...I might be a good choice to head it up. I practically laughed in the Colonel’s face. I was in no state to be commanding anything, let alone a new untried unit. I didn’t even really hold a high enough rank to be commanding an entire base, but he insisted my background made me perfect for it and that they were willing to forego normal ranking precedence in this instance. He’s not an easy man to say no to, and he had been friends with my father and always knew how to get to me. I think he thought it would be good for me – something to throw myself into to take my mind of what had happened out in Iraq. So in the end after what was deemed sufficient counselling I took command of the Superhuman Research Unit.”

“Only the ironic thing was that even though they’d wanted me because they thought I might be able to understand the superhumans, at the same time they didn’t want me actively using my powers. I’m not sure what the full reasons behind it were, I think it was partly that they wanted to draw a distinct line between the military and the superhumans, but also I’m sure there was an element of fear.”

“Fear?” queried Andrea.

“They’d seen what I was capable of in Iraq and didn’t want a repeat performance.”

“So they told you not to tell anyone?”

“Yes, as part of the conditions of my transfer I had to agree to keep my powers secret and not use them in any way.”

“That seems a bit over the top,” noted Andrea, “And how would they know anyway?”

The Major turned her right arm to Andrea, tapping her bicep area. "I have a monitoring device, just like yours."

Andrea looked from Kate's face to her arm in amazement.

"I have to provide regular reports of the readings from it," continued Kate, "Just to verify I'm not doing anything I shouldn't be."

The talk of reports rang a distant bell in Andrea's mind. "Oh my god!" she cried in sudden realisation, "Those reports that you and Doc were talking about, they were about you!"

The Major looked at her curiously, not understanding the reference.

"I overheard you once, in the corridor, talking about having to prepare some extra reports for the Colonel," explained Andrea, "I just assumed you were talking about me."

"Ah, yes," said the Major, "They were indeed about me. Doc is the only other person on the base that knows I'm a mutant, since he needs to have some input into those reports and monitor my 'condition'."

"So it's not secret from everyone then," remarked Andrea, bitterness edging back into her tone.

"I'm so sorry, I really wanted to tell you," insisted Kate, "Even from the start it seemed somehow wrong to hide it from you, even though I didn't really know you then."

"But somehow you always held back?"

Kate nodded guiltily. "Yes."

"Hang on," said Andrea, suddenly remembering something else, "That night of the car accident, when we crashed into the river - you could have saved yourself?"

"Maybe, maybe not," allowed Kate, "Obviously I was unconscious when you first found me, then I was hoping that the rescue services might arrive before I needed to do anything."

"But they didn't, did they?" noted Andrea, accusingly, "And still you did nothing. Would you have let yourself drown just to protect your secret, or were you relying on me to do something?"

"No," stated Kate adamantly, "I didn't want you to endanger yourself like that! I was reluctant because like you I wouldn't have been able to see what the hell I was doing in all that murk. I could have blasted my own foot off, or, even worse, harmed you or Thompson by accident. But when it was obvious time was running out I was going to give it a go, but you went and beat me to it. I tried to stop you, I called out, but you were already under the water at that point."

“Christ I nearly died that night,” Andrea recalled bitterly, “And all the time you had the power to do something.”

“Don’t think I wasn’t grateful,” Kate tried to explain, “I know how much that took for you to do that, how dangerous it was. When you were shaking in my arms I was so scared that you weren’t going to make it. And then when you passed out I knew I couldn’t wait any longer.”

Andrea looked at Kate quizzically, not understanding what she meant.

“How do you think we got back to the base that night?” asked Kate slowly.

“We got picked up by the emergency chopper, the one you called,” Andrea said, before catching the odd look Kate was giving her, “Didn’t we?”

Kate slowly shook her head.

“Then how?” asked Andrea.

“I carried you.”

“You *carried* me?” repeated Andrea, confused, “But...the sea...,” a realisation was slowly dawning on Andrea. “You...you can fly too?”

Kate nodded. “Yes I can. I knew the helicopter was going to be ages, even if it could get off the ground, which was highly unlikely in that weather. So I flew us both back here and managed to collude with Doc to cover up exactly how I’d made it back so fast. I think Chadwick suspected something, but he didn’t push it.”

“So I have more to thank you for than I thought from that night,” noted Andrea.

“I’m the one who should thank you, you did save me after all,” Kate reminded her, “I was just grateful you were all right in the end after that fright you gave me.”

“You were actually concerned then?” said Andrea, suspecting she knew the answer, but wanting confirmation anyway after the shocks of the day.

“I was!” insisted Kate, “I should have realised then that you meant more to me than any normal operative should.” Kate moved closer to Andrea on the sofa, reaching out to place a tentative hand on her thigh. “So are you all right about this?” she asked uncertainly, her eyes searching Andrea’s face the whole time.

Andrea met the questioning gaze. “About you being a superhuman? Of course I’m all right about that,” she said, “About you lying to me...” She paused for a moment.

How could she remain angry with Kate? Especially when Kate was looking at her like that, with those soft blue eyes burning a path directly into her soul. She supposed that for most of the time Kate had kept her secret they hadn’t actually been ‘together’, so it wasn’t as if Andrea had any right to expect Kate to divulge it.

Eventually Andrea let out a long sigh. “I suppose I can forgive you.”

A tiny smile crept onto Kate’s lips. “Thank you,” she said simply, her hand caressing Andrea’s thigh more softly.

“Just don’t do it again!” added Andrea.

“I won’t, I promise, no more secrets!”

Andrea narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but her anger had completely left her by that stage. She had to admit that it actually felt good to have cleared the air, since it was obvious this had been preying on Kate’s mind for a while. As she thought more about it, she supposed it really wasn’t that bad that Kate had powers, in fact it gave them something else in common too, as if being madly in love wasn’t enough. “So what exactly are these powers of yours then?” she asked, curious now.

“You’ve pretty much seen them,” Kate replied with a shrug.

“Now you’re being modest,” noted Andrea, “That was pretty spectacular, whatever it was you did on that beach. And thank you, by the way, for saving my neck...again.”

“You’re welcome.” Kate’s fingers brushed gently along Andrea’s shoulder, Andrea leaning into the intimate caress when they got near her face. “It’s far too beautiful a neck to let anything happen to it.”

Andrea took Kate’s hand in her own, bringing it down into her lap to look at it, turning it over a couple of times as she studied the elegant digits. It didn’t look any different to the day before, though now she knew the deadly power hidden within.

“What was that then? What you did to the rocks?”

“I guess you could call them concussion waves,” Kate explained, “At least that’s what Doc likes to call them. They’re basically waves of kinetic force.”

“But I could...see them,” Andrea recalled.

“Yes, they do produce a slight physical manifestation, mainly from the distortion of the air as the waves pass through it.”

“There certainly was some distortion – I could *feel* the displacement of the air too.”

“Well, those were quite powerful ones that I used on the rocks. They obviously needed to be. But I can produce quite a variety of different strengths and size of wave. So I can ‘fire’ wide-dispersal ones like those earlier that blast apart whatever they come into contact with, or I can refine it down to a very fine almost beam-like blast to punch a small hole in something. And I’ve also learnt how to direct them to use them to push myself through the air, thus giving me the ability to ‘fly’. Not that they all have to be powerful blasts, as you’ve already seen, those I used on the rocks were quite different to those I used on you.”

“Thank goodness!” noted Andrea with some relief.

“Indeed. I have to be very careful with how much force I use, especially on people. If I got it even slightly wrong I’d end up breaking every bone in someone’s body or maybe even blowing them to pieces rather than just knocking them over.”

“Ouch! Maybe you should keep those concussion waves away from me in the future,” remarked Andrea.

“I’m sorry I knocked you over.”

“Forget it, I was being a bit of an arse. I’m sorry for trying to throw you out.”

“So now we’ve finished being all good and sorry, what should we do?”

Andrea looked over at Kate, her eyes sweeping over the other woman’s body. “We do have all these wet clothes to get out of...”

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Andrea’s eyes were closed, but she could feel the warmth of the sun through her eyelids, its caress over the rest of her body like the welcome touch of a lover. Breathing deeply, she thought she could happily lie where she was forever. The cold droplet hitting her shoulder was most unwelcome.

“Helvete!” she cried bolting upright.

She was met the sight of Kate standing above her, trying desperately to hold back the smirk that was threatening her face.

“Ooops, sorry,” she said, Andrea thinking she was nothing of the sort.

Andrea brushed the water off her bare shoulder, though the hot sun had almost dried it off already. She shot Kate a dark look, but the other woman looked unrepentant. Andrea suspected she had done it one purpose since there was plenty of room to avoid dripping anything on her on the large yacht.

“Do I need to find somewhere safer to sunbathe?” asked Andrea, taking the opportunity to reach for her sun cream, thinking she may as well top it up since she had been disturbed.

“No, you’re fine where you are, I like the view from the wheel.”

Kate eyes had travelled down Andrea’s body and the young woman followed them, noting that Kate would indeed have a very good view down her bikini top from her position at the back of the boat.

Kate knelt down beside her on the front canopy, Andrea's own eyes sneaking a peak up the Major's shorts. "Why don't you let me do that?" she suggested, holding out her hand for the bottle of sun cream.

Andrea passed it over, turning so that her back was to the other woman and pulling her ponytail out of the way over her shoulder. She flinched slightly when the cool cream first hit her skin, slowly relaxing into the languorous strokes of Kate's fingers.

"Mmm, that's good," she noted, closing her eyes to savour the sensation. She was sure the simple putting on of sun protection wasn't meant to be quite so arousing.

"You're enjoying our little trip out then?" asked Kate, continuing to rub down Andrea's spine in broad circles.

"Yes," agreed Andrea, "Especially since you've managed to avoid knocking me overboard this time."

"There's still time."

Andrea's head swung round. "Do it and you'll be joining me!" She might have been hot, but even in the height of summer the Atlantic off the coast of Scotland was not the most inviting temperature.

Kate laughed. "All right, no impromptu dips. We certainly don't want anyone catching you using your powers either, since it's a lot busier out here this time. Who knows who might have some binoculars or a camera out."

Andrea turned back to the front as Kate put some more cream on her hands. "I can't believe no one has found anything out yet."

"I know," agreed Kate, "We were lucky no one saw me in Bancastle, even that little boy was too busy hiding in your arms to notice what happened. And as for the woman at the harbour, well, I'm assuming Miss Kaminski worked her normal magic on her."

"No doubt," nodded Andrea, wondering exactly how the government official persuaded people to remain quiet.

The Major's hands had slipped around her sides now, sneaking up Andrea's front and over her bikini top.

"I don't think I need any sun cream there," noted Andrea jokingly.

"I don't know, haven't you heard that the sun can penetrate clothing?"

Andrea hadn't, but she wasn't about to make that point when the Major's fingers had slipped under the thin material and were now teasing her nipple. Andrea leant back into the body behind her, resting her head onto Kate's chest and looking up to her. "What about all those people with binoculars and cameras?" she reminded the other woman.

Kate made a show of glancing around. “Good point,” she conceded, “Maybe we should head below decks?”

Andrea grinned. “Now that sounds like an offer too good to refuse.”

Andrea felt like a naughty schoolkid playing hooky as they snuck downstairs. Not that they hadn’t earned some time off from their responsibilities back at the base after all the recent drama. Andrea wondered if anyone thought anything untoward about the fact that she and Kate had chosen to spend their time off together, sure that it would spark some rumours. There had been gossip the last time they had been on a boat trip together and they hadn’t even been an item then, so she suspected their latest jaunt would cause at least a slight stir.

Kate didn’t seem overly bothered by the possibility, Andrea thinking she was starting to become more comfortable and relaxed about their relationship. Maybe in time they would actually be able to make it public. She forgot all about such concerns as they reached the bedroom, though. As they’d already discovered the gentle roll of the boat certainly added an extra interesting dimension to their lovemaking and they slipped slowly down onto the bed, determined to find out more now.

They took their time, knowing there was no need to rush out on the seas with no one to disturb them. Andrea didn’t even know how long they spent down there, not caring when she was enveloped in such a mind-blowing whirl of ecstasy.

Eventually she lay back onto the soft sheets, pulling Kate’s now naked body to her. “I sure hope you anchored the boat before we came down here,” she remarked, stroking her fingers across Kate’s sweaty shoulder.

“If I didn’t we could well be halfway to America by now.”

Andrea chuckled to herself. “I think I’m starting to really like sailing now,” she commented.

“It’s certainly a lot nicer when the weather’s so gorgeous,” agreed Kate, “Along with the company.”

Kate’s eyes were on her, her soft smile lighting up her face and warming Andrea far more than the sun had managed up top.

“Though I’ll still be making you come out with me in the depths of winter you realise,” continued Kate, “The times my father hauled me out of bed on a Sunday morning to go down to the harbour at Weymouth...” she added with a amused shake of the head.

“You loved it really, though?”

“Yes, I just liked to make out I was offended at being disturbed from my warm bed, but I loved the thrill of taking the boat out when it was challenging conditions. And of course I loved spending time with my father.”

Andrea smiled, though inside she felt a small pang of regret. “You were lucky to have that close relationship.”

Kate propped herself up onto her elbow to look Andrea in the eye. “You could still contact your parents, you know.”

“I know,” said Andrea, “I just don’t think the time is right. It’s not like I’ve changed, at least not in any way they might have hoped.”

“If you’d rather speak to them in person I could come with you,” offered Kate, “I mean I wouldn’t intrude, rather that if you wanted to take a trip off the base to see them...”

She left the offer dangling in the air, and it was tempting to Andrea. Despite everything they were still her parents, and no amount of bravado could cover up the hurt of their rejection.

“Thanks,” she finally said, “If I change my mind, I’ll let you know.”

“All right,” said Kate, reaching up to stroke Andrea’s cheek as a soft reassurance. “On a more positive note, in all the recent excitement I forgot to mention that I heard from my friend, the one on the team investigating the warehouse accident.”

Andrea sat up excitedly. “You did?”

“Yes, I’ve arranged a meeting with him on Monday.”

“Off the base I hope?”

“Indeed, he was reluctant enough to see me as it was, but I called in a couple of favours so I’m seeing him just outside Ayr, at your favourite pub.”

Andrea frowned slightly at Kate’s playful jibe, knowing she meant the one where Andrea had gotten steaming drunk and tried to start a fist fight with Kate.

“You know you look so cute when you pout like that,” noted Kate.

Andrea’s face brightened at the compliment.

“And irresistible when you smile,” added Kate, slowly pushing her back down onto the bed.

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Two days later the Major sat in the booth of the remote country pub, glad to see she seemed to be the only occupant of the bar. She knew she shouldn’t have been surprised, even in the middle of summer this wasn’t exactly number one stop of the tourist trail. The only other person she’d seen in there that lunchtime was the barman

himself and he'd disappeared out the back now, leaving her on her own in the low celinged room. Kate was out of uniform since this wasn't official business, waiting expectantly for her friend. Checking her watch again, she noted that he was already twenty minutes late. She hoped that was because of the vagaries of the British transport system and nothing more sinister. Picking up her drink she finished off the orange juice, thinking she might try something a little stonger if she was forced to wait any longer. Eventually there a telltale creak from the door and she turned to see her friend furtively approaching.

"Kate," he acknowledged, his eyes making a quick sweep of the room before sitting opposite her.

"Phil," greeted Kate in return, concerned at his state of agitation. "It's all right, there's no one else here."

"I can't believe I agreed to this," he replied, finally looking her in the eye.

Kate could sense the fear emanating from him. "What on earth is going on with this investigation to put you in this state?"

Phil delved into his bag, pulling out a folder which he slid across the stained wooden table. Kate opened it up, flicking through some of the pages while Phil talked, keeping his voice low despite the fact they were alone.

"It's all very hush, hush – everything's on a purely need to know basis so I'm not completely in the loop on the entire investigation," he explained, "This is just some stuff on what exactly was being stored at the warehouse."

"Chemicals?" noted the Major, reading through the list of names.

"Yes," he confirmed, "I think the police were expecting weapons or drugs, but these were highly specialised chemicals."

Kate conceded that he was right, since none of the names meant anything to her. "Do you know the purpose of them?" she asked, wondering at the same time if she could get Dr Todd to take a look at the list for her, to see if he could shed any light on the subject.

"We don't know yet, we have our scientists working on it," replied Phil.

The Major nodded thoughtfully. "And what about Cowley, any leads on him?"

"As I said things are on a need to know basis, and it seems I don't need to know about that part of the investigation. Kaminski's keeping that very close to her chest."

Kate's eyes shot to him in shock. "Kaminski?"

He looked nonplussed in return. "Yes. Didn't you know she was heading up the investigation now?"

“No I didn’t,” replied Kate darkly, suspicious of the other woman’s motivations. “I thought it was a military investigation, what is she doing poking her nose in?”

“I’m sure you know Miss Kaminski well enough to know that’s one of her specialities, getting involved in anything that she can use to her advantage or use to advance her career. Somehow she managed to persuade the powers that be that it was best to have someone independent in charge.”

Kate frowned. “I suppose she has a point. Though I would rather it was someone else - I don’t trust that woman. She would never do something unless there was something in it for her, which makes me wonder what her angle is in this case?”

“I don’t know,” answered Phil with a shrug, “Though I have to admit she’s determined and thorough if nothing else. If there’s something to be uncovered I’m sure she’ll find it.”

Kate supposed he had a point, though that did throw up one further question - how would Kaminski use that knowledge if she did uncover it?

CHAPTER 19

Andrea stood on the beach at Duransay hoping that Kate's meeting with her informant was going better than the training exercise she was currently involved in. To her it was just wrong to be running around working on a beach when they could be relaxing and enjoying themselves in the warm July sun. It wasn't as if the sun made an appearance that often in Scotland, so they should really make the most of it. Instead she was sweating under her thick uniform, waiting for Chadwick's instructions.

Those instructions weren't forthcoming, and, tired of feeling hot and bothered, Andrea peeled off her black vest and jacket and sat on the sand in just her t-shirt. She closed her eyes for a moment, drinking in the warmth of the sun on her face and arms, feeling the faint breeze drifting up the deserted beach while the waves lapped gently at the shoreline. The sound was lulling in its effect - back and forth, back and forth – the gentle rhythm never changing.

Andrea jolted suddenly having almost nodded off. Supposing that she didn't have anything better to do, she decided that it wouldn't hurt to make an extra check of the equipment considering the recent spate of 'accidents'. Though everyone else seemed to think the sabotage had stopped with Patterson's arrest, she remained to be convinced.

Clambering to her feet she made her way over to the mobile launchers positioned on the grassy solid ground at the top of the beach. Examining the devices she couldn't see any obvious signs of tampering and she reached in to pick out one of the projectiles. She turned it over a couple of times, its smooth metal surface glinting in the bright sunlight. It looked fine to her, but she wasn't exactly an expert. She picked the second one out of the tube for comparison purposes and that was when she saw the obvious difference. There were a couple of tiny scratch marks on the second projectile where one of the panels had been prised off at some point. Andrea tried to get her fingers nails under the edge so she could lever the same panel off.

"Hallstrom, are you ready?"

It was Chadwick on her earpiece.

"Hang on," replied Andrea, still fiddling with the projectile.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just need a moment."

"You've been sunning yourself on that beach long enough, get your bloody arse in gear!"

Andrea ignored his irate tone, finally managing to get enough purchase to pull off the metal plate on the side of the projectile. There was a timer inside, as there was supposed to be, but Andrea wasn't sure if the wires leading from it were in correct order. Quickly grabbing the untampered disc she prised the same panel off, holding them both up to study them closely.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Andrea swung round, squinting against the sun to see Chadwick stomping across the beach towards her, his boots kicking up puffs of golden sand along the way.

“*Someone's* being tampering with the projectiles,” she stated, staring directly at him to make it obvious who she thought that person was.

“Yes, someone has,” he replied, snatching them off her, “You!”

“Before me,” she said, offering him a withering look, “There were marks on the second one where someone had taken off one of the outer panels.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” he said dismissively, “They were probably there already.”

“Scared I'm going to discover your attempts at sabotage?”

Chadwick's eyes shot darkly to her. “You better not repeat that to anyone, certainly not your little girlfriend.”

Andrea fought hard to stop the colour draining instantly from her face at his comment.

“A bit close to the bone am I?” he noted.

Obviously she hadn't been able to cover up her shock well enough. “I don't know what you're talking about,” she attempted.

“Really?” he said, raising his eyebrows suggestively, “Because you two seem awfully...close.”

Andrea stepped in towards him, narrowing her eyes warningly. “And you better not repeat *that* to anyone.”

Chadwick didn't reply, but the smug smirk on his face was obvious. Andrea wanted to wipe it off. With her fist. However, she knew that would only make matters worse. She'd already hinted at far too much by her reaction. Controlling her rising anger she stepped back from him and walked away. As she made her way across the sand she wondered exactly what it was Chadwick was out to achieve.

Was he out to get her? Was he after Kate's job? Did he want to shut down the unit?

She considered that quite possibly it could be a combination of all of those and maybe other factors she wasn't aware of. One thing was for sure, though, and that was that she was more determined than ever to discover the answers.

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Later that evening Andrea waited anxiously for Kate to join her, eager to know what she had unearthed from her meeting. Kate was late, however, no doubt still working to catch up on the time she'd missed while off base. After kicking her heels impatiently for a while, flicking distractedly through the television channels and leafing aimlessly through a few journals, Andrea decided she might as well check in on the 'real' world to pass the time. She dialled Meg's number, glad to find that she was in. Meg seemed equally happy to hear from her and they chatted for a while before Andrea eventually heard the sound of the chime to the door.

"Hang on a sec, Meg," she said, crossing over to the door with the phone in her hand and opening it.

"Late night visitor?" asked Meg inquisitively.

"Something like that," agreed Andrea seeing Kate on the threshold and gesturing her inside.

Kate could immediately see Andrea was on the phone so crossed wordlessly to sit on the couch and wait for Andrea to finish.

"Have you got a new girlfriend?" came Meg's voice down the line, *"You have, haven't you!"*

"Meg!" countered Andrea warningly.

"Who is it? Is it that woman I saw you with?"

"Ok, I've got to go now," said Andrea quickly, "Take care!"

She hardly waited for Meg's corresponding goodbye before she cut the line. "Sorry about that," she said to Kate, replacing the phone in its cradle.

"No problem," replied Kate, "Meg was it?"

Despite Kate's best attempt at keeping her tone even, Andrea still managed to detect the faint edge to it, especially when passing over her ex-girlfriend's name.

"Not jealous are we?" asked Andrea, amused after the way Kate had ribbed her about Sophie.

Kate was now looking down at an interesting piece of fluff on the sofa next to her. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

Andrea flopped down onto the sofa too, pushing up against the other woman who was resolutely not looking her way. “You are,” she teased Kate, “You’re jealous,” she repeated, worming her fingers across Kate’s stomach and attempting to tickle her.

“All right, all right!” cried Kate, squirming under the touch. “I might be a teeny bit jealous.”

“I’ve told you all about Meg, though,” Andrea reasoned.

“Exactly,” pointed out Kate, “You two were together for over two years.”

“You were paying attention,” noted Andrea, “But believe me it’s ancient history as far as I’m concerned.”

“As far as *you’re* concerned,” said Kate, echoing the words but altering the emphasis, “Remember I’ve met Meg and she did not like me. Considering she doesn’t know me I can only assume that the reason for that was the fact I was with you, as it were.”

“I’m sure she likes you just fine,” Andrea remarked, ignoring the small scoffing noise emanating from Kate as she spoke, “And even if she doesn’t I’m sure you won’t be losing any sleep over it,” added Andrea pragmatically. “Not to mention that there are so much better ways to lose sleep...”

Andrea leant in closer, flicking her tongue over Kate’s earlobe. The other woman managed to resist for all of five seconds before she turned her head, meeting Andrea’s lips with her own. Andrea never ceased to be surprised by how fast the arousal shot through her, even from the simplest of kisses. She slipped her hand up over Kate’s shoulder to tangle in the soft hair at the nape of her neck pulling her closer. Just when Andrea thought she might get lost in the sensuous play of Kate’s tongue across her own, the other woman pulled back.

“Oh, before I forget, I have something for you.”

Kate reached over to the coffee table, handing Andrea the folder she had brought in with her.

“From your friend on the investigation?” queried Andrea, opening it up.

Kate nodded. “It’s not much yet I’m afraid. From what he said it appears the investigation has been hived off into sections. He’s only been looking into what the contents of the warehouse was.”

“Some of these names are awfully familiar,” noted Andrea, reading through the chemical list.

“They are?” asked Kate, leaning over Andrea’s shoulder to look, “They didn’t mean anything to me.”

“I’m just trying to remember where I saw them,” said Andrea, rubbing at her temple.

“You can keep the folder,” offered Kate, “Sometimes these things come to us when we’re not actively thinking about them.”

“I suppose so,” conceded Andrea, though it was really bugging her now as to where she’d read the names before.

“I did find out one other thing of interest,” added Kate.

Andrea stopped reading, turning her eyes to the other woman, alerted by the wary tone. “Oh?”

“Our friend Kaminski’s in charge of the investigation now.”

“What?” cried Andrea incredulously, “And what experience does she have exactly?”

“Don’t ask me. Someone, somewhere must think she’s right for the job.”

“Or maybe not,” noted Andrea cryptically. Seeing Kate eyeing her questioningly she sought to clarify her statement. “If someone didn’t really want the investigation to go anywhere, then what better way to bury it than put someone inexperienced in charge.”

Kate’s lips pursed thoughtfully as she pondered Andrea’s point. “Possibly, but I don’t think that’s the case here. Kaminski may be a lot of things, but she’s not sloppy or lazy.”

“I guess not,” agreed Andrea, sighing and putting down the file. Closing her eyes, she kneaded the muscles of her neck which were suddenly tense. It seemed rather than answers all they had were more questions.

Suddenly her fingers were joined by another set, slowly brushing hers aside and starting to gently massage her aching muscles.

“Mmm, that’s good,” she murmured, leaning back into caress.

Kate eased forward, whispering into Andrea’s ear. “It would be easier without this,” she said huskily, working her fingers under the bottom of Andrea’s shirt.

Andrea slipped it off over her head, shivering for an instant before Kate’s hot hands were on her back again. Kate’s touch was at once sensuous and relaxing, Andrea finding her eyelids drooping as she lay down on the soft cushions of the sofa.

“You know I do have some massage oil, if you’d like some,” Andrea remarked over her shoulder.

“Really? And where might that be?”

Andrea propped herself up to twist round slightly. “In the bedroom.”

Kate smiled seductively, raising a single eyebrow. “I should have guessed.”

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“Wait!”

Andrea ran along the gantry after the mysterious figure, her steps making the familiar clanging on the metal walkway.

Why did they never listen? Why did they never stop?

“I just want to talk to you!”

The gas was still drifting around the warehouse and she thought she had lost her target in the murky swirls, pausing for a moment on the raised area as she peered around. Then suddenly they were there, looming out of the smoke towards her. Only now she wasn't sure she wanted to catch them after all. Now she found herself filled with an irrational urge to turn and flee the way she had come. Yet she stood her ground despite the chilling dread trickling through her.

They were reaching out to her. The fingers inched closer, Andrea's breathing growing ever shallower as her terror increased. The digits were nearly on her face...

Andrea took a sharp breath, and suddenly she was awake.

Andrea's chest heaved as she took a few more deep gulps of air in the darkness, trying to calm her racing heart before she sat up. Her hair was dampened by sweat, and she noted that the sheets were similarly clammy and uncomfortable. By her side, Kate slept on, oblivious to Andrea's nightmare. Andrea watched her sleeping in the half-light, seeing how her breath tickled at a few loose strands of auburn hair that had flopped down across her cheek. Andrea almost chuckled out loud when one of the hairs flew up and then landed on Kate's nose, causing it to wrinkle in annoyance. Unable to resist the temptation, Andrea reached down and gently brushed it away for the still slumbering woman.

Knowing that sleep would be elusive any time soon, Andrea quietly slipped out of the bed, pulled on her robe and made her way out into the lounge area where she flicked on a single lamp. She rubbed tiredly at her eyes in the sudden illumination, sitting down to try and read a journal. Yet it was hard to concentrate on the words. She needed to do something less intellectual and more instinctual to distract herself, she realised. Thinking of instincts she couldn't help recalling being with Kate earlier, when the massage had quickly degenerated into prolonged love-making. However, she wasn't sure how amused Kate would be if Andrea woke her at 4am for a repeat performance just because she couldn't sleep.

Instead she crossed to the bookcase and pulled down her violin case from on top of it. Making sure the door to the bedroom was closed, she started to play a quiet melody as she walked round the room. As she allowed herself to drift along with the music, she finally started to feel calmer, not thinking about anything bar the notes of the piece. As she neared the end, she felt almost relaxed enough to return to bed, eventually playing the last notes as she reached the window.

A soft clapping noise made her turn back round. Kate was in the doorway to the bedroom, leaning against it and regarding Andrea with sleep-softened eyes and mussed hair. The whole vision was unbelievably gorgeous to Andrea.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” she asked, placing her violin back in its case.

“No,” replied Kate, running her hand through her hair as she sat down on the couch, “I think the empty bed did that. Trouble sleeping again?”

Andrea nodded ruefully, taking up a position next to Kate. The other woman leant back, gesturing Andrea to lie on her. Andrea didn’t need to be invited twice, laying her head in Kate’s lap where the other woman started soothingly stroking her hair. Andrea loved the feel of the fingers gliding through the strands, wondering at how amazing it was she got to experience it. Only a few weeks ago she could only have forlornly dreamed of a moment like this with Kate, and yet now it was a reality.

Andrea was just starting to close her eyes when Kate finally spoke. “Was it the same nightmares?” she pressed gently.

Andrea sighed. “Yes, chasing the mysterious figure in the warehouse.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t such a good idea showing you those papers,” allowed Kate, “Not if it stirs up your memories like this.”

“No, I’m glad you did,” insisted Andrea, “To tell you the truth I still have those nightmares quite frequently, without any prompting.”

“I thought the counselling was helping?”

Andrea was quiet, reluctant to answer the question. Kate’s fingers stopped their stroking for a moment as she wondered at the hesitation.

Andrea glanced guiltily up at her. “I haven’t actually been for a few weeks.”

“Andrea!” cried Kate in exasperation.

“I know, I know!” said Andrea sitting up, “You don’t have to tell me, I’ll start going again, all right?”

“It’s not me who needs to be all right about it – they’re meant to be for your benefit. Is it Dr Shah? Are you two not clicking?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Andrea reassured her, “I just wasn’t...in the mood recently.”

“If that’s all it is?”

“Really, I’ll make an appointment for this week.”

Kate nodded her acceptance of that, relaxing back into the cushions and motioning Andrea down onto her lap once more. This time it didn't take long for Andrea's eyes to drift shut under the other woman's loving caress.

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The Major pinched the bridge of her nose in an effort to stem the tide of her fast-approaching headache, but the gesture couldn't block out the raised voices that flew across the conference room. To her right sat Colonel Parsons, while opposite him sat Anna Kaminski, both of whom were almost shouting across the table at one another. The Major left them to it for a moment, reaching forward to slowly and deliberately pour herself a glass of water from the jug sitting in the centre of the polished table.

She supposed it was fortunate that neither of them had turned up for their unscheduled visit two days previously when she had been on the mainland speaking to her friend on the investigation team. She would have been hard pressed to explain her absence to an inquisitive Parsons and Kaminski, especially since the latter was notoriously suspicious of everything. Finally the Major got tired of their bickering.

"Please!" she said, her voice just loud enough to get them to stop without being aggressive. "Can we just talk about this calmly?"

"That's what some of us were trying to do," Kaminski pointed out

"Colonel," said Kate, swinging to look at the older man, "Perhaps I could have a word with Miss Kaminski on my own?" It was a risky gambit, basically ordering him from the room, since obviously the Colonel was her superior. However, The Major was banking on the fact that he was also her friend and would realise that he had become counter-productive to negotiations at that point.

He eyed her for a moment before dipping his head and leaving the room. The Major waited a few seconds to allow the dust to settle.

"So what is this really about?"

"It's like I outlined before – the government is interested in expanding the role of the Superhuman Research Unit. You should be pleased."

The Major had to hold back her laugh. "Not when you consider what it is you want us to 'expand' into."

"I thought you of all people should be able to appreciate the unit taking a more active military role," commented Kaminski.

"I know this may be hard for you to grasp," said the Major as if talking to a small child, "But though this is a military run operation, a good percentage of the people here are not military personnel. I'm thinking particularly of the superhuman operatives."

“You don’t think they’re up to it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You haven’t trained them well enough?”

The Major could see exactly what game Kaminski was playing and she wasn’t going to go along with it. “You know full well exactly what training they’ve received, unless you’ve not been reading the reports?”

Kaminski’s eyes narrowed at the implied insult.

“However, training and the real thing are something else entirely,” the Major continued. “None of these people have seen any active combat before. Take Harry King for example, he was an IT consultant before he came here for god’s sake, he’s hardly covert operative material.”

“Maybe not,” conceded Kaminski, “Though possibly some of your operatives are more suitable than others.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Andrea Hallstrom? She was a police officer after all, a role which included a fair bit of undercover work I note from her records.”

Kate determinedly maintained an implacable expression, despite the fact that all her blood was rushing to her head. The corresponding thread of fear and anxiety curdling her stomach at the mention of Andrea’s name as part of whatever scheme it was Kaminski was cooking up didn’t help matters either.

“I hope you’re not getting too close to these people,” noted Kaminski.

Kate internally chided herself - how did the woman sense such things? At least Kaminski had no idea just how ‘close’ she and Andrea were.

“I know you share a certain ‘bond’ with them,” remarked Kaminski snidely.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Kate couldn’t help herself rising to the other woman, there was no way she was letting Kaminski railroad her into anything that could put anyone in danger, especially not Andrea.

“We are aware of your background in Whitehall ^[16],” Kaminski outlined succinctly, “I’ve seen the unofficial reports from Iraq.”

Kate tried hard not to let her obvious shock show. She had assumed the Colonel had kept details of her own powers under wraps. She made a mental note to speak to him in person later.

Deciding she really didn't want to be discussing her own situation with Kaminski, Kate turned the conversation back to the main topic.

"Whatever you think of my personal motivations, I should remind you that the superhumans are here completely voluntarily. They're not prisoners, and you certainly can't make them do anything they don't want to."

"And how do you know they don't want to do this? Have you asked them?"

Kate gritted her teeth. "No."

"Then perhaps you should."

Kate had to keep her hands firmly gripped together on top of her trousers under the table. It wasn't so much Kaminski's words that were offensive, as it was the way she delivered them all with an air of unremitting superiority.

"As far as I know, I am still in charge of this base am I not?" questioned Kate.

"Yes..."

"In which case," Kate quickly continued, "Until such time as I receive a direct order telling me otherwise, I'll continue to run it as I see fit."

Kaminski pursed her lips into a fine line. "Fine, I shall expect to speak to you again soon."

Kate had no doubt she would, fearing this would be nowhere near the end of the trouble she was going to be getting from Miss Kaminski's direction. She escorted the other woman downstairs, wanting to personally make sure she was off the base and not snooping around somewhere. As they stepped from the lift on the ground floor, Kaminski was almost knocked off her feet by someone coming along the corridor.

"Well, well, Miss Kaminski, what an unexpected surprise," noted Andrea, catching the petite woman before she fell.

Kaminski quickly shook off her hand, straightening her jacket in annoyance. "Miss Hallstrom," she acknowledged.

"Since I've literally caught you, there was a matter I'd like to ask you about."

Kate gulped nervously. Andrea wouldn't would she?

Kaminski regarded Andrea curiously. "Oh yes, and what might that be?"

"I've heard you've been put in charge of a certain investigation."

Kate frantically tried to catch Andrea's eye, to indicate that this really wasn't a good time to bring up the investigation. Not to mention the fact that they weren't even supposed to know about it.

Meanwhile Kaminski's eyes swivelled slowly from Andrea to Kate and back again. "And how exactly did you hear about that?"

"I have my sources," replied Andrea evasively, "So it's true then?"

"I'm afraid that is a classified matter that I am not at liberty to discuss," Kaminski informed her, turning to go.

"Wait a minute," cried Andrea, latching onto her arm again to stall her.

Kate could only watch on in stunned amazement as Kaminski rounded on Andrea and the conversation suddenly erupted into a heated debate, all carried out in frantic and irate Swedish. She had no idea what Andrea and the other woman were saying to one another but neither of them looked very happy. She was pretty sure that a number of the words were curses and swearwords from what little she'd heard Andrea speak before. Finally, and without warning, Andrea turned and marched off down the corridor, not deigning to look at Kate as she left.

Kaminski watched her for a moment before turning back to Kate. "If that's the level of discipline you encourage on this base, I can see why you would be uncertain of some of your people."

Kate didn't reply, grimly keeping her mouth shut and resolving to catch up with Andrea as soon as she'd dispatched the annoying Kaminski.

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It didn't take long for Kate to see Kaminski on to her waiting transport, and a quick check of the internal monitoring systems showed her that Andrea was on the first underground level, in the gym. Kate pondered for a moment about the wisdom of pursuing her when it was obvious she was angry, considering it might be better to let Andrea take the edge off her temper before speaking to her. However, she also knew that the Colonel would be expecting her back and that once she got back upstairs she might not be able to get free until later that evening. She wasn't sure she could wait the rest of the day stewing, so in the end punched the down button on the lift controls.

When she entered the gym she could immediately see Andrea, since everyone else present seemed to be giving her a wide berth. Andrea was currently taking out her frustrations on a poor, unsuspecting punchbag, the equipment quivering beneath her furious blows. It was a good job the one she was attacking was specially reinforced or she would most likely have destroyed it.

Kate could see that Andrea had already worked up a sweat, the edge of her vest top displaying the telltale darker hue around the neckline. Her bare arms also glistened from her exertions, and Kate had to take a moment to remind herself why she was there, before she got too distracted by the arousing sight. As if sensing the study, Andrea stopped her blows, catching the bag as it swung back at her.

Kate made her way over, directing Andrea over to the benches in the corner where they could hopefully talk out of earshot of anyone else.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” questioned Kate in a annoyed whisper.

Andrea picked up her towel, dabbing at the sweat on the exposed part of her chest. “I was trying to shock her into a reaction.”

“You managed that all right, but you also dumped us, and possibly Phil, right in it!”

“Someone had to take the initiative,” replied Andrea, the edge to her tone evident too, “I bet you didn’t ask her about it.”

“No, but it was hardly appropriate,” Kate pointed out, “And in case you’d forgotten we’re not actually meant to know she’s in charge of the investigation. Phil took a risk bringing me those papers, but now Kaminski’s going to be wondering if she has a mole in her midst.”

“Maybe it’ll be good to keep her on her toes!”

Suddenly Andrea swept out through the nearest door into the changing rooms. Kate quickly followed, taking a moment to gauge that they were alone, relieved that they were no longer airing their difference of opinion in public. Despite their conversation being hushed in the corner, she had spotted the inquisitive looks back out in the gym.

Andrea was pacing back and forth across the tiled floor, flicking her towel angrily by her side.

“What’s really going on here?” asked Kate, watching her go back and forth.

Andrea stopped abruptly. “I’m just so...frustrated!” she tried to explain, running her hand through her damp blond hair, “It’s been four months since the accident and I’m still no nearer finding out what happened or who was responsible. It’s driving me mad! Then I bumped into Kaminski and it seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. I know it was probably stupid bringing up the investigation, but she just seems to have this knack of bringing out the worst in me.”

“I did notice,” agreed Kate, “What exactly were those things you were calling her?”

“You don’t want to know!”

Andrea sighed and sat down heavily on the bench, putting her head in her hands. Kate slowly lowered herself onto the seat next to her, placing a calming hand on the younger woman’s arm and stroking the hot skin softly a couple of times.

“If it makes you feel any better she has the same effect on me,” she said reassuringly, “I’ve just had to sit through a couple of hours of her outlining her wonderful plans for the base. I don’t have time to go into them now, but I finally managed to impress on her that I was in charge here and wasn’t going to take any of her enforced changes lying down.”

Andrea's head swung up. "And then I came up and made you look an arse?"

Kate knew she didn't need to answer that.

"I'm sorry, I made a bit of pig's ear of it all round didn't I?" said Andrea ruefully.

"Yes you did, but we'll sort it out," Kate insisted. "At least she doesn't know *what* we know, unless you mentioned that in your Swedish diatribe?"

"No, fortunately not," said Andrea with some relief.

"Then all she can do is speculate at the moment," insisted Kate. "Anyway, I have to get back upstairs, the Colonel will be starting to wonder where I am."

Kate went to rise from the seat, but her hand was captured quickly by Andrea who pulled her back down and then proceeded to surprise Kate by kissing her. Kate's lips yielded to the sensuous touch, her hands subconsciously slipping around Andrea's waist. Only after a moment did she recall where they were.

"Andrea!" she cried, glancing anxiously around the changing room, "Anyone could have walked in and seen us!"

"But they didn't did they? Don't say it didn't give you at least a little thrill kissing out here in 'public'"

Kate made some disapproving noises, but she had to admit Andrea had a point. "Maybe," she allowed, "But I'd still rather we kept it behind closed doors."

"I'll see you behind yours later then?"

Kate smiled as she got up to go. "It's a date."

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A couple of days later, Andrea found herself walking along one of the base corridors, glancing at her silent escort. The soldier striding next to her didn't return her look, keeping his eyes trained forwards on the plain walls. Andrea wasn't entirely sure why she had been summoned the way she had – normally she would get a call over the comm system if anyone needed her. However, that day the soldier had turned up in the training room and requested her presence upstairs. The other superhumans had shot her inquisitive looks, but she had been as bemused as them as to the reason.

Her attempts to engage the private in conversation had proved fruitless, with the man maintaining that she should just 'follow me, ma'am'. She didn't even know who it was she was going to meet and when he finally stopped in front of some doors and indicated she should enter, she pushed them open curiously.

He had brought her to one of the large conference rooms, usually used by Kate when she had official visitors. The room was empty now, all the chairs at the large, rectangular table unoccupied. Andrea wandered around the room, noting the impressive view of a fine summer's day out the window. Running her hands over the backs of the chairs, she wondered which one Kate normally sat at, determining it was probably the one at the head of the table. Andrea lowered herself into it, sliding her hands out across the smooth surface of the table, imagining the other woman being there, commanding the attention of assorted dignitaries.

When the door suddenly opened, Andrea shot out of the seat; it somehow seemed inappropriate to be in Kate's place. Only it wasn't Kate at the door, she quickly realised, but rather someone she was much less happy to see. The diminutive form of Anna Kaminski crossed towards her, the woman holding a briefcase and carrying a stack of papers. As usual she was immaculately turned out, not a single crease or piece of fluff evident on her grey suit. She placed her case down at the head of the table, taking up the seat Andrea had been in moments before.

"Sit down, Miss Hallstrom," she instructed

Andrea stared at her a moment, annoyed the other woman had chosen that particular seat. She waited until Kaminski registered the disapproving look before sitting in one of the chairs along the side of the table.

Andrea glanced around the room. "Is it just us?"

"Yes, you were expecting someone else?"

"Where's Major Jarvis, does she know about this?"

"I thought I would bring this to your attention first," outlined Kaminski, leading Andrea to assume that Kate didn't know the other woman was talking to her in secret, "I wanted to gauge how you felt about undertaking a specific mission for us."

"Us? Who is 'us' exactly?"

"The government of course," replied Kaminski, "This isn't some sinister plot; it is a fully sanctioned mission."

Given that it was Kaminski proposing it, Andrea found that highly doubtful. "Then why didn't you go through the Major if it's all so above board?"

"I'll be honest with you, there are some questions being asked about Major Jarvis' capability to run this base in the appropriate manner."

"Appropriate in your eyes," noted Andrea, starting to feel the first stirrings of trepidation. She supposed the only good thing about the way Kaminski was talking was that she obviously had no idea that she and Kate were involved, despite her rash statements of two days previously.

“The Major was somewhat resistant last time we talked about this,” added Kaminski, “Unwilling to even seek the opinion of her operatives on the matter, so I thought I would come straight to the horse’s mouth as it were.”

“And you really expected to get a positive reaction from me?” asked Andrea in amazement, “After our last encounter?”

“I was hoping you might be professional about this. As I said this mission is at the request of the government, straight from the Secretary of State himself. It wouldn’t look good for the base or those in command if it wasn’t completed satisfactorily.”

Kaminski maintained an even tone the whole time, but it was perfectly obvious what she was hinting at. Either Andrea agreed or it would be another black mark against Kate’s name. Andrea considered that maybe Kaminski wasn’t as oblivious to what was going on as she had first thought, or why else would she use a threat to Kate as a form of coercion. Andrea wondered if Kaminski had been asking questions about them round the base and who might have been answering them. Andrea didn’t say anything, determinedly holding the other woman’s gaze while she waited for her to elaborate further. Kaminski didn’t get the chance though as the door to the room swung open.

“What’s going on in here?”

It was Kate, looking mightily pissed off that Kaminski was using her meeting room for clandestine conversations.

“Major, come in,” said Kaminski, her voice never altering from its calm tone but somehow still managing to ooze obsequious arrogance, “I was just briefing Miss Hallstrom on a mission we have in mind.”

“You were what?” said Kate incredulously, stalking furiously over towards Kaminski. Andrea thought the other woman was really in for it now, judging by the thunderous look on Kate’s face. Andrea merely sat back and watched Kate at her commanding best with interest, since for once she wasn’t the recipient of the other woman’s ire.

“I thought I made it clear last time that I’m still in charge here,” continued Kate, jabbing her hands on her hips as she remained standing, “Everything comes through me first.”

“Only those things don’t get passed on do they?”

Kate looked like she was about to explode at the other woman’s impertinence, a tiny vein on her temple starting to pulsate. Somehow she kept her mouth held tightly shut.

“I didn’t actually get as far as briefing Miss Hallstrom,” remarked Kaminski, “So you’re welcome to sit in and listen, add your input.”

Kate’s eyes narrowed. “You’re too kind,” she said, her voice cold enough to freeze the water on the table.

Kate sat down opposite Andrea, the young woman managing to catch her eye briefly to offer an apologetic look. She hoped Kate didn't think she'd been deliberately going behind her back with Kaminski. An almost imperceptible dip of Kate's head was enough to tell Andrea that she wasn't in trouble herself. It was amazing how adept Andrea had gotten at picking up the tiniest signals.

Oblivious to the silent communication, Kaminski proceeded to outline the specifics of the mission, which basically involved Andrea sneaking into a rebel military base in Kandahar Province in Afghanistan, and retrieving some technology and documents that had supposedly been stolen from the British military. The name of the province rang a bell in Andrea's mind and she suspected it was as a result of hearing about some terrorist activity on the news. The whole thing sounded highly suspicious and Andrea was just about to say as much when Kate beat her to it.

"You have to be joking? You really expect Andrea to go behind enemy lines in some foreign country on her own? Why can't the soldiers already on the ground handle it, or the SAS?"

"Are you saying she's not capable?"

"Well, no..."

Andrea quickly interrupted the two women. "I'll do it."

Kate's eyes shot straight to her in utter astonishment. "Andrea!"

Andrea ignored the look, knowing she would falter from her course if she dared to look Kate's way. "When is this mission?" she asked Kaminski instead.

"It's on Monday," replied the other woman, Andrea able to detect the barest hint of a satisfied smile on the official's face. Andrea wasn't happy to be the one to put it there, but knew there were bigger concerns at stake than her pride. "I'm glad you've seen sense," added Kaminski, "Here are the full briefing papers."

Andrea accepted them, resolutely keeping her eyes cast down as if she was studying them intently. Of course she wasn't, she was merely waiting for Kaminski to leave and preparing herself for what Kate had to say, which she suspected would not be favourable. She didn't have to wait long, as soon as she'd shut the door behind the government official, Kate was storming back over to the table.

"Are you mad? What were you thinking, agreeing to her crackpot mission?"

Andrea looked up slowly, seeing Kate above her, hands placed firmly on her hips in a pose of obvious displeasure. "I was thinking of you," she said simply.

Kate was completely taken aback, blinking in confusion a couple of times. "Sorry?"

"I said I was thinking of you," repeated Andrea, "Before you got here, Kaminski basically intimated that if this mission wasn't accepted that it would reflect badly on the unit, in particular on you."

“I don’t care about that!” cried Kate, “Tell her you’ve changed your mind!”

“You don’t think I can do it?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it? You don’t trust me to do it?”

“No, I’m worried.”

Andrea paused for a moment, having to repeat the word as she digested it.

“Worried?”

“Yes, About you!” exclaimed Kate in exasperation. “I don’t want to send you off on some dangerous mission. You could get hurt. Do you know what it’s like in Afghanistan? I’ve had a few friends stationed there and the situation is highly volatile. There may not be an active war as such, but indiscriminate terrorist activity is rife – rocket attacks, suicide bombs, random shootings.”

“It’s not like I’m going to be hanging around to take in the sights,” Andrea reminded her, “I’ll be fine, I have been trained by the best after all.”

Kate didn’t look in the slightest bit appeased by Andrea’s rather obvious attempt to placate her.

“And I will need some backup,” she continued, “An emergency pickup on standby.”

Kate sighed, her shoulders sagging from where she had been tensely holding them. “I suppose that’s the best I’m going to get,” she said ruefully, finally taking a seat again. “At least if I’m close I can get in to help if necessary.”

“I hope you’re not thinking of using your powers again, Kaminski would love finding out about that.”

“She already knows,” revealed Kate.

“What?” exclaimed Andrea.

“I forgot to say,” Kate answered, rubbing her temple as she leaned forward on the table, “The other day when she was here she let me know she was aware of my ‘background’”

“That *could* mean anything.”

“No, she knows,” stated Kate. “I don’t know how. I presume she has access to high level classified reports including those on what really happened last year in Iraq.”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t used that in some way against you yet.”

“Perhaps she’s waiting for the right time,” proposed Kate, “When she’s accumulated enough evidence to discredit me.”

“We better make sure this mission goes well then.”

“I’m sure it will,” said Kate with a rueful shake of the head. “It’s funny really. When you first came here you were so resistant to anything military, yet here you are practically volunteering for duty. It’s amazing how things have changed.”

Andrea quirked her eyebrow suggestively. “In some rather unexpected ways too,” she noted. “But you’re right when I first came here I couldn’t wait to get away. Finding out I had these weird abilities and then being expected to stay cooped up with a bunch of military nutters...well, it wasn’t my idea of what I wanted to be doing with my life. But I’ve come to realise that this is the hand fate has dealt me and it’s no good moaning about it or wishing it could be different. This is my new life now and there’s no point looking to get back to what I once had. Especially not when there are such good reasons to stay.”

Andrea peered directly at Kate, making it perfectly clear what the most important of those reasons was. The smile that spread across the other woman’s face indicated she hadn’t missed the point.

“So, if it hadn’t turned out that you liked me, would you still have wanted to leave?”

Andrea considered it for a moment. “I don’t know, if it hadn’t turned out that *you* liked *me*, would you have wanted me to stay?”

Kate laughed. “Touche! But I would like to think I would have been professional enough to see past any personal differences to work with you.”

Now it was Andrea’s turn to laugh. “You don’t know how difficult I can be when I set my mind to it. Luckily you didn’t have to find out.”

Kate’s face took on a look of mock horror. “You mean all those things you did when you first got here weren’t you being difficult?”

“Those?” said Andrea with an elaborate scoffing noise, “They were nothing.”

“Deliberately running off the island – twice - starting fights, damaging equipment and getting me caught up in a car crash are nothing?”

“Ah, now the last of those wasn’t my fault,” pointed out Andrea, “I’ve always suspected Thompson had sneaked in a couple of pints at that pub.”

“Andrea!”

“Only kidding!” said Andrea quickly, holding up her hands, “At least we can laugh about it now.”

“Let’s hope we can say the same after this mission,” noted kate, bringing a touch of sobriety back to proceedings.

CHAPTER 20

The click of the handle echoed around the empty room, and Andrea paused for a moment with her hand on it, the faint sound seeming deafening in the silence. The only other noise in the near-darkness was her own breathing, that too seeming to be much louder than normal. Realising it was all just her paranoid imagination she continued on, pulling open the door to the cabinet and retrieving the contents inside. She flicked on a small torch briefly to scan the files and verify that they were what she had come for. Ascertaining they were, she placed them and the torch in the backpack she had with her, slinging it over her shoulders.

Standing up, she pulled back the sleeve on her black jacket to make a quick check of the time. She was still running to schedule. Despite the fact that the mission seemed to be running smoothly and to plan she couldn't help feel uneasy. Or maybe it was *because* it was running so smoothly. It was all too convenient – she'd not encountered any guards, no unexpected alarms had gone off, the documents had been exactly where they were supposed to be. She didn't really know why they had needed her to perform this mission at all, in fact, any regular covert soldier could have done what she was doing. Rather than reassure her, that only led her to become more suspicious and as she left the room she was half-expecting some alarm to suddenly start blaring out, accompanied by flashing red lights and a horde of enemy troops converging on her. Yet the corridor was as empty as when she had come in.

Andrea still crept cautiously back along it to the hatch where she had entered. Her fingers were just on the metal when the loud rat-a-tat of bullets being fired broke the calm. Andrea fell back as they impacted the wall where her hands had been seconds before, sending up a shower of paint and concrete. Not even having time to look at who was firing, Andrea turned and started sprinting down the corridor in the opposite direction, a hail of bullets following her booted feet the whole way. She frantically shot round the corner at the end, skidding to a halt and pressing herself up against the wall. She risked a quick look back around the edge of the wall, almost having her head taken off by a fresh round of shooting.

Ducking back out of sight, she deduced that there had been at least a half-dozen of them, so taking them on directly wasn't an option – she might be able to take out one or two with the element of surprise but then the others would shoot her for sure. Instead Andrea carried on running down the side corridor, breaking radio silence since it seemed the mission was blown out of the water anyway.

“Unit one to support, I'm under fire,” she said, out of breath from running, “I need an alternative route out!”

The answer was muffled slightly by static, but Andrea couldn't fail to detect the anxiety in Kate's voice. *"Hang on, we're working on it now!"*

"Work on it fast...shit!"

Andrea just had time to throw herself to the floor as a rocket shot straight past her head, exploding on the wall behind her.

"Andrea! Andrea! What's going on?"

Andrea uncovered her head, seeing the soldier who had fired reloading his mortar down the corridor ahead of her.

"Andrea!"

"It's all right, I'm here," she quickly reassured the frantic Kate, "Hang on."

Andrea leapt to her feet and into the air, though there wasn't much room in the enclosed space. She shot down the corridor in the soldier's direction. He was still shoving his rocket down the tube, glancing up at her as he fumbled with it. Andrea urged her body on, knowing she had to get to him before he loosed the weapon; she would stand no chance if he hit her directly.

He had it up on his shoulder...his finger was on the trigger...just a few more feet...

Andrea cannoned into him, knocking the weapon from his hand. A swift following blow to the back of his head rendered him unconscious. Only now she could hear the sound of more booted feet hurrying in her direction, from all directions. She urgently surveyed her surroundings, but there was no obvious way out. In which case she would have to make one. At least she now knew that pummeling a wall with her fists wasn't going to break them, after her experience in the fire back on Duransay.

Andrea didn't hold back as she smashed into the nearest wall, barelling straight through it to the room beyond. It was dark inside and she could still hear the approaching troops, knowing she didn't have much time.

"Support? Any word on that way out yet?"

.....

Kate heard Andrea's voice back on the line, heaving a huge sigh of relief. When she had heard the sound of firing and explosions on the communications link her first thought had been to dash to Andrea's rescue. However, she had the slight problem that she wasn't alone in the support helicopter. Most notably Lieutenant Chadwick was with her, studying her every move and word. She hadn't wanted him along at all, but for some reason Miss Kaminski insisted she took her second in command. She wondered if there was some connection between the two of them – was Chadwick spying on her for Kaminski, or was she just being paranoid?

Kate looked over the shoulder of Private Ramis, who was busily studying Andrea's location and options out of the enemy base. Andrea showed up as a small red dot on the schematic, her internal tracking device allowing them to keep tabs on her position.

"All right," Kate said over the radio link, "We have a route for you, you need to..."

Suddenly the harsh sound of more gunfire broke in on the radio. That was followed by the sound of scuffling and grunting before the line went dead.

"Andrea!" Kate cried futilely into her radio. When there was no answer, she immediately swung round to the pilot. "Get us down there now!"

Chadwick was by her side quickly. "Are you sure that's a good idea, our orders are to wait here..."

"Sod our orders!" She looked to the pilot again who appeared to be waiting for the outcome of their discussion. "I said get us down there!"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, turning back to his controls and launching the helicopter into a swift downward course.

Kate had to grab for something to hold onto as the craft lurched violently, Chadwick not managing to do so quickly enough and ending up in a heap on the floor.

"This is as close as I can get us safely," called back the pilot, once they had levelled off near the ground.

"All right, I'll head in on foot from here," Kate said, hurriedly pulling on the rest of her equipment and grabbing her automatic rifle.

"On your own?"

Kate looked sternly at Chadwick as she fastened the straps of her backpack, pulling them tight over her camouflage jacket.

"I only meant I should come with you," Chadwick added, picking up his own weapon.

"You should stay here," she replied, surprised that he was willing to put himself in danger for either her or Andrea's benefit. However, she didn't really want him with her in case she needed to use her powers in some way.

Chadwick merely went over to the door, sliding it open. "I insist," he stated.

Cursing him, but knowing she didn't have time for a debate, Kate grabbed her helmet and hopped out the door and down onto the sand, immediately falling into a crouched position, gun at the ready. A muffled thump behind her indicated Chadwick had done the same.

The sand whipped viciously around, stirred up by the blades of the helicopter and Kate had to squint to see anything through the cloud of debris. What was more distinguishable was the sound of far off gunfire.

The pair of them hurried across the rocky ground in the direction of it, stopping every once in a while and scanning the surroundings to check they hadn't been detected. The terrain was rough but provided them with few possible hiding spots should they be noticed. Finally they reached the top of a ridge, giving them a view of the base down below.

Kate had time to see the plumes of smoke rising up from before a loud whooshing gave her just enough warning to leap out the way of the incoming rocket. The explosion sent up a pall of dust and debris, Kate rolling away back down the slope, surmising someone down below had spied them. Rising to her feet she saw Chadwick who had obviously not been so fortunate. He was still on the ground, looking dazed, his jacket singed from where he had been caught in the blast.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kate could now see the enemy troops on the top of the ridge closing fast on Chadwick.

“Chadwick!” she shouted, running in his direction and starting to lay down some covering fire.

He heard the shout and began desperately groping round for his weapon as bullets pinged down around him from the enemy soldiers. Kate could see there were just too many of them for her to take out with her gun alone, especially when a jeep also drove into view. Throwing her gun to the floor as she ran, she raised her hands instead.

The concussion waves swept up over the sand, knocking all the approaching troops to the ground. Kate prayed she had judged it just right not to kill any of them. The jeep was still coming, though, and she stopped by Chadwick's side, concentrating on sending out a more forceful wave which flipped the vehicle over.

Now the shooting had stopped momentarily she had time to check on Chadwick. However, when she reached down to him he recoiled backwards staring up at her in stunned horror. His mouth opened and closed a few times but no words were forthcoming. Kate latched onto his jacket, dragging him up.

“Chadwick!” snapped Kate trying to break him out of his stupefied trance. He was firmly rooted to the spot, though, staring disbelievingly at her, or more precisely at her hands.

Kate grabbed his arm, trying to haul him away, but he was far too well-built for her desperate tugs to make much of an impression. The deafening boom caught them both off-guard and suddenly Kate found herself flung through the air, landing heavily on her back in the sand with Chadwick's burly form crashing down on top of her. Kate gasped as all the air was driven from her body.

She could only lie there, taking a few ragged breaths, as Chadwick attempted to get off her. Kate's vision was blurred by the sand whipping up off the ground and the sound of bullets ricocheted close by.

Where was this place? She thought dazedly, Afghanistan? Iraq?

It was hard to think with all the noise, the sand in her eyes and clogging at her throat. She rubbed at her head, trying to gather her thoughts, remember what it was she had been doing while the bullets and explosions echoed around.

They had been ambushed by Iraqis...No, that wasn't right...

As she rolled over and rose into a crouching position the tightening in her chest was painful. Looking down at her hands she saw the blood on them, falling back in shock.

Her father...his blood...

The ground started shaking, her teeth banging together as the sound of rumbling grew louder. It stirred her slightly from her daze and she looked to the ridge above their position in time to see a tank cresting it. The barrel of the gun was levelled directly at her and Chadwick, about to blow them to kingdom come, when all of a sudden the tank tipped up on its side. Clearly visible through the swirling sand was a figure all in black pushing it over before it came crashing down the slope. The vehicle tumbled haphazardly over a couple of times before coming to rest on its roof, its gun pointing impotently in the wrong direction.

Then all of a sudden Andrea was there, kneeling down beside Kate.

"You managed to get out?" said Kate, stating the obvious, but too relieved to see the other woman to care. Andrea was caked in sand and dust but otherwise looked fine.

"Yes," replied Andrea, looking anxiously at Kate's head, "Are you all right?"

Kate felt at her temple, seeing the blood on her fingers and realising the source was her own head wound. "Yes, I was a bit confused for a moment, but I'm fine," she reassured Andrea. "Still we ought to get out of here as quick as possible," she suggested, attempting to rise to her feet. Andrea instinctively reached out to help her up, Kate grateful for the aid when her legs wobbled for a moment; the explosion must have rattled her more than she had realised.

"Chadwick," she called to the Lieutenant who was staring dumbly at her again. "Chadwick!" she shouted, though he barely flickered at the raised tone.

"She...she...she has powers," he stammered, talking to Andrea and pointing a shaking finger at Kate.

"Yes, I know," said Andrea, "Now come on," she added trying to pull him along.

"But...but..."

“Oh for god’s sake,” cried Andrea as he still refused to move. Balling her fist, she punched him swiftly across the jaw, laying him out with one blow. Then she picked him up and hefted him easily over her shoulder. “All set?” she said, turning to Kate.

“You could have picked him up without knocking him out,” noted the other woman.

“I could have done,” agreed Andrea unrepentantly.

Kate gave an amused shake of her head, immediately wishing she hadn’t when a jolt of pain stabbed at her forehead. She saw Andrea looking questioningly to her, but forestalled any more questions as to her well-being by taking to the air, Andrea quickly following on.

.....

Kate watched the other occupants of the room filing out at the conclusion of the meeting, still unable to believe what had just happened. She was at Chicksands, the headquarters for the Intelligence Corps, and had fully expected to be in a great deal of trouble when she had been summoned there almost as soon as they’d got back from Afghanistan. She’d barely had time to get her head wound seen to, before she’d been on a helicopter again, this time heading for Bedfordshire.

Her sense of foreboding had only been reinforced when she’d entered the conference room to see Anna Kaminski amongst those present. Also there was Colonel Parsons and several other high-ranking members of the Corps. Kate had actually felt vaguely disturbed as she sat on her own on one side of the table with the others arrayed opposite her, though tried to put that down to her aching head.

It appeared Chadwick hadn’t wasted any time bringing her power usage to the attention of her superiors, most likely thinking they didn’t know about it. The fact that they were already aware of her superhuman nature didn’t make it any the less of a breach of orders that she had used those abilities. Chadwick himself was called in at one point to give his account of what had happened on the mission. Somehow he managed to omit any mention of her actually saving his life in that recounting. Kate could see that Kaminski was making furious notes throughout and was most interested in Chadwick’s testimony.

Afterwards Kate got to give her version of events and the ‘jury’ retired to consider its verdict. Left alone in the room, Kate had got to her feet, wandering distractedly around and inspecting the photos of various squadrons and regiments on the wall. As with all official military photos everyone stood stiffly to attention and she had felt tense just looking at them. The desire to run a finger round her own starched collar, easing it away from her skin for a moment had been too strong to resist.

She had wondered what she would do if the outcome went against her. Would they transfer her, suspend her, possibly even court-martial her? None of those prospects was particularly appealing, especially when she took into account the fact that she would have to leave the base on Duransay and more importantly Andrea. Would Andrea come with her? Would she give up using her powers as she would be

required to do if she did? Kate thought she knew the answer, hoped she knew the answer, yet she couldn't help the small pangs of doubt that had pricked insidiously at the back of her mind. They had only been together for a short time after all.

Before her uncertainties had the chance to escalate further the sound of the door opening had indicated that the disciplinary panel was back. When they proceeded to inform her that, rather than been disciplined, she was actually receiving more responsibility, she'd had to ask for confirmation. A telltale sign that it was indeed the truth was the look of disgust on Kaminski's face as the Colonel told her the wishes of the Unit's overseeing committee. Kate had little doubt that Kaminski would have been opposing what the Colonel had to say the whole way, but it seemed that, luckily for Kate, he still had more influence than she did. At least for now.

The committee had decided that having an "asset" like Kate and not making full use of her was counter-productive, so now she was not only the commander of the base, but she was also the field commander of the superhuman operatives, free to use her powers on the base and on missions as she saw fit. Kate had tried to restrain her elation, thinking it wouldn't do to look too pleased for herself. She hadn't been able to resist a snide look at Kaminski, though, the other woman seething quietly on the end of the table. She couldn't wait to get back to the base and tell Andrea all about it, though it would be interesting seeing how everyone else reacted.

The only potential problem on the horizon was the intimation that now she could lead the superhumans in the field, then they would be able to undertake more military operations like the one they'd just come back from. Kate supposed she would just have to cross that bridge when she came to it – there was no point throwing up obstacles when she didn't need to.

As the members of the panel left, Kate saw that the Colonel had lingered behind, presumably wanting to speak to her in private. He waited for the door to shut behind the last of them before he looked to her, still sitting on the opposite side of the table.

"Well done," said the Colonel, dipping his white haired head.

"I'm sure I have you to thank for my reprieve," noted Kate.

"Not entirely, but you were lucky, Kate, you know that," he said, "It could so easily have gone the other way with your track record. This is definitely your last chance though, even I won't be able to protect you if there are any more...incidents."

"I know," agreed Kate, "It could have backfired on me badly, but as I said to the panel before I can control my powers properly. The Iraq incident was an aberration. A tragic aberration, but still not reflective of my abilities and the power I have over them."

The Colonel nodded his head thoughtfully as she spoke. "I just hope we're not about to have a repeat of that whole Dixon mess," he said solemnly.

Kate was taken aback by the unforeseen turn in the conversation. "I beg your pardon?"

The Colonel stared directly at her. “You and Andrea Hallstrom.”

Kate knew her breathing had shortened, praying that she was showing no outward sign of her shock.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said as evenly as she could manage, though her mouth was suddenly dry.

“Don’t take me for a fool, Kate. There have been things said.”

“By whom?” Though she asked, Kate suspected she knew exactly who had been throwing round accusations, and they weren’t very far from that room.

“That doesn’t matter,” replied the Colonel, “What matters is how this affects you.”

“What I get up to in my own time is private,” Kate informed him with a touch of indignation colouring her tone. The Colonel might be her friend, but she didn’t take kindly to anyone telling her who she could be involved with.

“Only when it doesn’t affect your command.”

“And this doesn’t,” she stated, “I *can* keep my personal and professional life separate.”

“Really?” he questioned, “And that’s why you were so quick to take in the backup chopper on that mission was it? Nothing to do with a personal desire to save Miss Hallstrom?”

Kate exhaled slowly, giving herself time to formulate her answer. “I admit that it was a personal desire,” she said eventually, “The same as it would be for anyone under my command who was in trouble. I’m not in the habit of abandoning my people.” The explanation sounded plausible, though the Colonel’s original take on it had probably been closer to the truth than Kate cared to admit.

The Colonel studied her across the table, his pale eyes boring into her, assessing her answer. “All right. I can’t tell you who you should associate with in your free time,” he said eventually, “I just want you to be careful, discrete.”

“And I will,” Kate insisted, relieved that she seemed to have got away with this one as well. It must be her lucky day, she considered. “I’m the first person to know about the pitfalls after what happened with Dixon.”

“You would think so,” the Colonel concurred, “Though I have heard some other disturbing things, making me think your loyalties aren’t quite as clear cut as they should be.”

“I beg your pardon?” asked Kate, unsure where the Colonel was going with this. Wherever it was she was starting to feel decidedly uneasy. She knew the Colonel well enough to be able to tell when he had something heavy preying on his mind. To

confirm this he got to his feet now, pacing away from her to stare out the window at the trees beyond.

Finally he spun back round, his hands held firmly behind his back. “The warehouse accident,” he said slowly, “Now as far as I can recall, I specifically ordered you to leave it alone, yet now I find you’ve been secretly digging into it.”

Kate gulped nervously, wondering how the Colonel had come by that information and knowing at the same time she could hardly deny it. Instead she kept silent.

“That wouldn’t be for a particular person’s benefit would it?” added the Colonel pointedly.

Kate thought that silence was still her best response, while at the same time maintaining an even, unreadable expression.

The Colonel’s eyes narrowed at her continued reticence. “I don’t like having to repeat myself,” he said in low tones, “Especially not when it’s an order, but I’ll tell you again – leave the investigation alone.”

“Why?”

The Colonel looked vaguely shocked that she had chosen that moment to speak up, and with a challenge at that. “Kate,” he said with obvious warning in his tone.

“Come on, Colonel,” said Kate, looking to reach out to him, “Surely this isn’t your doing. It’s Kaminski isn’t it. What is she up to?”

The Colonel turned back to the window, making Kate think she had been pretty close to the mark with her deduction. His hand came up to stroke thoughtfully across his chin while Kate waited in anticipation – he was close to revealing something interesting, she could feel it.

“What I am about to tell you is classified at the highest level, do you understand?” said the Colonel, still staring away from her. When he did turn his look was as deadly serious as perhaps she had ever seen it. “You are not to disclose this to anyone else,” he said, “And I mean anyone.”

Kate knew exactly who he was talking about – he meant she wasn’t to discuss it with Andrea. Kate merely nodded in reply, thinking she would wait to hear what he had to say before she committed herself verbally.

The Colonel crossed over to take a seat next to Kate, the leather creaking in the otherwise silent room as he lowered himself into it. He fixed his eyes on her and Kate felt the urge to shift in her seat to try and ease some of the tension that was pervading her body.

“Cowley,” began the Colonel, saying the name of the man Andrea’s police team had been pursuing, “As you might have suspected he was the one responsible for the warehouse accident.”

Kate nodded, waiting for him to continue since she didn't think that was what he really had to tell her at all.

"We know who he is," added the Colonel.

Kate looked at him curiously. "You know? Then why didn't you..."

"He's Adam Dixon."

Kate was glad she was sitting at that moment, because otherwise she might have fallen down. "Adam...?" she repeated dumbly, her thoughts and emotions in free fall.

"Yes."

Kate couldn't take it in, her words coming out falteringly, all her normal composure shot to pieces. "But...I thought..."

"That he was in a high security facility?" the Colonel finished for her. "He was meant to be."

"Adam, Adam caused the accident?" repeated Kate in stupefaction, as much for her own benefit as a question for the Colonel. Maybe if she repeated it enough times it would begin to make sense. She had thought he was safely locked away somewhere, that he would never trouble her again, but yet here he was worming his way back into her life.

"Yes he did. As you mentioned he was supposed to be in military prison. Unfortunately he escaped while in transit some nine months ago."

"Nine months?" said Kate incredulously, only capable of parroting the Colonel's words stupidly, unable to believe this was the first she'd heard of it.

"Since then he's been building up his criminal empire under the pseudonym of Cowley, though there is intelligence to suggest that he's part of some wider organisation who have an interest in superhumans. As you know only too well, when at the superhuman research unit, Dixon was providing information to outside parties. We believe he carried on those associations when he escaped."

Kate did know only too well, since Adam had been doing it right under her nose. "For what purpose, and what has this got to do with the accident?" asked Kate, finally managing to find her voice now the initial shock had subsided, to be replaced by the faint stirrings of anger.

"Superficially their interests are the same as us – research and investigation of superhuman powers. Only their driving force is money, rather than anything altruistic. Basically Dixon and his companions will use superhumans and their knowledge of them in any way they can, but in order to do that they need

superhumans. He's hardly going to use himself as a guinea pig for any experiments he might want to attempt."

"Experiments?" repeated Kate, not liking the sound of that. She had been aware that such organisations existed, having once warned Andrea about them before, but this was the first time they'd actually gotten close to one.

"Indeed, and not the sort of experiments we carry out at Duransay. I'm thinking more along the lines of the sort of thing you might do to lab rats."

Kate winced at the comparison, especially as she was one of those potential rats. Suddenly a sickening thought hit her, Kate hardly daring to voice it out loud. "The warehouse, that was an experiment?"

The Colonel nodded grimly. "The delivery from eastern Europe that the police were investigating was actually constituent parts for a gas Dixon was developing. We believe this gas was designed to be fatal to humans but leave mutants untouched. The warehouse was his first test of that gas."

Kate could only stare back at him, too horrified to say anything at all.

"So you can see why it's more important than ever for us to identify and hold onto any superhumans first. And we need to make sure security at the base is tighter than ever, though we do have our suspicions that some information is still making its way off."

Kate shook her head, trying to digest everything he was telling her. "How long have you known about this?" she asked, "Why didn't you tell me before?"

The Colonel didn't answer straight away, his eyes flicking to the floor before he regained eye contact.

For a moment Kate wondered at his nervousness, and then it hit her. "You think *I* could be the leak?" she asked in utter consternation.

The Colonel looked uncomfortable at the suggestion. "We did think it a possibility," he tried to explain, "You two were...close."

Kate got to her feet, agitatedly walking across the carpet, pacing the room. Of all people to doubt her, she never thought one of them would be the Colonel. "You don't need to tiptoe round it," she said, her voice now taking on an accusatory edge, "We were lovers and I bitterly regret that now. I was still hurting from the death of my father, and he filled a hole in my life. I guess I let that cloud my judgement, stop me for seeing him for what he was until it was too late. But I certainly don't hold any flame for him now," she insisted, stopping to face the Colonel. "He betrayed me, I'm hardly going to be helping him am I?"

Again the Colonel looked perturbed by the subject matter. Possibly Kate's blunt confessional was too crass for him. Kate didn't really care, though, still smarting from the fact that he could even think she might have anything to do with Dixon.

“Andrea should know about this,” Kate noted, since the Colonel seemed to have gone quiet, “She’s been desperate to find out more about the accident ever since it happened.”

“She’s the last person you should be telling.”

“What?” cried Kate, amazed at his audacity after what he had just accused her of. “You want me to keep it from her? I can’t do that.”

The Colonel got to his feet too, puffing out his chest slightly. “That’s an order, *Major*.”

Kate ignored the unsubtle attempt to intimidate her. “And why shouldn’t she know, why are you covering this up? If you’re worried about the reputation of the Corps or the army or something then I’m sure she can be trusted not to spread it around publicly.”

“This isn’t a debate, Major,” he said, deliberately using her rank again, “I’ve made my decision and you are not to tell anyone about this.”

“But…”

“I said it’s an order,” instructed the Colonel, his voice rising noticeably to cut her off, “Or have you forgotten what those are while you’ve been running the base?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” replied Kate, still staring defiantly up at him. She was on the verge of insubordination, she knew, but she didn’t give a damn.

“Good, because this is just what I feared when I mentioned personal involvements.”

Kate seethed internally at the fact that he would bring it back to that. “It’s not personal,” she stated resentfully, “I would want to tell Andrea if she was any of my operatives, I think she has a right to know.”

“And what is she going to do with that information?” asked the Colonel, “It’s not as if we know Dixon’s whereabouts right now. Most likely she’ll go charging off on some futile crusade to find him and then what? Kill him?”

That dashed cold water in Kate’s face. She had never considered exactly what it was Andrea planned to do when she did find out the truth behind the accident. They had been so busy concentrating on the difficult task of just getting the information she hadn’t pondered the consequences. “I think you might be underestimating her,” Kate said in Andrea’s defence, “She did used to be a detective, don’t forget, maybe she’ll discover something we’ve missed.”

“Perhaps,” allowed the Colonel doubtfully, “But more likely she’ll let her personal feelings regarding this cloud her judgement. You said yourself how desperate she was, and she’s not exactly been known for her calm temper. Not only could she jeopardise our ongoing investigation but also it could be dangerous for her.”

The cold water was now a full of torrent, chilling Kate right to the core. “What do you mean by that?”

“I told you that Dixon needs test subjects,” outlined the Colonel, “Think how happy he would be if Andrea blundered straight into his hands.”

Kate didn’t even *want* to think of it, not if what had happened in the warehouse was any indication of the sort of thing Adam was willing to stoop to. She had seen the pictures of those police officers, their faces contorted in death masks of agony.

“All right,” she finally conceded, “I won’t say anything to her for now, but only because I don’t want to place her in danger, not because I agree with any of your other reasons.”

“Your objection is noted.”

“And I want to know as soon as you find out any new information,” Kate quickly added.

The Colonel eyed her with a mixture of annoyance and anger. “I didn’t realise you’d suddenly acquired some extra pips or crowns on that rank slide?”

“I haven’t, but at the same time I certainly haven’t *lost* my principles.” She let the scathing remark hang in the air for a moment. “If that’s all?”

“Yes, you’re dismissed, Major.”

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Kate wandered back to her quarters the conversation of the day before with the Colonel still playing over in her mind. It had been hard when she had got back from Chicksands, not telling Andrea what she had discovered about the warehouse accident. All the way back she had pondered over whether to tell her, despite the fact she had told the Colonel she wouldn’t. In the end she had resolved that she would obey his order for now, but she would be keeping close tabs on the investigation from now on. As soon as they uncovered any new information, such as Adam’s actual whereabouts, then she would reassess her position. The Colonel did have a point that at the moment it would do Andrea little good to know Dixon was responsible, beyond winding her up further since she wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.

Having made her decision didn’t make it any easier facing Andrea, especially not when she was so thrilled to learn of Kate’s reprieve in terms of her job and her new role on the base. All the time Andrea was being glad for her, Kate couldn’t help feeling like she was betraying the young woman in some way. She didn’t like the guilty sensation and prayed that the investigation into Dixon progressed quickly.

At least she didn’t have the added burden of having to pretend she didn’t have any powers anymore. First thing that morning she had conducted a briefing of the entire

base staff, informing them of the outcome of the meeting at Chicksands and her new active commanding role. To say the stunned silence that greeted her announcement had been deafening would have been an understatement. For a moment she was worried that she had somehow diminished herself in the eyes of the personnel.

However, afterwards enough people had come up to offer their support to reassure her that it shouldn't be a problem. There were still a few dissenters, most notably amongst Chadwick and his allies, but the Lieutenant didn't really have a leg to stand on now he had been made to look a fool at the hearing.

Once in her quarters she headed straight for the bathroom and turned on the taps of the bath. She still felt like she had sand in all sorts of places she shouldn't after rolling about in it out in Afghanistan and hoped a long hot soak would make her feel more human again. Looking in the mirror, which was quickly steaming up, she peeled off the dressing from her right temple, tentatively touching the broken flesh underneath. It didn't look too bad, she surmised, discarding the old dressing in favour of airing it for a bit.

She had just got her uniform off when the sound of the chime disturbed her. Emitting a curse she grabbed her robe and headed back out into the living area. The harsh words quickly died on her lips when she saw Andrea on the threshold holding a large bunch of red roses and wearing a huge grin. Her other hand was hidden behind her back, while over her shoulder was slung the strap of her violin case.

Kate quickly hauled her inside, making a swift check of the corridor outside before closing the door.

"It's all right, no one saw me," noted Andrea.

Kate looked quizzically at the roses and then up to Andrea's face.

"Ah, yes, these are for you," said Andrea, as if she had forgotten she was holding them, "Happy birthday."

Kate merely looked stupidly at her.

"You forgot your *own* birthday?" Andrea deduced in some amusement.

"I was rather pre-occupied with other things," Kate noted by means of explanation, realising that Andrea was indeed right, it was the 20th of July.

"Lucky you have someone to remind you then."

Andrea offered up the roses again and Kate took them, taking a moment to have a customary sniff of the flowers. She was raising her head to ask where on earth Andrea had got them from, when the younger woman suddenly closed the distance between them and wrapped her now free hand around Kate's waist, pulling her close. Kate just had time to get the flowers out the way before Andrea's lips pressed against her own. Kate sunk into the embrace, closing her eyes at the luscious feel of the lips.

Eventually Andrea released her, Kate having to take a deep breath to compose herself before she spoke. “Happy birthday to me!” she said resoundingly.

Andrea laughed, bringing round her hidden hand which contained a bottle of champagne. “Sorry I couldn’t get you a real present, but my shopping opportunities are somewhat restricted.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Kate, accepting the bottle and heading to the kitchen area to fetch a corkscrew and glasses, “It’s hardly cause for much celebration anyway, being thirty-six.”

“I see what you mean,” agreed Andrea seriously, though Kate could see the obvious amusement behind her eyes.

“Excuse me,” Kate objected indignantly, uncorking the champagne with a loud pop, “But that’s the point where you’re meant to interject with ‘thirty-six isn’t that old’”

“Ok,” said Andrea with a shrug, “Thirty-six isn’t...”

“It’s too late now!” interjected Kate, “Just shut up and drink your champagne!” Kate handed over the slender glass, keeping hold of her own one. “To being old!” she toasted ruefully.

Andrea stalled her before she brought the glass to her lips. “To being old...gorgeous, wonderful, amazing, brilliant and downright sexy!”

Kate smiled at the additions, chinking her glass against Andrea’s and swallowing some of the dry-tasting liquid.

“Actually,” said Andrea, placing her glass down on the kitchen counter, “I did have a sort of home-made present for you.”

“Oh yes?”

“Maybe you should sit down on the sofa?”

“Hmm, this present sounds interesting,” noted Kate, raising an eyebrow suggestively.

“You are incorrigible,” remarked Andrea with a shake of the head, following Kate over but remaining standing as she lowered herself expectantly onto the cushions.

Andrea took the violin case off her shoulder and placed it on the coffee table, drawing out the delicate instrument. After a couple of checks of the strings she brought it up to her chin, nestling it into position. “This is a small something I wrote for you,” she remarked.

Kate raised her eyebrows appreciatively. She knew Andrea could play wonderfully, but had no idea that she actually composed pieces too. As soon as Andrea started she realised that she did that equally as brilliantly as she played. The melody was exquisite, in equal parts haunting and uplifting.

She watched Andrea for a while, her eyes closed as she was consumed by the music, her fingers dancing nimbly over the strings. She looked like she was somewhere else altogether, the only time Kate having seen a similar expression on her face being when Andrea was asleep. Taking her cue from the other woman, Kate closed her eyes to drift along with the lilting music, allowing it to wash over her and filter into her every fibre. She was sad when the final notes echoed out across the room.

Opening her eyes again she could see Andrea waiting anxiously for her verdict. “That was...” Kate couldn’t find the words. Nothing seemed appropriate to convey the swell of emotion it had stirred within her, made all the more poignant by knowing it had been specially written. “...Amazing,” she settled on in the end.

“Really?” asked Andrea finally sitting down too and putting her instrument back in its case.

“Yes, really! And you wrote that for me?”

Andrea actually looked somewhat embarrassed now, glancing down at her hands. “Yes.”

Kate reached out to tilt up the young woman’s chin, finding it rather sweet that even someone like Andrea found it hard to accept a compliment. “Thank you,” she said simply and sincerely before leaning over to tenderly kiss the younger woman.

“Did I catch you in the middle of something?” wondered Andrea, running an absent finger along the neckline of Kate’s robe. Her teasing of it made it gape open even more than it already had been, Kate feeling the faint prickling of arousal as her nakedness underneath became exposed.

“Oh god, yes,” said Kate, remembering what she had been doing prior to Andrea’s arrival, “I ran a bath, it’s probably cold now.”

“Would you like some company to warm it up?”

Kate grinned. “That would be great.”

Kate grabbed her hand and led Andrea through to the bathroom, taking a moment to add some more hot water before they got in. As she leant over the bath to turn the taps, Andrea peered over her shoulder, pressing up against her back, Kate’s bottom melding into Andrea’s groin.

“How comes you get a larger bath than the rest of us?” wondered Andrea, her breath hot by Kate’s ear.

“I am the commander of the base, it should have some perks!”

“I can think of a few others you enjoy too,” noted Andrea, sliding her hands around the front of Kate’s robe and under its folds.

Kate just about managed to fumble the taps off again as Andrea's fingers saught out her breasts under the soft material. Resting her head back on Andrea's shoulder she sighed at the intimate touch, her nipples quickly stiffening despite the steamy heat of the room. She could only stand it so long before she was compelled to swing round and grab Andrea into a fiery kiss.

Unfortunately Andrea didn't seem to have been expecting the sudden movement, and as their lips melded together they overbalanced, both of them flopping into the bath. The water sloshed out over the sides, running across the tiled floor as they thrashed about to right themselves for a moment, Kate eventually giving up and leaning back against the side of the corner bath, laughing to the ceiling. Andrea finally managed to sit up between Kate's legs. Kate bit her lip at the sight of the bedraggled young woman who was still fully clothed and pushing her now soaked hair away from her face. Kate's own robe floated loosely about her body and she eased it off her shoulders, dumping it out of the bath where it made a wet, resounding slap on the floor.

"I suggest you do the same," Kate suggested, "Unless you particularly like taking baths in your clothes?"

Andrea started peeling off her clinging shirt. "You do realised I'm going to have to stay round here until they dry now," she reasoned, "Unless I go for a naked dash back to mine."

Kate considered it, a smile spreading across her face at the image it conjured. "As much as I'd like to see that, I think I can bear the hardship of having you stay over for the night."

"Wow, it must be progress," noted Andrea, now onto her trousers, "Are you sure you want to risk the gossip?"

All the other nights they had spent together had been round at Andrea's quarters, Kate thinking it would be easier to excuse her presence there than vice versa should anyone spot them. However, she was sure one night at hers wouldn't be too problematical.

"I think I can handle it," she said, her voice becoming more husky now Andrea had finally removed all her sodden clothes allowing Kate's eyes to roam over gorgeously naked skin. Kate slinked across the bath, slipping her legs either side of Andrea's slender waist. The water trickled from her fingers as she drew them out of the water and ran them up Andrea's back and on into her hair. Once there she eased the younger woman's head down so she could slide her tongue across Andrea's parted and eager lips.

Andrea's own hands were under the water, presently tracking a sensuous trail up Kate's thighs. Kate groaned loudly as they reached her hips and then swept downwards towards the temptation that lay there. Their bodies slid hotly against one another as Andrea pushed forwards, slipping her fingers inside Kate, the bath water mingling with the juices pumping out over the probing digits.

Kate hungrily kissed Andrea again, her fervour building as she felt the rhythmic caress within her. Her own fingers dug sharply into the young woman's slick shoulders, seeking some purchase to brace against the raging fire threatening to consume her already.

The pants and gasps echoed around the bathroom from both of them as she swirled round in the hot water, locked together in a frenzied dance of lust. Kate's groans grew louder and more intense until suddenly she let out an actual scream of release. She collapsed forwards, her head nestling into Andrea's shoulder for a moment as she let the amazing feelings wash over her.

Eventually she had gathered enough of herself back together to lean back. "Now that is what I call a birthday present," she noted saucily, "Though I believe it's normally customary to thank the gift giver too."

Kate slipped round behind Andrea, her hands sliding round her waist and up over her chest where she gently squeezed both of Andrea's breasts. The soft mounds just poked up out of the water as Kate leant back, Andrea easing back on top of her.

"You must have really liked that gift," noted Andrea raggedly.

"I liked it *a lot*," agreed Kate, swirling her fingers around the erect nipples, pinching them teasingly. The touch illicit a wanton moan from Andrea, stirring a further flush of arousal in Kate herself who was unable to prevent her own corresponding sigh.

Andrea squirmed against her, her back rubbing against Kate's own tender breasts as Kate's right hand trailed back over the smooth abdomen and on under the water, seeking out the sticky warmth below. Andrea juddered anew as Kate flicked on past the hard nodule at the apex of her sex, and on into the soft folds beyond. Even taking into account the bathwater, Kate couldn't help gasping at the wetness between Andrea's legs - first one, then two, then three fingers easily slipping inside the young woman.

Kate had to crane round slightly so she could plunge them right in, twisting them slowly deep within Andrea and garnering a fresh groan of delight with each movement. Andrea gripped tightly onto Kate's knees that lay either side of her as the first throes of orgasm started to ripple through her body. Kate sensed the tightening of the muscles around her fingers, the grip almost vice like by the time Andrea was arching back and crying out Kate's name.

Kate eased her fingers out, wrapping her arms back around Andrea as she residually trembled. Leaning back once more she rested her hand on the bath edge, stroking the soft strands of Andrea's hair where they lay against her chest.

It was only when she suddenly jolted that Kate realised she had almost nodded off in the bath. The dead weight lying atop her chest suggested that Andrea already had. Kate eased herself round slightly so she could look at Andrea's face, sliding away a few damp trails of blond hair. She was feeling the familiar swell of love within her when out of nowhere other thoughts started creeping into her brain. These were much

less pleasant, being reminders of how she was lying to Andrea and keeping secrets from her. Kate frowned at the unwanted intrusion on the otherwise beautiful moment, trying to push them away, but now they had gotten even the slightest of holds she couldn't stop their insidious progress.

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Andrea's eyes flicked open seeing Kate staring down at her with a serious, contemplative look. Her blue-grey eyes weren't focussed on Andrea at all, looking at some faraway point or thought. It seemed to take a moment for Andrea's wakefulness to register and she could have sworn Kate almost jumped when it did.

"What is it?" asked Andrea, wondering at the odd reaction.

"Nothing," Kate said quickly, "You just surprised me."

Andrea studied her for a moment, unconvinced that was all it was. "Busy staring were you?"

"Would I?" said Kate innocently, the playfulness edging back into her tone.

Andrea smiled. "Yes!" she cried, flicking some water at the other woman.

Kate immediately splashed her back which was the cue for a furious round of tit-for-tat until Kate finally caught Andrea's hands. "All right, all right, I may have been staring a little," she conceded, "Now, how about we get out before we turn into a couple of prunes?"

Kate offered her a fluffy pale blue towel which Andrea gratefully accepted, stepping out of the bath and gingerly making her way across soaked floor, fetching up her dripping clothes as she went.

"How about a drink?" offered Andrea, "Coffee?"

"You read my mind," said Kate with a smile, taking the clothes off her to hang up. Andrea watched her closely for a moment, unsure what had prompted the strange look on Kate's face when she had woken, but supposing whatever it was Kate had dismissed it. Deciding to do the same, Andrea wandered over to the kitchen, Kate eventually reappearing carrying a robe for the young woman.

"You have a spare?" asked Andrea curiously, quirking an eyebrow as she looked at the silky garment.

"I like to be prepared," replied Kate nonchalantly, trying to maintain an even expression as she held it out. Andrea kept her stare sceptical until Kate caved in. "Oh all right," she conceded, "I brought it for you, just in case...well...you know..."

Andrea chuckled at Kate's disassembling, thinking it cutely peculiar in the normally self-assured woman. "In that case I best put it on," she said, dropping her towel and extending her hand to take it.

Kate suddenly seemed reluctant to hand it over, her mouth gaping ever so slightly as she stared at nearly six feet of naked flesh exposed to her. "Actually I'm not sure it's your colour," she noted thoughtfully after a moment.

Andrea sighed and gave up trying to take it, folding her arms across her bare breasts in a show of exasperation instead. She just about resisted the urge to tap her foot as she waited. "I'm not sure I can make your coffee nude," she mulled, "It's a bit dangerous mixing naked flesh and hot water."

Kate quickly thrust the robe back at Andrea. "Oo, you know a woman's weak point."

"More than one of them," agreed Andrea with a quick raise of the eyebrows as she pulled the sheer garment on. It rested softly against her skin, Kate giving a quick appreciative stroke of her now covered arm before she went to relax on the sofa and await the drinks.

"You know I still can't believe how well things went at Chicksands," Andrea remarked conversationally from the kitchen, "There weren't any questions asked about the sabotage on the base at all?"

Kate craned her head round. "No, they're happy that we caught the person responsible for that," she replied, "Unless you're still making out it was Chadwick who masterminded it after all?"

Carrying the mugs over, Andrea remembered that she hadn't mentioned the incident with Chadwick and the projectiles on the beach. Unfortunately, when she had gone back to the launchers both he and the projectiles were gone, so she had no sort of evidence. It occurred to her that he might still have them, or possibly other interesting evidence in his possession. Chadwick was just the sort to foolishly hang onto such things as a memento. If she could get a look around in his quarters then maybe she could bring something concrete to Kate rather than her continued speculations.

"He's not exactly my favourite person either at the moment," continued Kate while Andrea deliberated, "But I don't think he would stoop to sabotage."

"We'll see," noted Andrea, "If he is the sort then now is just the sort of time that he might do something. Snitching on you lost him a fair bit of respect in the eyes of the other soldiers, and it didn't do him any good either. I'm sure that has to be galling for him. I bet he was rubbing his hands in glee, thinking he was going to get your job, whereas instead your position's stronger than ever."

"Well, I wouldn't exactly put it like that," Kate said to temper her words, "I do still have my somewhat colourful track record to live down. The Colonel intimated that I was lucky this time, and that I might not be quite so lucky next time."

“I don’t suppose you had the chance to do any other digging while you were there then?”

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Kate shifted uncomfortably as Andrea asked her question, all her doubts and fears from when she had been watching Andrea in the bath tumbling back in on her.

“No, the opportunity didn’t really present itself.” It wasn’t a direct lie – she hadn’t had to do any digging after all, the Colonel had come flat out and told her about it. That small consolation didn’t really make her feel any better about the deception.

“Oh well, I guess they’ll be more chances. Especially now we have that informant and our lead.”

“I don’t know,” said Kate, trying desperately to think of a way to curb Andrea’s enthusiasm or at least get off the subject. The degree of awkwardness she felt whenever Andrea brought it up was intense. “We’ll have to see how things go. Give it a bit of time for the dust to settle and then hopefully we can start probing again.”

Andrea looked unconvinced. “If you think that’s best?”

Kate could hardly believe that Andrea was leaving it up to her, feeling awful about using that to her advantage. “I do.” The sense of guilt within her was painful.

CHAPTER 21

Andrea snuck along the second floor corridor keeping her eyes peeled for anyone else that was up there that afternoon. Of course she knew it was more likely that she would be spotted by one of the soldiers in the monitoring room than someone in person, hoping they would think nothing of her being there if they did. It felt faintly wrong to be contemplating what she was, but even as a police officer she'd been required to do a few things that weren't quite above board, as long as she got the right result in the end. Even Inspector MacKenzie had known that and even indulged in a few nefarious activities himself if it meant the right villain ended up behind bars. And that was Andrea's aim today – to get the right result.

She'd had enough of Chadwick thinking he could get away with his attempts to sabotage the base, especially after his actions when they'd got back from Afghanistan. The way he was so willing to try and land Kate in trouble smacked of cowardice, even more shameful considering she had saved his life.

Of course Chadwick hadn't been successful in this instance, he being the one who came out of the whole incident looking an idiot while Kate's reputation was intact. Though that pleased Andrea, she also recognised it could make Chadwick even more dangerous. He could turn to more of his underhand tactics given that his overt ones had failed.

Therefore, Andrea had resolved it was time for her to be more proactive too. Having thought of the idea a couple of days before, she had been unable to resist the temptation to come and have a snoop round Chadwick's quarters. Maybe she couldn't do anything in terms of investigating the warehouse accident for the time being, but this was something she did have the power to affect.

Before making her way to his quarters, Andrea had made sure the Lieutenant was otherwise occupied, picking the afternoon for her clandestine task since most other people would also be busy with their duties and less likely to spot her breaking in. It didn't take much to open the lock, using a technique Tom had demonstrated to her. The Lieutenant's quarters followed the same basic layout as all the others she had seen on the base, though she noted that Chadwick had even fewer personal touches to his living space than she herself did. Andrea carefully started poking through the drawers and cupboards, making sure she left everything as it had been before she touched it.

Carrying out the search was a strange reminder of her former police life back in London. However, where once it would have made her hanker to return there, now it just served as a piece of nostalgia for a time that was gone. She was halfway round the room when she came to the desk, sliding out each of the drawers in turn. A quick rifle through their contents didn't yield anything of particular interest, apart from a stash of pornographic magazines in the bottom drawer. She was about to continue on

with the other rooms when something made her stop. Sliding out the top drawer again she pulled it right the way off its runners, putting it down atop the desk.

Andrea knelt down to look into the gap left by it, immediately seeing something that shouldn't be there. She stuck her hand under the desk, searching out the corners of the tape that held the object in place. Once she had removed it and taken it out of its casing she didn't immediately recognise it. It was only as she wracked her brains trying to place where she had seen it before that realisation dawned and along with it a swelling sense of triumph. That was quickly pricked by the sound of the door being opened. Andrea shot back to her feet, squaring up to the astonished looking Chadwick.

“What the hell are you doing in my quarters?” he demanded angrily, striding towards her.

Andrea held up the circuit board in her hand. “Finding very interesting pieces of equipment,” she declared.

Chadwick instantly stopped in his tracks, the paleness coming over his face further confirming Andrea's initial suspicions as to the source of the object in her hands.

“This is what I think it is, isn't it?” she carried on confidently, already knowing full well the answer to her question.

“That's breaking and entering,” Chadwick attempted, avoiding the question, though his nervousness was evident in his tone.

“I'm sure no one's going to be too bothered how I got this, not when they realise what it is.”

Chadwick appeared at a loss for words for once, his eyes shifting uneasily around the room. Andrea knew she had him bang to rights. The object she had found was the part of Doc's medical equipment that Patterson had supposedly tampered with, causing the accident when Andrea herself was injured. The one in her hand was obviously the original as opposed to whatever it was they'd found in Patterson's possession. Even with the circuit board it might have been a bit difficult proving anything, if it weren't for Chadwick's obvious guilty reaction.

“How did you get Patterson to take the rap for you?” pressed Andrea. “Did you pay him off, threaten him, or did you just set him up?”

Chadwick remained silent, his eyes still searching the room as if looking for something.

“Fine, keep quiet if you want,” continued Andrea, “I'm off to tell the Major and then you can speak to her.”

“Wait!” said Chadwick suddenly as she was halfway to the door, “Can't we talk about this?”

Andrea paused, wondering what he was playing at. He had perched himself on the edge of his desk now in what she supposed was meant to be a non-threatening pose, his hands behind his back.

“Now you want to talk? Face it, Chadwick, you’re finished when the Major hears about this,” she remarked scathingly.

“You don’t have any proper evidence, that doesn’t prove anything.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” allowed Andrea, “But who do you really think the Major’s going to believe out of the two of us? I’m sure when we start digging some more we’ll find all the evidence we need.”

Suddenly Chadwick was up off the desk, getting imposingly close to Andrea, his dark eyes narrowing menacingly. Andrea made sure she kept her left arm and her power regulator away from him.

“Running to your girlfriend are you?” he remarked with a sneer, “Using your perverted influence over her to get me in trouble.”

“You got yourself in trouble, Chadwick,” stated Andrea, bristling at his disparaging tones, “You’re the one that’s been sabotaging things, not me! Why did you do it? What did you hope to gain?”

“My rightful place!”

Andrea looked at him in confusion. “What?”

“I should be running this base,” he declared emphatically, “I used to be a Major too, you know. I only got demoted because of some minor indiscretion. But I’m far more qualified than Major Jarvis to run this place. She only got the job because she’s Parson’s pet. Oh, and not forgetting the fact that it turns out she’s also a closet mutie freak!”

That was more than enough for Andrea. “You’re a wanker, Chadwick,” she said turning to go, “A soon to be in jail wanker.”

Chadwick’s hand darted out, grabbing onto her right arm to try and stall her.

“Get your hands off me!” she said angrily shaking it off.

She only just caught sight of his other hand heading towards her, realising at the last moment that his latching onto her had been a diversion tactic. The scratch on her neck was barely perceptible. Andrea’s hand shot up to where she had felt the tiny nick, bringing it away to look for evidence of damage.

“What was that” she demanded, rounding on Chadwick who had taken a couple of wary steps back towards his kitchen.

Andrea started towards him. “I said what…”

The wave of nausea was sudden and intense. Andrea stumbled, having to grab quickly for the kitchen counter to stop herself falling. Her head was swimming, the room spinning in a dizzying haze.

“What the fuck?” she managed, glancing to Chadwick, trying to focus on his face which was blurring worryingly before her eyes. She could just make out that he was sneering back at her.

Slowly he brought up a small needle. “Just a little something to counter those powers of yours,” he explained, “I hear it has some rather unpleasant side effects too.”

Unpleasant was putting it mildly, thought Andrea. She felt like the contents of her stomach was about to take an express route out via her mouth any second, while her legs didn't seem to be co-operating in the moving stakes at all, trembling weakly below her. Lucky for her Chadwick was standing foolishly close. She lunged for him, intending to punch his smug face, only he easily caught her right fist in his own.

Andrea stared in stupefaction as she actually felt the pain of his tight grip – it seemed her powers really had deserted her. Undeterred she tried the other fist, but he let go of her right hand and grabbed her flailing left arm. Jamming it roughly behind her back, Chadwick swung her round and smashed her head straight into one of the kitchen cupboards.

The pain flared instantly in Andrea's temple, a cry escaping her lips. As Chadwick released her she staggered unsteadily away, bumping into the counter top and sending the plates on it flying. The noise as they tumbled to the tiles was a discordant crashing in her brain, causing her to wince at its harshness. She continued stumbling away, trying to distance herself from Chadwick, feeling the warm trickling that was now starting down her left cheek. She reached up, seeing her hand coming away coated in red when she wiped ineffectually at it.

My communicator, she thought dazedly, Call for help.

She fumbled for it, but she was finding it difficult to think or focus now, the combination of whatever drug Chadwick had given her and the blow to the head clouding her thoughts.

“Uh-uh,” cried Chadwick, snatching it from her hand just as she'd finally got hold of it, “We don't want any more uninvited guests.”

“Give it back,” demanded Andrea, alarmed when her voice came out in a mumbling slur. It was almost like she was drunk.

She tried to reach for the communicator, but it was hopeless, she could barely move her arms let alone control the direction they were heading. Suddenly more pain shot through her jaw, Andrea dazedly registering that Chadwick had back-handed her across the face. She hadn't even seen the blow coming. Her legs finally gave out, sending her tumbling to the floor. There was a wet, metal taste from the blood in her mouth as she crouched on the floor, trying desperately to gather herself.

She had to fight back, do something! And quickly, before she was consumed by the drug or Chadwick killed her.

Another movement out of the corner of her eye only just forewarned her before Chadwick's boot cracked forcefully into her ribs. Andrea let out a gasping cry at the darting pain, flopping listlessly to the carpeted floor. It was getting harder and harder to concentrate, her surroundings seeming to fade into a confusing jumble. Then Chadwick was on her, pushing down on her chest as she lay on her back, pinning her arms to the floor. She tried to struggle but he was far too strong given her weakened state.

"You always thought you were better than me didn't you?" he snarled, "But who's on top now?"

"Fuck you!" gasped Andrea defiantly, grimly noting the spray of blood she sent over Chadwick's face.

He wiped it slowly and deliberately out of his eyes. "You bloody muties are everywhere. Even the sodding Major's one! And to think I actually fancied her for a while, it makes my skin crawl. And not only are you a mutie freak," he continued, "But you're a fucking dyke too! And you seem to have infected the Major with that too, you make me sick!"

"The feeling's mutual," retorted Andrea, receiving another swift slap across the face for the remark. The stinging pain brought tears to her eyes, but she determinedly held them back.

"I bet you just never had a decent man," noted Chadwick, leaning ever closer, so close that Andrea could smell his sour breath, hot on her face.

She attempted to twist from his grasp again, realising with agonising clarity exactly what his intentions were. It was no good though, the drug having taken its toll on her body. Chadwick grasped both her wrists in one hand, forcing them above her head. His free hand slid slowly across her chest, Andrea having to fight down the urge to recoil in disgust at the unwanted touch – she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of getting any sort of reaction from her. She didn't have much else she could do to fight back, so she would cling onto that one small thing.

"I think it's time I got a taste of what the Major's been getting," said Chadwick, his fingers worming their way lower down her body.

The sound of the door chime made them both jump.

Andrea opened her mouth to call out, but Chadwick quickly jabbed his hand over it. His palm was sweaty as it pressed against her lips, the stale smell wafting up Andrea's nose, causing her to gag in disgust. Still she tried to shout, but her words were muffled, incoherent against his fingers.

The chime sounded again.

Please! begged Andrea internally, *Whoever you are, just open the door!*

Chadwick's eyes remained on it, as the agonising moments stretched on. Eventually, when there was no further chime, he turned back to Andrea.

"Now, where were we?"

Andrea screamed against his hand, a scream of indignation and fury. She desperately tried to wriggle from his grasp once more, but he held her tightly still. The sudden click of the door lock being released caused them both to freeze.

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As she opened the door it took a moment for the scene before her to register fully in Kate's brain. *What the hell was Chadwick doing?*

He was crouched on the floor. No, she realised, he was pinning someone to the floor, his hand over their mouth. There was a lot of blood coming from a gash on the other person's temple, covering most of the left side of their face, matting their blond hair.

Then a pair of pleading blue eyes swung to her.

"Andrea!"

There were no more thoughts for Kate then, just a primal urge to leap to Andrea's aid.

And to hurt Chadwick.

Instinctively she raised her hands as she dashed across the room, sending out a concussion wave that cannoned into the burly lieutenant. He was flung straight off Andrea, spiralling across the floor. But Kate didn't stop there. She kept coming, hitting him with blast after blast, knocking him back across the room until he was pinned to the wall. She was dimly aware of his words begging her to stop, but she ignored them, only able to recall the sight of him atop the battered Andrea, the vision driving her on in an avenging rage.

It was another sound that finally made her lower her hands, a small plaintive cry.

"Kate..."

The simple call sent a dagger of fear into her heart, and Kate hurried back over to where Andrea still lay, knowing the Lieutenant wouldn't be going anywhere in a hurry. Kneeling down, she had to fight hard to control the fresh wave of anger that shot through her when she saw Andrea's bruised and bloodied face. She gently took Andrea in her arms, the other woman seeming incredibly small for once as she cradled her trembling body to her.

"It's all right, I'm here now," said Kate soothingly, stroking Andrea's cheek as softly as she could, frightened of hurting her.

Andrea clung tightly to her, her hands gripping the material on the back of Kate's uniform shirt. Kate merely held Andrea to her, pulling her close, not wanting to ever let go. She didn't say or ask anything, thinking there would be plenty of time for questions later. For now all she wanted to do was keep Andrea close and safe.

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Kate jolted awake in bed, instinctively reaching out to the space next to her only to find that it was empty. As her hand brushed over the sheets she could feel the residual warmth on them. Glancing over to the bedside table, the clock told her it was 4am, and she sighed to herself as she swung her legs out of bed. Grabbing her robe, she padded out into the lounge, finding Andrea in her usual position – standing, staring out the window into the blackness of the night sky.

“Nightmares again?”

Andrea's head nodded minutely, her eyes still fixed on the window.

“The warehouse or Chadwick?” asked Kate gently.

“A bit of both.”

Kate merely nodded in understanding not wanting to rush Andrea. She was willing to go at whatever pace the other woman wanted, just as long as she could be there for her. She wanted Andrea to feel safe with her, able to be vulnerable and not have to worry that Kate felt any the less of her. She resolutely ignored the other thoughts at the back of her mind telling her that she could hardly expect Andrea to trust her when she was still lying to her about the warehouse accident. Now was hardly the time to lay that one on her too, she maintained.

“It's all right, take your time,” said Kate softly. She drew Andrea over to the sofa, sitting her down and maintaining a gentle grip on her hands the whole time.

They sat there in silence for a while, Andrea simply staring distractedly off at the wall. Kate was happy to wait, occasionally stroking her thumb across the back of Andrea's hand to let her know she was there. If she had to she would sit there in silence all night, if that's what Andrea wanted.

She suspected that wouldn't be the case though, since they had already talked about what had happened with Chadwick many times over the past few days, Kate feeling freshly sickened by her subordinate's actions each time Andrea described it. Thankfully he wasn't a danger to anyone at present, being incarcerated in the brig, having spent a couple of days in the medical bay after her attack on him.

He was just lucky she hadn't known about his other actions at the time, or it could have been a lot worse. Andrea had confessed that there had been another incident months ago when Chadwick had assaulted her, and Kate had felt a fresh wave of

hatred towards the man when Andrea outlined his callous disregard of her painful seizure. Kate also felt like a fool considering she had been defending him to Andrea all that time.

Yet however uncomfortable it made her feel, she knew it was good for Andrea to try and express openly her emotions surrounding both incidents. That was hard for Andrea, and as they had talked it quickly became apparent that one of her biggest anxieties concerned her feelings of powerlessness, a subject she came back to now, as she finally spoke.

“I just can’t get over how easily he subdued me,” she began quietly, focussing on their entwined hands. “I wanted to fight back, but I couldn’t do anything, I was helpless.” Andrea’s words were soft, almost mumbled. “I’ve finally gotten used to having these powers, accepted that they were part of me and now...now...I find that when I don’t have them I’m just weak.”

“You’re not weak,” Kate insisted, “Chadwick had drugged you, no one could have done anything to resist that. That drug was specifically designed to temporarily attack your mutants cells – it would have had the same effect on any of us.”

Andrea didn’t look entirely convinced, nervously biting the corner of her lip.

“And anyway,” continued Kate, trying a different tack, “Strength isn’t always about physical strength. Strength comes from within too – strength of character, strength of will, the strength to know and do what’s right. I know you’ve got plenty of those qualities and certainly more than a loser like Chadwick. You just need to find them again.”

Andrea looked mournfully up to her, Kate holding the gaze as she spoke. “You’ll get through this. *We’ll* get through this.”

“I suppose,” agreed Andrea hesitantly. “I think I kind of started to take my powers for granted, perhaps got a bit overconfident. If you hadn’t turned up...”

“But I did,” stated Kate forcefully, “I would never let anyone hurt you if it was in my power to stop them.”

“You certainly stopped Chadwick,” noted Andrea appreciatively.

Kate glanced guiltily away.

“What is it?” asked Andrea, seeing the sudden change in mood.

“It’s nothing,” said Kate dismissively, “We’re meant to be talking about you.”

“I know, but you’re important too, at least to me. I want to know if something’s on your mind too.”

Kate swallowed for a moment, supposing it would probably do Andrea good to hear that she herself had doubts and insecurities. “It was just how I reacted when I saw

Chadwick...on top of you..." she began, trying desperately not to bring the mental image to mind, "...I wanted to kill him. That's not just a figure of speech, I mean I literally wanted to kill him."

"That's understandable," allowed Andrea, seemingly less perturbed by it than Kate, "It's only a natural human reaction to want to defend the ones we love."

"Maybe, but most human's don't have the power to carry that desire out with a mere flick of the hand."

"You're worried about losing control again?" Andrea deduced.

"Yes," admitted Kate. "Since Iraq I've had my powers under such tight rein, but that afternoon...it was scary how easily I could have tipped over the edge."

"But you didn't," Andrea reminded her, now the comforter in the conversation, "When it came down to it, you still had enough control to pull back when you really needed to."

"I'm not sure," said Kate, shaking her head, "If it had just been me and him in the room at that point..."

"Would it make you feel any better to know that it makes me feel good in a way, knowing that you would be willing to do that for me?" asked Andrea. "Not that I'm condoning killing people, though god knows someone like Chadwick deserves it, more like...it's the feelings behind it that count. Am I making any sense?"

Kate nodded solemnly. "I think I understand what you mean. You know you can rely on me. It's all right for you to feel weak and vulnerable sometimes and that you just need me. You don't have to have a reason - I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

Andrea looked plaintively at Kate with wide, tear-rimmed eyes. "Will you? Do you promise?"

Kate reached out to brush her fingers across Andrea's face, gently tracing the small scar that now marred the skin above her left eyebrow, a stark reminder of Chadwick's attack. "I promise," replied Kate, her own eyes suddenly moist.

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Andrea lay on her stomach reading the words of her book, though in fact she had read the same ones at least five times as her mind continued to wander. At least her talk with Kate a couple of days ago had cleared the air to some degree and she was starting to feel better about things, more like her old self. Andrea was determined to put Callum Chadwick behind her and concentrate on her future, safe in the knowledge

that whatever happened Kate was there looking out for her, supporting her. To know she had that stability to fall back should she need it was immensely comforting.

The shadow creeping across Andrea's book led her eyes up from the printed words. She pulled down her sunglasses slightly so she could peer over the top in annoyance at the figure looming over her.

"You're standing in my sun."

Offering her a quick flashing smile, Tom looked unrepentant as he crouched down in the sand to push back the cover of her book. He completely ignored Andrea's continued attempts to give him a withering look.

"You actually like reading this science shit?" he asked, a frown creasing his brow below his own mirrored glasses.

"Yes I do," stated Andrea, closing it for a moment on her towel. "Did you want something?"

"We were wondering if you'd like to come and join our rounders game?" asked the man, his fair hair shining brightly in the rays of the sun.

"No, thank you, I'm happy with my book," replied Andrea, turning back to it.

"Oh, come on, you've been over here on your own all afternoon. No need to be in a sulk just because your girlfriend has to work."

Andrea's eyes shot up, her hand pushing her sunglasses up onto her head so she could give him a stern look.

"What?" he said with a shrug, "There's no one else to hear," he reasoned, gesturing around the wide open spaces of the beach.

Andrea followed the hand, supposing he had a point. The only other people visible along the whole golden stretch were Harry, Bel, Doc and Lister who were engaged in the game Tom was trying to persuade her into. Andrea could just make out the sound of Bel's raised voice floating up the sand on the warm breeze as she disputed some point of the game. Meanwhile the three men were starting to back away as she waved the bat around wildly. All of them were in shorts and t-shirts, enjoying the hot day since they had been given a break from training and duties for once. Unfortunately for Andrea, as Tom had already pointed out, Kate still had work to do so couldn't join them.

"Come on," tried Tom again, "Just for five minutes, before Bel kills them all."

Andrea sighed, rolling over on her towel. "All right!" she said, grabbing her own shorts and slipping them over her bikini bottoms. She pulled on her sandals too, since the sand was scorching but didn't bother with a top, thinking her bikini one was good enough.

“Christ, are you trying to win by giving everyone a coronary?” pondered Tom, looking over at her as they walked across the sand.

Andrea raised her eyebrows, unsure of the reference. What he meant became obvious as he dipped his head to her chest area. “That bikini top doesn’t leave much to the imagination,” he added.

“*You* shouldn’t be looking.”

“Sorry is that privelege reserved only for high-ranking officers?”

Andrea offered him an indignant pout, just as they reached the others in time to catch the tail end of the disagreement, which it appeared Bel had won. They had determined to play in teams of two, with all four of the non-batting players fielding when not batting. Andrea was dispatched out into the field, which consisted of wandering up the beach and watching the ball sail off to other parts of the playing area as Bel and Tom batted. *Well, this was so much more gripping than reading,* Andrea thought, stiffling a yawn. She wondered how long she would be required to participate before she could excuse herself.

She knew she should have found somewhere else to read once the others had turned up on the beach too. Unfortunately the golden snads along the western side of the island made up the only beach on it, the rest of the coastline being bounded by rocks or cliffs. Aside from moving as far up one end as she could, there wasn’t much Andrea could do to get away from them if she wanted to lie on the sand, and she was reluctant to give up her spot since she had been there first.

“Andrea! Your team is in!”

Andrea started, realising she had been daydreaming, sauntering back over to join her teammate, Doc. He went first, managing to be caught straight away by a whooping Harry. Doc handed the bat to her apologetically so she could take up a stance in front of the bowler, Tom. He was eyeing her up like they were playing a test match at Lord’s ^[17] rather a supposedly friendly run around on a beach. As he launched the ball, she couldn’t resist the temptation to put one over him. Swinging with all her might she clubbed the ball back over his head, the small white object disappearing way off into the distance and plopping down somewhere in the sand dunes that stretched out behind the beach.

“Hey!” cried Tom, “No fair! You used your powers!”

“You didn’t say I couldn’t,” said Andrea with a shrug.

“Well, you can bloody use them and go and find it then!”

Andrea rolled her eyes, but took off anyway, flying over to the sand dunes and landing down amongst them. The island was actually quite beautiful in secluded places like this, especially when it wasn’t raining. Not that it was exactly a Caribbean island or anything, mulled Andrea, it was still Scotland after all - the high twenties

being about as warm as it got. The sea certainly wasn't anywhere near as inviting, unless a case of frostbite was your cup of tea.

Andrea noted that she wasn't visible to the others anymore and considered that she could pretend to look for the ball for a bit before returning empty handed. She made a cursory glance amongst the grass and sand, not sure why she was bothering since they couldn't see her anyway.

"Looking for this?"

Andrea spun round in surprise to see Kate standing on the sand behind her, wearing just a plain white vest top and navy shorts, her eyes obscured by a pair of dark glasses as she held out the ball. The top was teasingly see through in the bright light, Andrea able to make out the lines of the bra underneath. As she traced them with her eyes, she found her mind straying to what lay beneath that.

Shaking herself, she forced her eyes up. "I thought you were working?" she remarked, moving to take the ball Kate was offering up.

As her fingers were about to close over it, Kate whipped her hand away, wrapping her other one around Andrea and pulling her close. "I got out early," she said huskily.

Andrea grinned as she looked down at the smaller woman, whose hair caught the sun, a million strands of brilliant red in the rays of light. "Lucky me."

The heat from Kate's lips as they met hers was much more intense than anything falling on Andrea's near-bare back from the sun. Since the incident with Chadwick a little over a week ago, Kate seemed to have been uncertain around her, almost as much as Andrea herself had been out of sorts to begin with. Today was the first time when there didn't seem to be any holding back in the kiss, and Andrea eagerly deepened it, probing lustfully in Kate's mouth with her tongue.

The sound of someone clearing their throat nearby caused them to dart apart.

"I see you found the ball then?" noted Tom. His lips were thin like he was desperately trying to hold back a smile.

"How long have you been perving there?" asked Andrea, able to see Kate looking slightly embarrassed next to her out of the corner of her eye.

"Long enough," he replied cheekily, stumbling down the dune towards them in a cascade of sand. "Do you want me to say you went back up to the base?" he asked Andrea, casting a sideways look at Kate, "That you had an urgent...erm...meeting with the Major," he added suggestively.

"Thank you, Mr Parsons," interjected Kate quickly, "I was just on my way to the beach actually, when I found your ball."

"That's not all you...ow!"

He was stopped by Andrea swiftly punching him in the arm. He rubbed it indignantly as Kate thrust the ball in his hand.

“I presume I can trust you to be discrete,” she said, keeping hold of his hand for a moment, fixing her eyes sternly on him.

“Bloody hell, you two are a pair! Like anyone gives a flying frig what you two are up to!” he cried, “But yes, I won’t say I saw you snogging the face off one another.”

He zipped away at super speed this time before Andrea could lay another blow on him.

“I suppose we ought to go and join them before he starts embellishing his story,” Andrea noted ruefully.

Kate’s half smile suggested she had other ideas. “I’m sure we can wait a couple of minutes”

Andrea’s own smile naturally crept across her face as she slid closer to Kate. “Just a couple?” she queried, taking Kate’s hand and bringing it to her lips.

Kate watched intently as Andrea slipped one of her fingers into her mouth, swirling her tongue around it. “Possibly ten...” conceded Kate, her tone suddenly more ragged.

Andrea closed the final gap between them, leaning to place her lips upon Kate’s hot neck, flicking her tongue slowly up it. “Maybe fifteen...” allowed Kate between gasping breaths.

Andrea continued on her upward path. “Or thirty...” whispered Kate just before Andrea reached her lips, covering them in a passionate kiss.

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The weather five days later couldn’t have been more of a contrast to that glorious day on the beach, the rain lashing down across the island, driven on by a gale force wind whipping in off the Atlantic. Andrea supposed the contrast was typical of the British weather really - it was August but given the weather it was more like the depths of winter. Luckily for her what she had planned didn’t require any trips outside the main complex. In fact, if all went to plan, it wouldn’t involve a trip beyond the confines of Kate’s bedroom.

Utilising the lock-opening trick Tom had taught her again, Andrea snuck into Kate’s quarters, knowing the other woman was busy in her office. She’d come up with her little surprise on a whim, but thought it was another good way to show Kate that she was feeling better. She knew Kate was still concerned about her after what had happened with Chadwick nearly two weeks ago but a successful mission since then had gone a long way to restoring her confidence in her powers and herself. Anyway,

Chadwick was long gone now, dispatched off to military prison in Colchester, so she didn't have to worry that she was ever going to see him again. As Andrea had supposed, once they started investigating his conduct more thoroughly, the evidence against him soon mounted up. It was certainly enough to make sure that, once his prolonged stay in jail was over, he wouldn't be going anywhere near an army base again.

Andrea crept around Kate's quarters, feeling a little like a naughty schoolgirl poking round the headteacher's office. She maintained to herself that she wasn't going to actually root through anything, she would just do what she had come to do and not disturb any of Kate's belongings.

However, as Andrea's eyes drifted over to the antique desk, she spotted the folder Kate kept the notes about her novel in. It lay invitingly on the surface, just waiting for Andrea to go and take a look. Kate was always so cagey about it that the young woman couldn't resist the opportunity now presented to her. What harm would one quick peek do? As if seeking to make her invasion seem more acceptable she quickly opened the folder and closed it again, only catching a few random words off one of the pages. A few more attempts at this gave her at least a vague indication as to what the novel was about.

It appeared Kate was mixing her love of the stars with her own military background by writing about a female starship captain and her trials and tribulations. It all sounded very Star Trek. Thinking it best not to delve further into it, though she was sorely tempted, Andrea re-arranged the folder so it was in the same position as when she came in and made her way over to the bedroom. She laid out the underwear she had brought to change into and was just about to start taking off her clothes when the sound of the main door opening filtered through to her.

Shit!

Andrea let out the silent curse, presuming Kate must be back early. That was highly unusual – she never finished work early. Andrea glanced from the lacy underwear to the t-shirt and jeans she still wore, resigning herself to the fact that she would have to save the surprise for another time. She was about to go out to the other room when Kate's voice rang out. Andrea jumped before realising that Kate was talking on her communicator rather than to her.

“Are we on a secure line?” came another voice, immediately recognisable to Andrea as that of Colonel Parsons. Andrea deduced Kate must be talking to him on screen for her to be able to hear his part of the conversation.

“Yes, I'm in my quarters,” came Kate's response.

Andrea knew she should declare herself, yet something held her back and she pressed up against the bedroom wall, listening in. It felt faintly seedy to be eavesdropping like she was, but Andrea shook the sensation away as they continued.

“I'm afraid I've got some bad news regarding Lieutenant Chadwick,” said the Colonel, “He managed to escape en route to Colchester.”

“What?” cried Kate incredulously, Andrea sharing her disbelief but just holding back her own exclamation. “How the hell did he manage that?”

“We think he had outside help, from Adam Dixon.”

Andrea took a sharp breath, quickly clamping her hand over her mouth and praying Kate hadn't heard it in the other room.

“I might have known those two were connected,” stated Kate ruefully.

Penetrating through Andrea's shock at hearing the name of Kate's former lover, was the slowly dawning realisation that Kate herself didn't seem surprised in the slightest.

“It appears that way,” agreed the Colonel.

Wasn't Dixon supposed to be off in prison somewhere? Wondered Andrea. So why were Kate and the Colonel talking about him?

Kate's voice was next to ring out. “Talking of which is there any news on him?”

Andrea's confusion was deepening. *What exactly did Kate know about Dixon? She'd certainly never said anything before about having any residual connection to him.*

“No,” replied the Colonel, “There's nothing further from the warehouse investigation as far as I know.”

Andrea felt the sickness sweeping through her at the mention of the warehouse. *What did Dixon and Chadwick have to do with the warehouse accident or Cowley? And more importantly why hadn't Kate mentioned any of this?* Andrea's heart was thumping wildly in her chest now, the young woman sure its pounding must be audible out in the living area.

“Are you sure Kaminski's not hiding anything?” Kate asked the Colonel.

“I don't think so, though who knows with that woman, she's harder to read than a doctor's prescription. I presume you haven't told anyone about this?”

“No, I haven't,” replied Kate quickly.

“Not even Miss Hallstrom?”

Andrea's heart leapt again at the mention of her own name. She was holding her breath now as she leant against the wall.

“No.”

“Good. Maybe we can still keep a lid on it somehow. No one is to know about that accident and certainly not that Adam Dixon and Cowley are one in the same.”

The Colonel's final words caused a painful stabbing sensation in Andrea's chest, her hand reflexively shooting up to clutch it. Her thoughts raced uncontrollably and she actually felt dizzy for a moment having to lean heavily on the wall to hold herself up.

Cowley was Dixon, Dixon was Cowley.

Dixon had killed her friends.

And Kate knew about all of it.

Andrea stumbled out into the other room in a daze, unable to comprehend the depth of the betrayal. She had trusted Kate, believed in her and now it seemed that was all a pretence. She had given Kate everything, given her heart completely, but now it appeared Kate had been holding back the whole time, keeping secrets and who knew what else from her. If she hadn't have heard it with her own ears she would never have believed it, but unfortunately it was all too real, as was the intense, gnawing pain in her heart.

As Andrea wandered into the room, Kate sensed her presence immediately, looking up in shock from her desk. "Andrea?"

Andrea couldn't say anything back, holding Kate's gaze in a look of numb, questioning despair. '*How could you do it?*' was the silent question Andrea was unable to force past her trembling lips. Confusion was obvious in Kate's blue eyes for a moment before realisation dawned, realisation that Andrea had heard every word of her conversation.

"Oh my god, Andrea..." she began, swiftly pushing back her seat to stand up.

The bang of the chair on the wall snapped Andrea her out of her daze. Suddenly she was assaulted by a barrage of painful and conflicting thoughts and emotions, all vying for attention - anger warring with self pity battling with gut-wrenching heartache. Andrea was unable to control the deluge, her mind reeling as she staggered backwards, away from Kate. She couldn't handle this, it was too much.

"Please..." came Kate's voice.

Kate was coming forwards. Andrea had to get out.

"Let me explain..."

"No!"

Andrea darted straight for the window, crashing through the glass, not caring about the damage, only wanting to get out as fast as she could. She flew straight up, high up over the island into the low clouds, before turning for the mainland. The rain lashed at her face as she soared up through the leaden grey skies. She ignored the pain of the ice-cold droplets buffeting her skin as she ploughed on and on, not really knowing where she was going, just that she needed to go, to fly free, free from all the hurt. She

just wanted to forget, but even now, as she pushed herself to the physical limit, images crowded in on her mind forcing their way into her thoughts.

Suddenly she took a ninety-degree turn, heading straight down towards the ground instead. As she flew from the base of the storm clouds the peaks of the mountains loomed large on the horizon against the fading light of the day. She continued hurtling downwards, towards the deep murky waters of the loch below.

Faster...faster...faster...

The wind was whistling past as she plummeted down, raw against her face, bringing tears to her pale blue eyes.

Faster...faster...faster...

Just as she was about to crash straight into the choppy waves she dramatically pulled up, skimming her fingers in the icy waters as she flew parallel to the surface. As she got to the edge of the water she flew up the steep rock face and landed on an outcrop overlooking the dark, foreboding loch.

The wind whipped harshly across the exposed ground, sending damp blond strands of hair into Andrea's face as the rain continued to hammer down around her. She bent over and rested her hands on her knees, breathing heavily. Her clothes were soaked already, her thin t-shirt clinging tight to her body, her jeans heavy against her legs.

As she hunched over, still the thoughts were there, unwilling to give her any peace. Andrea balled her hands into fists digging her nails into the palms, wanting the pain that invoked. Spinning round she drove her fist into the nearest boulder. She looked on in grim satisfaction as the rock shattered into a million pieces under the force of her blow, the fragments being scattered out across the loch by the fierce wind. She looked around at the other boulders on the outcrop as the rain cascaded down her face, across her high cheekbones to drip from her chin. A wicked smile curved the corners of her mouth as she sized them up and approached the nearest one.

“Fuck you, Dixon!”

The boulder flew apart as she cracked it with a fearsome blow.

“Fuck you, Chadwick!”

Another boulder was pummelled into a pile of rubble, littered haphazardly across the ground. She slowly walked up to the last boulder with a menacing look on her face. This one towered over her and she let all her rage and anger consume her as she set upon it.

“And fuck you...”

Crash!

“...fucking...”

Smack!

“...Kate...”

Crack!

“...fucking...”

Wham!

“...Jarvis!”

The rock finally exploded in a shower of shards under the relentless assault. Spent, Andrea sank to her knees and bowed her head as the rain mercilessly pounded down on her. She took a few shuddering breaths as the anger subsided and gazed down at her hands which now lay limp in her lap, not a mark on them. A deep rumble of thunder echoed round the mountains as the storm continued to rage pitilessly about her. Another closer sound made her swing her head round. Through the driving rain, her eyes were met by the steely blue-grey ones of the main object of her ire.

“So, have you quite finished?”

Andrea leapt to her feet. “What the fuck are you doing here?” she demanded furiously.

“I just wanted to speak to you, explain things...”

“Explain how you lied to me you mean – again!”

“I was trying to protect you...”

“How did you figure that one out?” spat Andrea furiously, “You knew how desperate I was to find out the truth about the accident - all those nightmares, all that uncertainty, all that guilt and anguish! And all the time you knew! You bloody knew and you didn’t tell me?”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Kate tried, hands outstretched in supplication. The torrential rain ran quickly down her fingers to plop on the ground. “I only found out recently and part of me wanted to tell you but I was ordered not to...”

“Oh I see!” jumped in Andrea, “And orders always come first! How could I forget!”

“No, that’s not true...”

“True?” cried Andrea incredulously, “You wouldn’t know the truth if it fell on your head!”

“I was still going to disobey orders for you,” insisted Kate, trying to come closer to Andrea who backed away, “But in the end the Colonel convinced me it was better for you not to know until we knew something more concrete.”

“Beyond who was responsible? How much more fucking concrete do you want?” exclaimed Andrea disbelievingly. She stared angrily at Kate, other irrational, insidious thoughts creeping into her mind prompted by her fury. “I think you just wanted to protect your old flame,” she suggested, “Scared what I might do to him were you?”

Kate shook her head, sending a fresh cascade of raindrops tumbling from her drenched hair. “No, of course not.”

“Still hold a bit of a torch for him do you?” pressed Andrea, allowing her jealousy to build along with all her other negative emotions, “Obviously I’m not ‘man’ enough for you. I guess you just like bastards who treat you badly. Well, I can be nasty too!”

Andrea picked up one of the larger pieces of boulder still left and hurled it straight in Kate’s direction, the other woman just managing to hop out of the way in time before it crashed to the ground behind her.

“Andrea, please, we can sort this out,” tried Kate again, but Andrea already had another piece of heavy rock in her hands.

“You really think so?” challenged Andrea. “Jesus Christ! You were scared that I might betray you like Dixon and in the end it was you who did the same to me.”

She loosed the second rock, again narrowly missing Kate who frantically sidestepped it.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said, full of contrition, “I didn’t like keeping this from you, I didn’t want to keep it from you.”

“Then why did you?”

“I told you, I wanted to get more information first,” Kate said, trying to keep her voice calm, “I was scared how you might react, worried that you’d run off half-cocked. Adam’s a dangerous man...”

“So you took the choice out of my hands and made the decision for me?” Andrea quickly snapped, “You don’t trust me at all do you?”

“I do!”

“Liar!”

Andrea flung another barrage of rocks at Kate who had trouble dodging all of them, tripping over and narrowly avoiding being crushed by the final one, only rolling out the way at the last second.

“I can’t believe anything you say!” shouted Andrea across the mountainside, “God knows what else you’ve been keeping from me under the guise of orders.”

Kate clambered to her feet. “There’s nothing else, I swear,” she said pleadingly.

“Like you swore the last time?” scoffed Andrea, “What was it you said then? ‘No more secrets’. That was just another lie though, wasn’t it?”

“Please, Andrea, can’t we just talk about this sensibly?”

“I don’t want to be fucking sensible about it!” screamed Andrea, her anger coursing unstopably through her now, “What you’ve done isn’t sensible – it hurts! Don’t you understand, it fucking hurts! I trusted you and you taken that trust and ripped it to shreds.”

As she threw another boulder, Kate got her hands up, using her own power to blow the stone apart. Andrea just saw that as a challenge though, each fresh rock she threw having an extra bit of venom in it as Kate vaporised one after the other.

“Andrea…”

Andrea ignored the plea, continuing on with furious intent. She wasn’t thinking now, acting only on pure rage.

“Please…”

Rather than Kate frantically dodging and blasting her rocks, all Andrea saw was someone who had lied to her, hurt her, betrayed her. Someone she wanted to hurt in return. The sound of the crashing boulders echoed round the mountains, the spray of dust from the ones pulverised by Kate heavy in the wet air. Andrea was hurling them so thick and fast now that Kate was having trouble keeping up and deflecting them all. None of that registered in Andrea’s mind, the fury within her surging up to blot out the more painful emotions and any rational thought. All she knew was the need to lash out in anger.

Suddenly a forceful blast cannoned into Andrea’s chest, flinging her back off the precipice and tumbling down into the icy loch below. The sharp cold jolt bit into her, the icy water quickly permeating though her clothes. She thrashed about a couple of times before gaining her bearings and shooting upwards to break the choppy surface.

As soon as she did she came face to face with Kate who was hovering just above, looking anxiously at the water.

“There you are,” she said with obvious relief, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to hit you.”

“Really,” noted Andrea sarcastically, “Or is that another lie?”

“I would never deliberately hurt you,” said Kate in consternation.

“But you have!” cried Andrea desperately, shivering momentarily as the wind bit through her thin and soaked clothes, “Don’t you see, you already have!”

Kate tried to reach out to her across the open space. “Andrea...”

“No!” yelled Andrea, snatching her arm away from the attempted touch.

Andrea immediately darted up into the skies, wanting to just get away from the pain seeing Kate induced. The wind whistled past her face, cold and harsh in a mocking reflection of what the other woman had done to her. There were tears in her eyes, Andrea not knowing if they were from the wind or the fact that her heart was broken.

“Andrea, please, stop!”

Andrea’s head swung round, her blond hair whipping in her eyes as she caught sight of Kate flying after her in close pursuit. The other woman’s trail through the sky was clearly visible as her concussion waves parted the streaming rain in her wake.

“Go away! Leave me alone!” shouted Andrea over the wind. She strained to push herself on faster, her muscles starting to ache from the rapid flow of energy through them.

“I can’t do that!” Kate yelled back, still getting closer despite Andrea’s efforts.

“Why, because you can’t lose another of your operatives?”

“No, because I love you!”

Kate’s heartfelt words fell on deaf ears. “Don’t make me laugh! If you loved me you would never have done this to me!”

Kate had drawn close enough to latch onto Andrea’s arm now in an effort to slow her. The sudden displacement caused Andrea to veer dramatically, the young woman furiously wriggling under the grasp. “Get off!” she screamed, her flight path becoming more and more erratic as she fought to shake the other woman.

Kate stubbornly clung on though, even when they started plummeting directly for the ground.

“Andrea!” she yelled frantically, “We’re going to crash!” She grabbed onto both of Andrea’s arms, trying to wrestle her into a more stable course.

“Then let go!” shot back Andrea.

The ground was zooming up perilously fast now as they spiralled towards it, but Kate remained defiantly holding on. “No!” she yelled, “I’m not letting you go!”

Andrea stared balefully back at the Kate, knowing that an impact at that speed would most likely kill the other woman. Andrea quickly twisted in the air at the last second so she was beneath Kate, Andrea’s body smacking forcefully into the turf as they hit

the ground. Whatever she felt, Andrea's level of fury didn't quite extend to committing murder.

The impact jarred through her body, rattling her thankfully dense bones, the pair of them bouncing up off the ground a couple of times before they skidded along the wet surface of the grassy hillside. They remained locked together as they tumbled over and over in a jumble of limbs before they finally came to a halt, the merciless rain still pounding down on their battered bodies.

Amazingly Andrea was first on her feet, ready to leap straight back into the air. However, something held her back. Despite everything she couldn't help taking a quick glance behind her, pausing when she saw Kate still lying on the ground, breathing raggedly as she hauled herself to her knees in the mud. A part of Andrea wanted to reach down to Kate, help her, but she quickly squashed those thoughts as soon as they surfaced. Instead she concentrated on the numbing sense of betrayal that chilled her to the core.

"Andrea, please, wait..." came Kate's voice, barely audible over the raging wind.

Andrea paused again, fighting hard to keep the compassionate feelings from working their way up again at the sound of Kate's pleading voice.

"Come back with me," begged Kate, "We can find Dixon together. Just don't leave like this."

"Right, you're really going to help me aren't you," said Andrea sceptically, "More likely you want to keep an eye on me, stop me finding out anything I shouldn't, just as you have been." As she thought about it, some of Kate's words and actions over the past few weeks fell into place. "Jesus Christ, no wonder you wanted me to leave the investigation alone, you were scared I was going to find out your part in it."

"No that wasn't it at all..."

"Just save it!" Andrea yelled, cutting her off. She didn't want to hear any of Kate's pathetic excuses. "You promised me that you would be here for me, no matter what," Andrea reminded her bitterly, the pain all encompassing in her heart, "But that was all lies wasn't it. In the end I just came second to the army."

"That's not true," Kate insisted, "Please just come back with me, I can help you..."

"I don't need your help!" screamed Andrea the pain and anguish evident in her breaking voice, "I don't need anything from you! It's over Kate! Do you hear me – over! I never want to see you again!"

Kate looked like Andrea had physically hit her, her face drained of all colour. "You don't mean that. I'm sorry for what I did, but please just give me another chance."

"It's too late!" cried Andrea, "I already gave you another chance and you just fucked me over a second time!"

“You can’t leave like this...”

“Just watch me!”

Andrea was about to spring into the air when something else occurred to her. She turned back to Kate who had finally managed to get to her feet, though she still looked shaken, cradling her left arm close to her body. Seeing Andrea delaying a small hopeful look came across her face but Andrea merely sneered disdainfully back.

“Just so you don’t get any ideas about following me again, I think I have something that belongs to you.”

Gritting her teeth, Andrea dug her fingernails sharply into the flesh of her own right arm. Her skin was clammy and cold, the blood that pumped out of the self-inflicted wound hot in comparison. The pain was intense but Andrea ignored it, actually savouring it in a perverse way. She pushed her fingers deeper, seeking out the small metal object she knew lay beneath the surface of her skin. With a final grunt she ripped it from her arm, flinging it down at Kate’s feet. Kate looked down at the tracker in shock, the rain already starting to wash off the blood from its metal surface. Her eyes slowly came up to Andrea’s in a silent plea, but Andrea’s heart was cold, impervious to the beseeching stare.

“Don’t come after me,” she said in a low, menacing voice.

Then she was off, soaring up into the air, not looking back at Kate who was left staring numbly up at the grey skies.

CHAPTER 22

The taste of the whiskey felt good as it slid down Kate's throat. It burnt ever so slightly as it trickled down before settling warmly in her stomach.

How many was that now? She wondered to herself as she put the glass back down on the small table, quickly pouring another one from the near-empty bottle. She managed to slosh some of it onto the table surface, maintaining to herself that it must have been the rocking motion of the boat that caused it and nothing to do with the fact that she was well on her way to reaching her goal of getting completely off her face.

She'd managed to achieve that aim of each of the previous four nights, so why should today be any different? The drink helped her forget everything. In particular it helped her forget Andrea.

Kate rubbed roughly at her forehead as the other woman leapt painfully into her thoughts. This was why she needed the drink, she told herself, to numb the feelings of despair and loneliness those images evoked. Those feelings had settled deep within her the moment Andrea had taken to the skies, leaving her nursing a sore arm and a broken heart.

Pouring the last drops from the bottle, she stumbled to her feet, banging into the kitchen counter in the enclosed space of the cabin. She loudly cursed the inanimate object, hitting it with her hand for good measure. All that served to do was make her hand sting as well as her hip. Continuing to mutter drunkenly to herself she staggered to the cupboards, retrieving another bottle of whiskey.

She needed another one, since she still had enough wits about her to be able to recall what had happened the past few days. Not only had Andrea left her, but the Colonel's previous assessment of her situation had proved accurate – he couldn't protect her this time. The mess with Andrea was one mistake too far as far as her career was concerned, and she was now on suspension, pending official investigation and possibly court martial.

They could throw the book at her as far as she was concerned, she didn't give a monkey's.

Flopping back onto the seating, she quickly unscrewed the cap and had already poured most of another exceedingly large measure when the sound of footsteps on the deck above stalled her. Her first ridiculous thought was that it was Andrea. This was quickly crushed as the door to the small cabin swung open. Though her eyes were finding it strangely difficult to focus, she could just blarily make out the form of her friend, Sophie McAllister, on the threshold.

“Sophie, come in, have a drink,” slurred Kate welcomingly.

“I think you’ve had enough for the both of us,” noted Sophie as she joined Kate at the table.

“Oh, don’t be such a party pooper,” said Kate, slapping her playfully on the arm, “Just a small one,” she prompted, waving the bottle loosely in the air.

Sophie caught her arm, taking the bottle gingerly from her grasp before it smashed onto the table.

“What’s going on, Kate,” she asked, placing it carefully down out of Kate’s reach, “I turned up at the base only to find that you were on suspension. No one was very forthcoming with details.”

“Really? I would have thought they couldn’t wait to gossip about it.”

“It seems not. So what happened?”

Kate took a fresh swig from her glass. “Andrea’s disappeared without authorisation”

“Shit!” exclaimed Sophie, “I told her if she hurt you, I’d kill her. Wait until I get my hands on her!”

Sophie had shot up from the table, Kate forlornly trying to call her back. “Sophie…”

“I’ll make her wish she had never been born…” continued the Scotswoman, pacing across the enclosed space.

“Sophie!”

The other woman stopped at Kate’s raised voice. “What?”

“It wasn’t Andrea’s fault, it was me,” confessed Kate, feeling distinctly sorry for herself, “I’ve got no one else but myself to blame for this.”

Sophie plonked herself back down opposite Kate, staring right at her. “All right, start spilling.”

Kate sighed, running her hands through her already disarrayed hair. This was all she needed – having to drag everything back up for Sophie’s benefit. She supposed she could just tell her friend to get lost, but then she didn’t have many people she could rely on right now. So she explained everything from the beginning, Sophie listening intently to the tale and not interrupting.

“And basically that’s it,” she said as she got to the end, “I was only trying to do the right thing, but now everything’s shot to shit.”

“It certainly is a predicament,” agreed Sophie.

“Ha!” cried Kate, her elbow slipping across the table top as she lost her balance on it, “The typical British ability for understatement rears it’s head. It’s a fucking mess that’s what it is,” Kate corrected, not caring that she was using language she’d never normally contemplate uttering. “And it’s all my own stupid fault!” she added banging her head on the table. “Maybe it’s a woman thing,” she mused, glancing up between the folds of her hair, “Everything always has to be so overcomplicated. It was so much easier with men.”

“Not all women are complicated. Sometimes it’s pretty easy to tell what they want and how they feel.”

Kate looked dazedly up at Sophie. “I suppose you’re right, she agreed, take you for example, I know where I am with you.”

Kate shuffled a little closer on the seat, Sophie shifting uneasily at her proximity but not moving away.

“Why couldn’t we have got together eh?” remarked Kate, trying for a soft tone, but failing miserably when her words came out slurred once more.

“Kate...,” was all Sophie said in return, the warning obvious in her voice.

At least it would have been obvious to anyone not completely drunk.

“It would be so much easier wouldn’t it,” Kate continued, oblivious to her friend’s disquiet. She leant in and pushed her lips to Sophie’s, barely registering how it felt through the haze of her mind.

Sophie immediately shot back in shock. “What the bloody hell are you doing?”

Kate blinked at her, her thoughts slowly settling into some form of order. “Christ!” she exclaimed, shooting to her feet and bringing her hand to her head as she realised exactly what she had been doing, “Sorry, sorry, I don’t know what came over me!”

“It’s all right,” said Sophie, trying to placate the agitated Kate.

“No, it’s not,” countered Kate frantically, suddenly sober, “Shit! What on earth was I thinking?”

“Not of me, that’s for sure.”

Kate stopped her pacing. “Sorry?”

“You were thinking of Andrea, you always are.”

Kate merely looked at her like she was mad. “How did you work that one out? I just kissed you for crying out loud. How can I claim to love Andrea if I’m so easily swayed?”

“That’s just it, I don’t think you are - I’m just a convenient substitute for you to focus your frustrated desires on.”

“Even if that is it, it still doesn’t excuse it in my eyes,” said Kate, sinking back down onto the seat, her head in her hands.

“Look, Kate, don’t beat yourself up about it, I’ve forgotten it already.”

Kate flicked a glance at Sophie. “That good was it?”

“You do stink of whiskey rather,” noted Sophie, trying to make light of the whole thing.

“Thanks!”

“You’d rather I say I enjoyed it, that I want to do it again?” asked Sophie pointedly.

“No,” Kate conceded, “I’m sorry, Sophie, it was unfair of me to do that to you. Andrea said...,” Kate had to take a moment as she stumbled over Andrea’s name, “She said that you still had feelings for me. If that’s the case then I’m even more sorry.”

Sophie paused, glancing away out one of the dark portholes. “I would be lying if I said I didn’t still feel...something,” she began, not looking Kate in the eye as she spoke, “But I realised long ago that it was all one way on my part. Then Andrea came along and at first that maybe gave me some hope, since it showed you were willing to contemplate being with a woman. However, it didn’t take me long to see that it wasn’t that you wanted to be with a woman necessarily, you wanted to be with one woman in particular. You wanted to be with someone you loved, and Andrea was that person. Of course there’s part of me that would still love to be with you, but what good would that do me, knowing all the time you were in love with someone else, that you were thinking about her?”

“I’m so sorry, Sophie,” said Kate genuinely, “I had no idea.”

“Yeah, well now you do,” said Sophie with a dismissive shrug, “I might not be able to have who I want, but there’s nothing standing in your way. The person you love loves you back.”

“Maybe not anymore,” noted Kate, the sharp pain in her chest as she said the words taking her breath away.

“And would your feelings disappear so quickly if Andrea did something similar to you?”

Kate thought about it for a moment, supposing Sophie had a point. “No, I don’t think so,” she answered.

“Then what makes you think hers have?” pointed out Sophie, “Sure outwardly she may be hurt, angry, upset, but deep down I’m betting she still loves you.”

Kate considered her words, thinking back to the tempestuous argument with Andrea. The young woman had been so furious on the mountainside it was scary. For a moment Kate had thought that Andrea might actually hurt her as all the rocks flew down about her. And the look in Andrea's eyes just before she left had been so chilling, it had torn Kate's insides to ribbons. Not to mention the wrenching out of the tracker prior to that. Kate felt freshly sick just thinking of the blood-stained device sitting at her feet. Yet as Kate pondered those terrible moments again, she realised that even then there had been just the tiniest hints that maybe not all was lost - how Andrea had protected her from the crash and then hovered for an almost imperceptible moment afterwards.

"Go and speak to her Kate," said Sophie, breaking her thoughts, "What have you got to lose?"

.....

Heeding Sophie's advice, Kate caught the overnight train down to London, assuming that was where Andrea would go back to – somewhere she knew, somewhere she felt safe. The journey down had been agonisingly slow, Kate hardly able to sleep at all with her thoughts and emotions in such turmoil. Her mind just kept going over and over the same thoughts, regrets over what she should have done and thoughts of what she might say to Andrea given half the chance.

Once in the capital, her first stop was Andrea's flat. She hardly expected to find the young woman there, but supposed it would be as good a starting point as any. Fortunately she had remembered the address of it from Andrea's file, not pondering too long on why exactly she might have committed it to memory all those months ago when she had first read it. Having caught the tube and wandered round with her hastily acquired A to Z, trying not to look too much like a tourist, Kate finally located the converted Georgian terrace where Andrea used to live. The street was in a gentrified area of Islington, and Kate wondered how exactly a Detective Sergeant in the Met might afford something there. She vaguely recalled Andrea mentioning a trust fund that her parents had set up for her, and supposed that her estrangement from them didn't extend to not utilising that financial support.

Running her finger down the list of three flats that the former single house had been converted into, she saw that Andrea's was the top one. Kate stood in the sun on the outside doorstep for a moment considering her options. A quick glance up and down the street revealed that there was no one else around, hardly surprising given that it was the middle of the day and the inhabitants were all most likely at work. Turning back to the door she shielded her hands from the street, just in case anyone was watching, and focussed a tiny concussion wave at the lock.

She realised that using her powers would register back on Duransay, thanks to the tracker in her right arm which would also let them know exactly where she had used them. However, she took the calculated risk that the small blip wouldn't warrant a full scale search and contain mission. She could do without army helicopters

descending on the quiet city street. More likely the obviously public usage would be added to the list of grievances against her.

Upstairs she knocked a couple of times, her heart skipping just that bit faster at the thought that maybe, just maybe Andrea would be there. Disappointment quickly settled back over her when it became obvious she wasn't, and another focussed beam granted her access to the flat.

It didn't look like anyone had lived in the flat for months, which Kate supposed was about right. It felt odd wandering round Andrea's former home alone, like she was intruding on something she shouldn't. Not that there was much left in the flat, since most of Andrea's personal belongings had been shipped up to Scotland. She strolled through the kitchen, a few utensils still hung up on hooks and there was an empty cat food bowl on the floor. She imagined the last time Andrea would have filled it up before her life changed forever on that fateful day back in March. At least Gerry was still being safely looked after back on Duransay, Kate having made sure Tom took care of him in hers and Andrea's absence.

As she made her way into the living room she saw it had also had most of its contents removed. The furniture was still there, but that was about it save for a few odd pictures, coated in a thin layer of dust.

She picked up one of them, wiping away the film and absently running her thumb over the glass when she saw that it depicted Andrea, smiling warmly as she posed with a couple of friends. Kate had to furiously brush away the tears that were welling up in her eyes, swallowing the lump in her throat at the same time. Looking at the other people in the photo, Kate recognised the small woman on Andrea's left from when she had met her at Maria Fernandes' funeral – it was Meg.

Deducing that she should probably be her next port of call, Kate placed the picture back and searched around for any sort of address book or something similar. She found one tucked away in a drawer near the phone, and, taking it with her, left the flat to go and see Andrea's ex-girlfriend. Again, she didn't think Andrea would be there, but Meg was probably the person Andrea was closest to down in London. She was one of the few people Andrea still had contact with, so if anyone knew where she was it would be Meg. Kate just hoped that she would be willing to part with that information.

Meg's flat was in a much less salubrious location in Highgate, further up the Northern Line from Andrea's home. Since Meg's flat was in a purpose built block, Kate just hung around by the main front door for a while until someone came out and she could nonchalantly catch the door to allow her entry. Once on the third floor her knock led the door to be opened by the small woman Kate had met only once before. She supposed the petite woman was pretty in a kind of elfin way with short, dark hair framing a well-defined face. All she wore was a towelling robe, despite the fact that it was nearly midday.

“Yes?” said the other woman tersely, before recognition suddenly dawned. “Oh, hello. You better come in.”

The quickness with which the invite occurred made Kate think she had been right in assuming Meg might know something. As Kate stepped into the flat she could immediately detect the sound of the shower running, swinging round to Meg.

“Sorry, am I disturbing something?”

“No, Andi’s just taking a shower.”

Kate had to stop herself swallowing her tongue in shock. She had just thought Meg might give her some pointers to Andrea’s location – she had never expected to actually find her there.

“She’s here?” she asked incredulously, her heart starting to beat erratically at the prospect of seeing Andrea.

“I thought you knew that, since you’ve come round.”

“No, I...” Kate trailed off trying to gather herself. Andrea was there, mere feet away.

“I’m sure she’ll be out in a moment,” noted Meg, walking in the direction of the small kitchen area, “Would you like a drink in the meantime?”

Kate was far too busy staring at the bathroom door to process the question properly. “Um...no...thanks,” she said absently.

Meg continued to prepare one for herself as Kate made a quick scrutinising sweep of the flat to try and calm her racing heart. It was pretty pokey, with the living room and kitchen all in one open plan area. That just left the bathroom and what Kate assumed was the bedroom. Suddenly it occurred to her that there was only one of those. Her eyes quickly flicked to the sofa, her heart missing a beat when she saw there was no sign that someone was sleeping on that.

The sound of the bathroom door drew her eyes back across to the far side of the room. Andrea wandered out, not noticing their company since she was towelling her hair dry, and starting to cross the room wearing only a short robe.

Kate stopped breathing for a moment at the sight of Andrea, her eyes fixed unwaveringly on the oblivious young woman. The churning of her insides was painful as turbulent emotions filled her with a mixture of elation and fear. When Andrea was halfway to the kitchen she brought the towel down, immediately spotting Kate and stopping in her tracks.

Their eyes locked across the small room, the piercing blue eyes upon Kate causing another alarming flip in her stomach. Kate thought she saw the briefest flash of happiness on Andrea’s face before the hard, impenetrable mask slammed down.

“What do *you* want?” asked Andrea coolly, continuing to dry off the ends of her damp blond hair.

Kate swallowed nervously in the face of Andrea's icy demeanour. "I was hoping we could talk."

"You were, were you? I thought I made it clear five days ago that I didn't want to see you anymore, let alone speak to you?"

"I know you said that, but I hoped you might have calmed down a bit since then."

Kate knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as the words had slipped past her lips. She'd practiced what she was going to say over and over on the train down to London but she hadn't been prepared for seeing Andrea then and there. Now, when faced with the other woman and all the conflicting emotions she evoked, all those carefully planned words seemed to have deserted her.

"Calmed down?" repeated Andrea, "You really think I ought to be calm when someone has betrayed me?"

"No, of course not..."

"Well, obviously you do."

"Sorry, that was a bad choice of words," said Kate contritely, "Perhaps I should start again?"

"If you must," said Andrea dismissively, continuing on to the kitchen and joining Meg on the far side of the counter.

Kate took a few deep breaths, feeling about as welcome in the flat as a hooker at a church tea party. "Could we talk alone?" she asked Andrea, flicking a look at Meg.

"Anything you have to say you can say in front of Meg," replied Andrea with an edge of challenge in the tone.

Kate could already tell that any plans for how this conversation might go had flown right out of the window. She was floundering badly already, and she hadn't even got to what she really wanted to say yet. And now she was going to have to confess her innermost feelings in front of a virtual stranger. She supposed this was all some sort of way for Andrea to punish her, or possibly a test. Either way, she wasn't going to shy away from what could be her only chance.

Gathering herself, Kate tried to begin again. "I just wanted to apologise for not telling you about Dixon sooner. I realise now that I shouldn't have let the Colonel sway me into thinking it was in your best interests to keep it from you. I should have trusted you with the information, and I can only repeat how sorry I am that I hurt you by not doing that. I love you, Andrea. It wasn't my intention to deceive you, I only wanted to protect you."

Andrea made a small scoffing noise at the back of her throat, Kate starting to get a decidedly sinking feeling. Fighting against the butterflies flapping uncomfortably in her stomach she pressed on.

“I know right now you’re angry and you have every right to be, but I’m hoping that one day you might be able to forgive me.” Kate took another slow breath, trying desperately to make her words count, put all her emotion into them. “I need you, Andrea,” she said emphatically, “You are the most important thing in the world to me.”

Andrea’s eyes narrowed. “More important than your career, more important than the army?”

“Yes, more important than any of those things,” Kate replied immediately and earnestly. “They don’t matter when faced with the prospect of losing you. I’d give them up in an instant if it meant I could have you back.”

Kate was giving it her all, but all she was being met with was indifference. She could tell she was fighting a losing battle and for once she didn’t know how to turn it around.

“Is that it?” asked Andrea, her voice flat and unemotional.

“Not completely,” replied Kate, starting to become resigned to the fact that she wasn’t getting anywhere, “I also wanted to see how you are, check that you’re all right. Even if you can’t forgive me, I’ll never stop caring about you.”

“Well, as you can see, I’m fine here,” said Andrea, moving closer to Meg who looked a bit perplexed. “Aren’t I, darling?”

As Andrea reached out and put her arm round the smaller woman’s shoulders, Kate felt like someone was reaching in and twisting her insides in ways they weren’t meant to go. When Andrea followed it up with a light kiss on Meg’s lips, it was like those innards had been ripped right out of her stomach and were trailing across the carpeted floor. Kate could only stare in horror as Andrea turned back to look at her, a smug smile on her face.

“So is that all you came to say?”

Kate’s voice seemed to have escaped her for a moment.

“If it is then I guess it’s goodbye, unless you’re now going to tell me you’ve brought the troops with you and are hauling me back to the base?”

“No, I’m on my own,” managed Kate, “I haven’t told anyone where you are.”

“And are you going to?”

“That’s hardly likely, given my present situation.”

“Oh dear, were you in trouble because I left?” remarked Andrea nastily, “That is quite careless of you, managing to lose two of your operatives in one year, and after sleeping with them both.”

Kate ignored the stinging comments, though they hurt like hell. It was obvious now that it was hopeless. Not only did it seem like Andrea hated her, but also it looked like she had already found someone else to comfort her. Kate wasn't yet at the stage where she was going to get down on her hands and knees and beg, though she wasn't far off. The main thing stopping her was the realisation that it would do her no good, beyond making her look even more of a fool than she did already.

"I'll be going then," she said evenly, though inside her heart was screaming at her not to turn for the door. "I brought these for you," she added, taking a couple of boxes out of her bag and placing them on the dining table. "They're refills for your regulator, in case you need to use your powers."

Andrea only stared blankly back at her, not even deigning to thank her.

Kate walked slowly for the door, each jarring step jabbing correspondingly at her heart. She could already feel the tears threatening, swallowing while her back was to Andrea in order hold them down until she got outside. When her hand was on the door handle she knew there was no going back, that she could prolong her departure no longer. Taking a final deep breath, she looked over her shoulder.

Andrea was still standing with her arm slung across Meg's shoulders, an impassive look on her face.

"Goodbye, Andrea."

For a moment she thought Andrea wasn't even going to respond to that before she offered a gruff, corresponding farewell. Kate held her gaze, longingly searching for something in those pale blue eyes, something that would tell her that there was even the faintest of hopes.

It felt like there were too many things left unsaid, countless regrets and recriminations piled up in that weighty silence that stretched on between them. She couldn't speak them though, knowing in that instant that it was all too late. All she saw in Andrea's eyes was emptiness.

With a painful, tearing in her chest she turned and left the flat.

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Andrea watched the door closing, suddenly finding Meg shaking off her arm and crossing huffily to the sofa.

"What the fuck was all that?" she said, flopping down onto it and shooting an annoyed look at Andrea. "I'm fine here, aren't I, darling'?" she said, parroting Andrea's words.

"I don't know what you mean," said Andrea, pulling out a mug to make herself a cup of tea.

“Bollocks! You knew exactly what you were doing, making her mistakenly think there was something going on between me and you, as if you wandering around my flat in next to nothing wouldn’t already have given her that false impression anyway. I don’t want to be a pawn in some stupid jealousy game you’re playing.”

Andrea slammed the mug down on the counter. “I’m not having her turning up here, she said angrily, jabbing her finger at the door, Thinking she can make everything all right with a few trite words!”

“Oh no,” cried Meg, her voice rising too, “Far be it for you to actually listen to what she had to say! Much better that you stick to your guns, give her the cold shoulder.”

“Right!”

“And did that make you feel better?” queried Meg scathingly, “Along with that ridiculous show?”

“Yes!”

“And really?”

Andrea sighed, leaning onto the counter. “No.”

Leaving the half-made tea, Andrea moved round to join Meg on the sofa, running her hands through her still damp hair as she sighed again, ruefully shaking her head but not saying anything further. She couldn’t believe it when she had stepped out of the bathroom to see Kate right there in the living area. Her first instinct had been to go to her, wrap her arms around her and hold on so she never lost her again; the urge amazingly powerful despite all that had happened. But Andrea couldn’t forget those things that *had* happened, and she had quickly thrown up her defensive walls instead.

“Why are you doing this to yourself, Andi?” pressed Meg,

Andrea didn’t answer, wondering that herself. If she was doing the right thing then why did she feel so bloody crap about it?

“When you first turned up here the other day I can’t say that I wasn’t pleased,” Meg added, “Deep down I think I’d been clinging onto the idea that we might get back together.”

Meg quickly held up her hand as Andrea went to interject

“If you’ll let me finish,” she instructed. “I know you told me it was over, many times, but I still couldn’t help fostering this tiny glimmer of hope, thinking that I might still have a chance. Then I heard you talking about Kate and I knew straight away that I didn’t. Even though your words were coloured by anger and hurt and pain I could tell from the way you spoke that you loved her. Despite the harshness of the actual words, the emotions behind them were more intense than anything I’ve ever seen from you. Certainly more intense than anything you might have ever felt for me.

And it's obvious to me now, after seeing her here, that you're still in love with her. Why don't you give her a chance?"

"I did that before," bemoaned Andrea, "And look where it got me!"

"I think she's sincerely sorry," Meg suggested. "She did come all the way down here to try and talk to you, most likely knowing the sort of reception she was going to receive."

"And she deserved it!"

"Jesus! I bet it's great in your world knowing you're on that high moral ground, though isn't it a bit lonely all the way up there?"

"So what am I supposed to do?" asked Andrea plaintively, looking to Meg for guidance, "Forgive her, tell her it's all right that she lied to me, betrayed my trust?"

Meg shrugged. "You could try. Love isn't all about rose petals and good times, sometimes we have to take the rough with the smooth. What is it you want to do, deep down in your heart? Put aside all your anger for a moment, which I know is no small feat where you're concerned, and think about that. Because if you deny what your heart's telling you, you're just going to be miserable."

Andrea stared back at Meg. *What do I want to do?* she repeated to herself. She could delude herself with anger and fury as much as she wanted, but in her heart of hearts she knew the answer without even having to think about it.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and the leaping in her heart confirmed what Andrea had already deduced. She vaulted over the sofa, quickly yanking open the door. The sight of the woman standing on the doorstep was almost enough to knock her right off her feet with shock. It wasn't Kate at all. This woman had blond hair and startling blue eyes. She was practically a mirror image of Andrea, only about thirty years older.

"Mother?"

"Andrea."

Andrea stepped aside to allow her mother to enter the flat, the elegant woman sweeping past in her usual commanding way. At least Andrea assumed it was still usual, since she obviously hadn't seen the other woman for five years. She hadn't changed much Andrea quickly noted. A few extra lines about the face, maybe, but she still looked as serenely beautiful as ever, wearing an elegant cream suit.

"Hello, Dr Hallstrom," said Meg, spying their visitor and clambering to her feet.

"Bloody hell, Meg, you don't have to keep calling her that you know," said Andrea rolling her eyes, "Though I'm sure she loves the superior feeling it gives her," she added shooting her mother a quick glance to see if her barb had hit home. "We're not little kids, you can call her Erin."

Meg looked uncertainly at Andrea's mother. "I think I'll stick with Dr Hallstrom," she said, seeing the frosty look she was receiving. "I'll leave you to it," she added, heading swiftly for the bedroom.

Andrea watched her mother walking aloofly round the room as if silently assessing it. The look on her face suggested she didn't approve, but then again she didn't tend to approve of much where Andrea was concerned. Part of Andrea wanted to get rid of her as quickly as possible so she could run after Kate – maybe she could catch her before she got too far. However, she supposed it was only polite to find out why her mother had turned up on her doorstep after so long.

"What are you doing here, mother?"

"Meg called me."

Andrea's mother spoke in precise, clipped tones. Every word was delivered in a measured English accent, belying her Swedish origins. But of course it wouldn't be seemly to speak with a foreign accent of any kind recalled Andrea. She remembered how aghast her parents had been when she had feigned a Birmingham accent for a time in a bout of teenage rebellion. Andrea had eventually gotten tired of forcing out all the nasal sounds, switching back to her normal plain English accent. At least she hoped it was plain, sincerely hoping she didn't sound as awfully posh as her mother did when she spoke.

"Right, and you just came running?" replied Andrea scornfully, "You haven't spoken to me in five years and then suddenly here you are?"

"From what Meg said you've been having a difficult time of things recently. You're no longer in the police force I understand?"

"No, I'm not, so you can stop being embarrassed on that account. However, I'm afraid I have to tell you I'm still a lesbian."

Andrea could see the small wince at her bluntness, deducing that fact still had the power to cause her mother discomfort. She wondered how it would go down if she also revealed that she was a mutant with superhuman powers. Then again, that would probably be preferable to the dreaded 'lesbian' in her mother's eyes.

"Do you have to sound so proud when you say that?"

"Yes I do," stated Andrea unrepentantly, "I see you haven't changed then. If you've just come here to tell me how ashamed you are then you can just turn right back around again, because I really don't need that kind of 'support'."

Her mother held a single, well-manicured hand. "I'm sorry, old habits die hard," she said apologetically, "We really have been worried about you these five years."

Andrea tipped her head to the side, regarding her mother sceptically. "You were so worried you never called once?"

“Would it have been welcome?”

Andrea didn't answer, thinking that maybe her mother had a point – she would have gotten a similar frosty reception as she was receiving now.

Undeterred, her mother continued on. “I'm not offering any excuses for what happened in the past, and I'm not saying I'm entirely comfortable with your...life choices, but if you do need us, or you just want to talk, then we are here for you, your father and I.”

Andrea could almost be convinced by the sincerity, yet there was something in it that didn't quite ring true. She didn't know what her mother's motives were, but she sensed there was an ulterior one beyond the simple olive branch she appeared to be extending.

“How is father?” she asked, still unable to resist the tiny inkling of hope her mother's surprise appearance gave her.

“He's well, wrapped up in his work as always,” noted her mother with a touch of humour.

“I'm surprised you could drag yourself away to come and see me,” replied Andrea caustically. Old habits died hard for her too, and the recollection of far too many lonely days and nights when her parents were busy with their research coloured her tone now.

“I thought maybe you might need me.”

“You mean I'm more important than the great Dr Hallstrom's work? I should be honoured!”

“My work is important, maybe one day you'll understand just how important,” remarked Andrea's mother, “But that doesn't mean you're not important to me too. I know that we weren't perhaps the best parents in the world, but we always wanted what was best for you. I'm sorry if we didn't always devote us much time to you as we should have done, but we'd like to rectify that if you give us the chance.”

Her mother was saying all the right things, all the things that Andrea had probably secretly hoped she would one day, and yet deep down she felt uneasy. Perhaps it was just that since she'd spent the past five years allowing her anger towards her parents to build, that to have her mother here now basically apologising for everything was far too incongruous.

“You want me to give you a chance after you've ignored me for five years, having made me feel like I was never good enough to live up to your high standards before that?”

“Yes,” replied her mother simply.

Andrea shook her head at her mother's incredible degree of arrogance. "I'll think about it," she replied.

"That's all I ask," said her mother with a tiny dip of the head, turning to go, "You know where we are."

It only took a few seconds after her departure for Meg to reappear, Andrea swiftly rounding on her.

"Why on earth did you call *her* of all people?" she demanded, "You two never got along, probably because you were one of 'those sort'"

"I just thought that now might be a good time to try and make up with your parents," Meg tried to explain, "Isn't five years a bit of a long time to hold a grudge? I thought there was nothing to lose, and she was actually surprisingly pleasant on the phone once I got on to the fact that I was calling about you."

"Really?" said Andrea doubtfully.

"She came didn't she?" offered Meg, "So what did she have to say?"

"That she's 'here for me' if I need her."

"That's good isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"It seems this really is a day for apologies," noted Meg, "So have you decided what you're going to do about Kate?"

"I'll go speak to her," answered Andrea, "I'm not promising anything, but at least I can hear her out."

In fact she already knew that whatever it was Kate had to say, she was going to forgive her. She wasn't about to admit that weakness to Meg though, and she certainly wasn't going to tell Kate that until she had made her grovel good and proper.

"I do have this meeting with my informant first, but then I'll catch the next train up to Scotland."

"I think you're making the right decision," Meg said, "So what's this meeting you've got?"

"You know I've been doing a bit of digging into the warehouse accident myself in the few days I've been here, catching up with a few old colleagues and informants," outlined Andrea gesturing to the pile of papers on the coffee table. She had needed something to keep her mind occupied and that had seemed like the perfect thing. "Well, one of them thinks he might have a lead on Cowley...Dixon, whatever he likes to call himself."

“You just be careful, I don’t like the sound of this guy.”

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Andrea dug her hands into the pockets of her jacket, pacing nervously across the concrete of the underground car park as she waited for her informant to show up. It was cold and damp in the dim light, a stark contrast to the warm summer’s day outside. The overriding smell of urine pervaded the stale air, Andrea wondering why Jimmy always insisted on picking such grim locations for their meetings. Perhaps he thought that it was a requirement of the police officer and grass dynamic – no meetings in pleasant surroundings allowed. Why they couldn’t just share a nice cup of tea in a café somewhere she didn’t know. A splash followed by an uncomfortable wet sensation in her sock made her let out a curse as she surveyed the dampness evident along the bottom of her jeans from the puddle.

This was just typical of Jimmy, she considered in annoyance, as late as ever. Despite her internal grumbling, it was comforting in a way to know that some things never changed. Other things, though, couldn’t be more different.

Where once she would have relished this, patrolling the urban streets using her intelligence and wits to outsmart criminals, now she couldn’t wait to get her information and get out of the dank hole. She’d always thought of herself as a city girl - an urban dweller through and through. She’d liked the constant hustle and bustle of London, that sense of perpetual activity generated by the diverse and ever-changing people who lived there. Not to mention the fact that you could get a packet of malteasers at three in the morning if you needed to. However, all she could think now was that the miserable car park was a long way from Duransay. She’d never imagined that she’d ever miss a small, wet island somewhere off the coast of Scotland, yet here she was having an urgent desire to go back there.

Andrea knew it wasn’t really the island so much that was exerting the pull on her heart, but more who she knew was waiting there for her. She had to admit that though it filled her with no small degree of trepidation, she was also excited at the prospect of seeing Kate again. Her appearance at the flat had made Andrea realise that she was fooling herself if she thought she could easily forget Kate and what they shared. It still hurt, what Kate had done, but what was more pronounced was the aching loneliness she felt without her.

The sound of footsteps broke her out of her reverie, Andrea swinging round, ready to give Jimmy a mouthful for being tardy since that was part of the routine too. When she saw who was approaching her, her well-practiced words died on her tongue.

“Chadwick?” she spat in a mixture of shock and distaste, “What the fuck are you doing here? Where’s Jimmy?”

Chadwick came to a halt at a discrete distance, no doubt aware that he wasn’t going to get the drop on her a second time and that she could crush his skull if she was so inclined. It took a moment for Andrea to realise what it was about his appearance that

she found so incongruous – he was out of uniform, wearing a pair of dark trousers with a plain light-blue shirt hanging loosely over the top of them.

“I’m afraid your friend couldn’t make it,” he noted snidely.

“What did you do to him?” demanded Andrea, fighting down the irrational prickle of anxiety seeing the burly lieutenant illicit.

“He’d served his purpose, feeding the appropriate information to you,” replied Chadwick with a dismissive wave of the hand, “After that we no longer needed him.”

“We? You mean you and Dixon, or is there anyone else involved in this little setup?”

Chadwick paced around her, Andrea following him the whole way, fists balled, ready to strike. “You would be surprised just how far reaching our organisation is,” he commented.

Andrea didn’t like the sound of that, that Dixon and Chadwick could be part of something much larger. “How long have you been in league with him?” she asked, still maintaining a cautious watch of the man, “Was it you and him together who stitched Kate up the first time? Did you think that would get you her job?”

Chadwick laughed evilly, the sound reverberating round the concrete walls. “We had hoped it might. It was only because she’s friends with that old fool Parsons that she got away with it. Just like she got away with Afghanistan.”

“You have one hell of a selective memory! In case you’d forgotten she actually saved your life, though god knows why.”

Chadwick glowered back at her, but didn’t come any closer.

“So after Dixon got booted off the island, you hung around feeding him information still did you?” deduced Andrea.

“Indeed, no one knew of my connection to him, just as no one knew my part in that sabotage until you started sticking your nose in.”

“There was more to that than you first intimated then I bet,” posited Andrea.

“What I told you before was some of the truth – I did want to cause enough trouble for Major Jarvis to get her job. However, my motivations weren’t purely personal. Our organisation had an interest in getting someone in at the top, allowing them access to highly classified information regarding superhuman research. You spoilt all that, though – my superiors weren’t too happy with me.”

“And this is your way of getting back in their good books?” asked Andrea doubtfully, “What is it you want, Chadwick?”

“We want you.”

The splash in the puddle alerted her to a presence behind her an instant before Andrea felt a sharp pain in her arm. The effect was immediate and paralysing, sending her crashing to the hard concrete in a heap. She got the vague impression of a shadowy figure looming over her before darkness came.

CHAPTER 23

Andrea was conscious. That was about all she knew as she struggled awake, apart from the fact that she ached.

Her head was stiff. Her body was stiff. Her eyes were stiff.

With great effort she forced them open, seeing the dimness of the room around her for the first time. Her surroundings were bare, no furniture in the room besides the chair she sat on. When she went to shift on it she quickly found that her hands were secured by her sides in some way.

Assessing her situation, she noted that she seemed to have lost her jacket somewhere along the way, sitting in only her t-shirt and jeans. Her exposed left arm revealed that her power regulator wasn't attached where it normally circled her bicep either. As Andrea's eyes drifted down to the rest of her body she noticed her socks and shoes were also missing, with some sort of chunky metal device attached snugly to her right ankle. What disturbed her even further was the fact that she hadn't even felt the cold concrete floor beneath her bare feet until now.

In the back of her mind a little voice was telling her there was something familiar about this whole scenario. *Where was it she was reminded of?* Her thoughts swam dizzily and she closed her eyes for a moment. That was it - the army base, on her first day there. She felt as dazed and confused now as she had done then, and as constrained.

Summoning her strength she pulled at the restraints around her wrists. They didn't budge, and Andrea stared balefully down at them. Either they were made of really strong metal or there was something seriously wrong with her. She tried again, the metal digging sharply into her flesh as she wrenched against it. However, no matter how hard she pulled she couldn't break them. Andrea collapsed against the seat back, a few beads of sweat tumbling down her face.

"Oh dear, not able to break free?"

Andrea's eyes shot open, seeing Chadwick standing before her, obviously gloating. "What have you done to me, you bastard?"

"Just a small dose of inhibitor, followed by a more constant dose," he added, indicating the anklet she wore, "I'm afraid it's no powers for you for the time being."

"What do you want, Chadwick?" asked Andrea, trying to inject as much disdain into his name as she could.

He stalked closer, leaning over her imposingly so she had to crane her head up to look at him. Suddenly his hand was on her throat, the skin of his fingers rough where they brushed over hers. Then he was squeezing, choking. Andrea reflexively gagged a couple of times as she tried desperately to breathe.

Chadwick pressed his face close, his breath coming out hot and fast over her cheeks. "Maybe I want to see the fear in your eyes again?"

Andrea couldn't reply, even if she'd wanted to, the fingers were too tight, crushing her windpipe with a relentless force. A few sparkles were already dancing across her eyes as she started to fade out of consciousness when suddenly Chadwick let go, stepping back from her. Andrea immediately took a few heaving gasps of air, coughing at the sudden rush of oxygen to her starved body.

Chadwick was still hovering, no doubt surveying his handiwork but Andrea resolved not to give him the satisfaction of seeing any fear from her, even if it was trickling insidiously through her. She'd already gotten a glimpse of the sort of thing he had in mind for her from their last encounter at the base. Only this time there was going to be no Kate to save her - she was alone.

She tried not to let that thought fuel her terror further while at the same time having to mentally shove images of Kate from her mind. It was no good to her to start getting maudlin; she was in enough trouble as it was. It was too late for regrets now - Kate had tried to apologise and Andrea had stupidly thrown it back in her face. Kate wasn't going to be coming back in search of her any time soon. No, she told herself, the only person she could turn to now was herself. Not that she was in much of a position to be doing anything while tied up.

"You're a real big man, aren't you, beating up someone bound to a chair," she commented. Andrea knew Chadwick wasn't exactly the brightest spark, and was hoping to goad him into something rash.

Chadwick laughed nastily, the sound bouncing off the walls of the empty room. Without saying a word he reached round to unlock the bindings on Andrea's wrists.

That was certainly easier than expected, considered Andrea warily.

Eyeing him suspiciously the whole time, she rubbed her wrists, trying not to flinch when she caught the skin she had broken in her earlier efforts to get free. Only when she went to stand, did Andrea discover exactly why Chadwick was so confident in releasing her. Her legs wobbled, pitching her forwards to take a couple of faltering steps.

"Having a bit of trouble?" asked Chadwick nonchalantly, viewing her efforts with amusement.

Andrea tried to swing for him, hoping to catch him off guard, but it was like she was moving through treacle. Her arm was achingly slow on its course towards him and he had more than enough time to avoid the clumsy lunge. Chadwick had no such problems with his limbs, smashing his fist resoundingly into her stomach. Andrea

doubled over in pain and shock, her already unsteady legs giving way and depositing her heavily on the floor.

Chadwick's laughter rattled around the room again, while all Andrea could do was cough and gasp as she clutched at her gut, a few tears forming in her eyes at the pain. She swiftly blinked them away. *This was not good, not good at all*, Andrea thought grimly to herself, staying down on her knees to try and get a moment to regroup. Not only did she have no powers, but Chadwick had drugged her again, like the time in his quarters. She had been in fights before, but never when she was at such a disadvantage. Chadwick could well make mincemeat out of her.

When she saw Chadwick starting to creep forward again, Andrea steeled herself for another blow. The sound of a door opening offered some respite.

"Now, now, Callum, don't go damaging her," came another man's voice, "At least not yet."

Andrea turned her eyes up to the new arrival, deducing it must be the shadowy figure from the car park. Slowly he stepped forward into the light. The moment really called for an amazing spark of recognition on Andrea's part, but she had never seen the man before. She guessed he was somewhere in his mid-thirties, tall and slender with dark hair and equally dark eyes. Those eyes remained trained on her prone form as he crossed to stand next to Chadwick.

"Who are you?" asked Andrea, "Why have you brought me here?"

"Come, come, Andrea, I would have thought it was obvious who I was?"

Andrea stared up at him, her mind too foggy to try and process what he was saying in any sensible way. She'd never met him before...had she? Yet he seemed to know who she was.

"I'm sure you've heard all about me from a mutual acquaintance of ours," he continued, "Though I suspect Kate didn't have particularly good things to say about me."

Even Andrea's clouded thoughts were starting to coalesce into some form of recognition. "Dixon? You're Adam Dixon?"

He merely smiled in response. A nasty, evil smile that didn't touch his dark eyes. Andrea felt sick. Here at last was the man she'd been searching for all these months, the man who had killed her friends, and she was crawling about on the floor at his feet. She balled her fists, allowing the rage to build within her.

"I have to say I was expecting more," he noted, circling around Andrea, "After what Callum had to say."

Andrea listened, concentrating on letting the white hot fury cascade through her, embracing it, knowing it could be her one shot at getting out. Her arms were shaking as she braced herself on the ground.

“But you really are quite pathetic aren’t you?”

“Fuck you!” seethed Andrea.

The nasty smile was back again. “Kate certainly did.”

Suddenly Andrea sprang from the floor, putting all the effort she could muster into her punch. The punch was a good one, only it didn’t hit its target. Before it got anywhere near Dixon’s face, Andrea’s fist bounced off some invisible barrier.

Dixon laughed as Andrea looked incredulously on. “Though now I hear she’s fucking you. That one was a turn up for the books – Kate being a secret rug muncher.”

Andrea launched herself at him again, but again the barrier was there. She tumbled off it, crashing down onto the unrelenting concrete, her elbows scraping painfully across the hard surface as the skin was shredded from them.

“I see she didn’t tell you everything about me then,” noted Dixon. He reached down to haul Andrea to her feet by the front of her t-shirt before slamming her into the nearest wall, driving the air from her lungs. “Like what my powers were?”

Andrea gripped his arm where it still held her shirt, more to hold herself up than anything else. She was sick to her stomach, her body crying out at the punishment it was receiving.

“As you can see I’m able to deflect your attacks with what Dr Todd liked to call my ‘personal forcefield’. It’s really quite ingenious, especially when I extend it outwards like this.”

Andrea grunted as an invisible weight started pressing in on her chest from Dixon’s hand that he held hovering before her. The crushing sensation was relentless, her breath coming in short gasping bursts as she struggled for air.

Dixon looked like he was enjoying her discomfort far too much. “Not putting up much of a fight are you?”

Andrea merely grimaced back at him and he finally released his hold before she passed out. Andrea immediately sunk to her knees at his feet. She wanted to get up, wanted to defy him, but it was all she could do not to collapse completely.

“But don’t worry, you’re not completely useless,” continued Dixon as he loomed over her, “We have big plans for you tomorrow.”

Dixon delivered one last parting kick, sending her sprawling over onto her side. The hard concrete was cold where her cheek lay upon it but she didn’t have the strength to lift her head. All she could do was watch them leave before the door slammed shut behind them. It didn’t take long for her to succumb to her fatigue in the lonely darkness.

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The first thing Andrea became aware of was the pressing sensation on her right cheek. It was forcing her head hard against the floor.

“Come on, wake up!”

The rough sole of Chadwick’s boot rubbed across her skin, Andrea opening her eyes and seeing his foot against her head out of the corner of her eyes.

“Ah, there we go!” he said seeing that she was awake. He removed his foot and jabbed it into her ribs instead. “Time for a bit of research.”

Chadwick reached down and yanked her to her feet. Andrea wobbled for a moment but noted that her head seemed to have stopped spinning quite so badly as it had the day before. She still felt incredibly weak, but the pervading sickness in her stomach had gone. Maybe her body was getting used to all the drugs being pumped through it, she considered. Andrea made a lunge for Chadwick but he merely laughed and swatted her aside, sending her crashing to the floor again.

Still no powers then, she noted grimly to herself as Chadwick hauled her up once more.

“There’s no point in keeping trying to do that,” he informed her, “As long as you have that anklet on, your powers aren’t going to be making an appearance.”

Chadwick escorted her from the room, keeping one hand on her right arm as they made their way along the corridor outside. His fingers were dangerously close to the makeshift bandage she had put over the self-inflicted wound where she had ripped the tracker from her arm. It seemed he was unable to resist the temptation to see how sore it still was, sliding his hand up the remaining distance and squeezing hard. Andrea let out a reflex yelp at the sudden pain before gritting her teeth. She wasn’t quick enough to prevent the satisfied smile creeping across Chadwick’s face though.

Andrea tried to ignore him and take in her surroundings in order to deduce where they were, but there weren’t many clues. The corridor was dimly lit, like the building they were in didn’t have full power, and the overall grubbiness of both the walls and floor made her think the building might have been disused for at least a period of time in its history. There were no windows in this particular corridor, only the doors to other rooms, none of which had an any indication as to what lay beyond on their plain surfaces. A few of them had name slides attached, but they were long since empty, whatever purpose the rooms in question fulfilled no longer required.

They hadn’t gone far down the bland hallway when Chadwick turned off into another one, opening the first set of double doors he came to. The room beyond was more brightly lit than the corridor though the upper reaches of the large room were still shrouded in shadows. It looked to Andrea like it had been part of a factory or a building used in some sort of manufacturing industry. There were a lot of conduits,

pipes, wires and vents snaking along the walls and ceiling, plus a few large pieces of equipment still attached to the walls displaying various dials and levers.

In the centre of the room was some much newer looking equipment, obviously not belonging to the old building. There were various computer terminals, shiny drawers, a hospital trolley with some medical equipment by it and right in the middle a large device the dominated proceedings. It was about ten feet tall, consisting of one large metallic block which curved round at the edges into four tips. Andrea had no idea what it was, but was sure she was about to find out.

“Glad you could join us,” greeted Dixon, turning from where he was studying the readouts on one of the screens.

There were a couple of other burly-looking men in the room, skulking over by the doors like bouncers, but apart from them it was just Andrea, Dixon and Chadwick.

“I didn’t really have much choice, did I?” noted Andrea as Chadwick dragged her across towards Dixon.

Dixon tipped his head in acknowledgement. Now they were in a brighter light Andrea could see his features more clearly. She supposed he was handsome in a swarthy way, though how Kate could ever have been fooled by him she couldn’t imagine. He was the sort of person Andrea would have known was a “bad ‘un” as soon as she had met them in her former job – he just exuded something sinister. Though she had to allow that she could also picture him being quite the charmer if he wanted to be.

“Right, time for you to help us out with our research,” he stated, taking her other arm and leading her towards the large device.

“Research?”

“Yes, though not the kind you’re probably used to back on Duransay. We’re examining the energy thresholds of your power, plus the general effect of energy on mutants...well, I don’t want to bore you with the details. Suffice to say, I’m afraid to say there might be some pain involved in these particular experiments.”

Dixon and Chadwick gripped her tightly as they forced her towards the machine, Andrea trying to struggle but finding it pointless. The purpose of the four tips became clear as each of her limbs were bound to them, restraints snapping round her wrists and ankles. She was now suspended off the floor, like she was in a perpetual star-jump that she wasn’t coming down from.

Dixon leant in closer, his head actually slightly lower than hers so that he had to look up into her eyes. “What I said before,” he said in a low voice, “About there possibly being some pain? I was lying - there *will* be pain involved, lots of it. But what’s a little bit of pain when it can further mutant kind?”

“Maybe you should experiment on yourself then,” retorted Andrea, “If it’s for the greater good?”

“Why would I want to do that when I have such a...willing test subject. You did walk right into our hands after all, for which I’m very grateful. And I am only collecting back on my investment since it was me who gave you your powers after all.”

Andrea looked at him in shock - was he telling the truth or just lying to get a rise out of her.

“The gas, in the warehouse,” he continued, “Did you really think that was some random accident?”

The conversation she had overheard in Kate’s quarters was starting to make some sense in Andrea’s mind. “No...that was you...,” she said, dredging up her memories of the accident and her subsequent nightmares, “...there, on the gantry in the warehouse.”

“You do remember it then,” noted Dixon, “I wasn’t sure if you did since you appeared to be in rather a lot of pain at the time. Of course I’d expected to kill all those annoying police officers, so imagine my surprise to find one resolutely hanging on. It was an unexpected, but interesting by product that the gas activated your dormant genes.”

“A by product?” repeated Andrea incredulously, “You killed all those people and I’m just some ‘interesting by product’?”

Dixon shrugged unapologetically. “Yes, that’s all you were. That was meant to be a test of the gas we were developing that would be deadly to normal humans but would leave superhumans untouched. It seems your body reacted in a last ditch attempt to save you – activating the necessary gene to give you protection from it.”

Andrea felt the sickness welling up inside of her again as Dixon’s words hit home - all those people killed as some sort of perverse test and Dixon didn’t seem even the slightest bit perturbed that he had done it. And as for Andrea herself – it appeared her survival had been more luck than anything else, the activation of her dormant genes a simple accident of nature’s tendency to try and survive at all costs.

“So all in all it was quite a productive test,” continued Dixon, stepping away from her at last and heading back to the controls, “And we have a much larger one planned too. But more about that later, now it’s time to see what your made of.”

Chadwick was still next to her, reaching down now at Dixon’s signal to remove the power negating anklet. Andrea immediately felt a faint surge within her muscles as her body automatically started to absorb energy from the ambient light, though she knew it would take a while before she absorbed enough to give her strength to break free.

“Don’t think we’re going to give you a chance to use your powers,” Dixon remarked as if reading her mind, “At least not against us. However, we do need them active for this to work properly.”

Chadwick also produced a needle jabbing it roughly into Andrea's bare arm and injecting her with something. When he was finished, Dixon flicked a switch and the device behind Andrea hummed into life. She could feel the vibrations from its power through her hands and feet. Dixon slowly turned a dial on his control panel, Andrea able to feel a corresponding increase in the level of the energy shooting through her from where the device was attached.

"This device stimulates your natural energy absorbing abilities," Dixon remarked, his eyes on his output screen, "Then we siphon it off. I suppose you could compare it to using you as a sort of power supply, which is ironic given our location."

Dixon turned the dial up further, the discomfort in Andrea's limbs starting to increase into something more painful.

"How is that?" asked Dixon, eyes flicking towards her. "Uncomfortable?"

"No," lied Andrea defiantly.

"Hmm, the settings must be too low."

Dixon cranked up the power levels, Andrea instantly feeling the painful surge of energy within her, making a small grunt as her body jerked but determinedly trying not to display any other outward sign of unease. The pulsating was relentless, Andrea's limbs now starting to tingle as they started working overtime to absorb and convert the light energy around her.

Seemingly satisfied he had it at the right level, Dixon came back to stand before her. "Does it hurt?" he asked, sounding far too interested.

Andrea merely grimaced at him, unable to declamp her teeth that were jammed firmly together. Behind Dixon she could see Chadwick standing with his arms crossed, a smug look on his face.

"At least it won't kill you," Dixon added, "Though you might eventually wish it would."

"Fuck you!" Andrea shot back, her spittle catching Dixon in the face.

Dixon merely laughed though, wiping it off. "You know that's what your friend also said, just before I killed her."

"W-What?" stammered Andrea, finding it hard to concentrate and decipher what he was talking about with the aching in her arms and legs.

"What was her name again, I did ask before I killed her...ah yes, Maria Fernandes."

Andrea gagged, only just holding back the bile that had welled up in her throat. "No, you're lying, she managed feebly."

“Would that make you feel better? Knowing it wasn’t you who sent her to her death?”

“You bastard!” screamed Andrea, pulling at her restraints in a futile attempt to free herself and strike him down.

Dixon laughed again, a hollow, nasty sound that only served to enhance Andrea’s overwhelming dread. “Now where were we?”

He moved back to the controls and ratcheted the device up another notch. Andrea gritted her teeth as another painful jolt shot through her. The device was humming loudly now, vibrating the whole of the room.

“Oh, and just in case you’re hoping your little seizure problem might save you, we’ve found a way to keep you awake through those, if you have one – we don’t want anything prematurely curtailing our experiments after all.”

Andrea’s breathing was coming hard and fast as she tried to blot out the pain that was raging through her.

“Time to go for broke,” noted Dixon.

Andrea’s whole body jerked as he whacked the dial right up to the top, the seizure as her muscles overloaded on energy instantaneous. The pain kept coming in wave after agonising wave, a fire that consumed all the muscles of her body. It was like all the seizures she’d had before rolled into one unending torture. Normally she would have passed out long ago, but whatever it was Dixon had given her kept her conscious through the agony. In the end Andrea could bear it no longer, opening her mouth and screaming until her throat was raw.

Think of something, anything but the pain...

She tried to focus, but it hurt so much, it was so hard. The white hot daggers of pain were all through her, piercing every fibre, unrelenting, unending in their torment. She was dimly aware of the tears tumbling from her eyes as she grimly gritted her teeth, but she had no will to hold them back.

Think...think of something...someone...

Then there was an image in her mind, Andrea gratefully clutching for it like a drowning person reaching for a lifebelt.

Kate...Kate...Kate

Andrea repeated the name in her mind like a mantra, over and over as the pain throbbed through her.

Then all of a sudden it stopped, Andrea gasping at the momentary relief from her suffering.

“What did you say?”

It was Dixon asking her the question, Andrea staring dumbly back not thinking she had spoken at all.

Dixon broke out into laughter at her stupefied look, Chadwick joining in nastily. “Do you really think *she’s* going to come and save you, like she cares what happens to you?”

Suddenly Andrea realised that her silent benediction hadn’t only been in her head. In her distress she must have been calling Kate’s name out loud. It hadn’t even registered through the haze of pain.

Dixon shook his head. “There’s going to be no miraculous rescue for you I’m afraid.”

Andrea got no chance to reply as Dixon turned the equipment back on, Andrea’s body jerking violently at the sudden rush of energy back through it. Again the waves of agony came and Andrea screwed her eyes shut, trying to summon forth the image of Kate again to block it all out.

Andrea had no idea how long it went on. Surely her body couldn’t put up with this level of misery indefinitely? Finally Dixon flicked a switch on his panel and the apparatus powered down, Andrea’s head flopping groggily forward, the residual pain still shooting sharply through her body. Her tears plopped slowly onto the plain white floor, splashing across the paint to be joined by a small trail of drool dribbling from her lolling mouth. When she heard Chadwick talking agitatedly to Dixon she realised they must have assumed that she’d lost consciousness despite the drugs. She kept her head down, listening to them.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Chadwick asked.

“I don’t know what you mean,” replied Dixon nonchalantly.

“Yes you do,” insisted Chadwick, “Bringing Hallstrom here. I think the boss might have something to say about it.”

Even in her semi-delirious state, his comments sparked Andrea’s interest. She had assumed Dixon was running things, but it sounded as if there was someone else above even him in whatever covert organisation they were part of.

“The boss doesn’t need to know everything,” replied Dixon glibly, seemingly less afraid of this person than Chadwick was, “Consider this a bit of initiative on our part.”

“Initiative?” repeated Chadwick incredulously, “You’re bloody crazy, you know. I told you we should have looked for someone else besides Hallstrom, but oh no, you had to have your way.”

“But she was so convenient.”

“She could also get us our balls handed to us on a plate if the boss finds out.”
Chadwick sounded as cowardly and weasly as he had on Duransay.

“Having Hallstrom does give us another advantage,” suggested Dixon, much calmer than his compatriot, unnaturally so given what he had just been doing.

“Oh really, and what might that be?”

“She might give us Kate too.”

A sharp dagger of fear shot through Andrea at the mention of Kate’s name and it was all she could do to hold back the gasp that had threatened to escape her mouth.

“What? But you just said to Hallstrom that she wouldn’t come,” said a confused Chadwick.

“I know I said that you moron, but I was just taunting her.”

“Christ, as if kidnapping Hallstrom’s not bad enough, now you want to tempt Jarvis here too?”

“She’ll be an asset to our research.”

“Bollocks!” cried Chadwick, “You just want revenge...or something else.”

“Maybe it would be good for other reasons,” conceded Dixon, “But it seems a shame to pass up the opportunity. We need more superhumans, and I’m sure she’ll be beating a path to our door once she finds out we have her little ‘friend’ here.”

Andrea was starting to feel a horrible sickness deep in her stomach now, realising that they were going to use her to try and capture Kate. It was bad enough she had foolishly stumbled into Dixon and Chadwick’s trap, but she wouldn’t be able to forgive herself if she was responsible for something happening to Kate.

“You really think she’ll come?” questioned Chadwick, “From what I’ve heard they’ve not exactly been on the best of terms recently.”

Andrea had to wonder how exactly Chadwick knew that, though that wasn’t the foremost of her concerns.

“If she doesn’t then we’ve not lost anything have we,” remarked Dixon reasonably.

Andrea found herself desperately hoping that Kate didn’t come. Though she’d had visions of Kate somehow finding out what had happened and swooping in to rescue her, she would rather remain captive if it meant protecting her from Dixon and Chadwick. In fact she’d rather they killed her than use her as some bait in a trap, despairingly contemplating if that was likely.

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Kate staggered to the door on her boat, tripping over the mess on the floor as she went. She hadn't really felt like cleaning up, the detritus of over two weeks living there piled up where it had fallen. If she had been in any sort of sane state of mind, she would have recoiled at the state of her yacht. Yet her grip on reality was tentative to say the least. Why would she want to hold onto it when it was so grim and hopeless?

Whatever futile hopes she might have harboured of a reconciliation with Andrea had been dashed when she'd turned up at Meg's flat two weeks ago now. Since then she'd sunken further and further into her squalid pit of despair, her only company the multitude of whiskey bottles that littered the boat.

Her head pounded from her regular hangover as she reached the door, pulling it open and blinking into the harsh sunlight that shone in from outside. It took her a couple of seconds to identify her visitor.

"Tom," she noted, the disappointment colouring her tone. She didn't know why she continued to delude herself with the forlorn and utterly ridiculous notion that one day it might be Andrea at her door. They hadn't spoken for two weeks, maybe they would never speak again. "Come in," she added gesturing him inside, "Sorry about the mess."

Kate made a futile attempt at clearing a space for him to sit, giving up and merely throwing the discarded clothes and bottles on the floor in a heap. Tom lowered himself gingerly down onto the seat.

"How are you doing?" he asked once Kate had joined him.

"Fine, great," she replied sarcastically.

"You look like shit."

"That good, eh?" she commented in return, "You been saving that one up for when I couldn't pull rank on you?"

"No, it's just an observation," he replied, his eyes sweeping over her again, "A pretty accurate one I'd say."

"Yeah, well, it's not like I need to look my best for duty is it?"

"You could still get your job back, they haven't sacked you yet have they?"

"The term is court-martialed," Kate corrected, "But no it's not happened yet. I have a hearing next week, though I'm sure it's only a formality."

"Don't say that! We want you back, all of us. Have you heard who we've got in charge in your place for the time being?"

Kate hadn't heard much of anything from the base for the past two weeks. The only communication she'd had was from the Colonel informing her of the hearing. She could tell he had been profoundly disappointed and the conversation had been brief.

"Anna Kaminski," Tom answered in the wake of Kate's silence.

That caused the faintest stirrings of shock in Kate, before the depression kicked in again almost immediately. "I'm sure she's doing a fine job," she said absently.

"You have to be kidding! The woman's a nutter! Why are you taking this lying down, where's the fighting Major spirit, or did that fly off with Andrea too?"

Again there was the slight stirring of emotion within in her, sadness at the mention of Andrea's name mixed with anger that Tom would bring her up.

"What happened between you two to lead to...this," he said with exasperation, casting his hand around the filthy room.

Kate didn't really feel like explaining things to Tom at that moment. Her head hurt as it always did first thing in the morning and she was tired of going over it in her mind, let alone voicing it out loud. "It's complicated," she offered, "Suffice to say there was something I should have told her and I didn't."

"You lied to her," he deduced.

"Yes I did."

He nodded, thinking for a moment before continuing. "This doesn't have anything to do with Dixon as well does it?"

That finally did penetrate Kate's wall of apathy. "What do you know about that?" she demanded.

"I've heard things around the base. It seems Kaminski has something to do with it."

Kate nodded, "She's investigating him as far as I know."

"Investigating him? But I thought he was off in prison after...well...you know." He finished falteringly not wanting to draw attention to Kate's previous indiscretion but only succeeding in highlighting it more.

"He escaped."

"And this has what to do with Andrea?"

Kate sighed. "He was the one who caused the accident in the warehouse, the one that gave Andrea her powers and killed her colleagues. I discovered this and I didn't tell her," she outlined in a rush, wanting to get it out quickly so she didn't have to linger on the painful recollection too long.

“Ah,” was all Tom could say in response.

“Exactly.”

“Ok, that’s bad, but have you tried speaking to her?”

“Oh yes, I tried,” noted Kate ruefully, “She didn’t want to know. And when I got there…” she trailed off, recalling the painful sight of Andrea and Meg, “... Well, let’s just say she was staying with her ex-girlfriend, who’s maybe not quite so ex.”

“What?” cried Tom loudly, “That’s bullshit!”

“You weren’t there, you didn’t see them.”

Tom still looked doubtful. “And did either of them actually say they were together?”

“Well...no...”

“And you’ve never tried to deliberately make someone jealous?”

“You think it was all an act?” asked Kate, the faint feelings of hope rising within her. Now she thought about it with a more analytical eye Meg *had* looked slightly uncomfortable with Andrea’s actions.

“I can’t say for sure, but my guess is that it was. I’m not sure you realise quite how in love with you she is,” pointed out Tom, “She confided in me before she ever admitted it to you, you know. When she thought she had ruined any chance with you before she was utterly despondent. I really thought she was going to leave then, but she hung around, just so she could be near you, even if it was painful for her.”

“Maybe, but as I said I tried talking to her,” Kate reminded him. Even if the thing with Meg wasn’t real, that didn’t detract from the reception she had received from Andrea. “That was two weeks ago. If she was really missing me that much she could have made contact by now.”

“And you’re going to leave it at that?” said Tom, his brow creasing as he shook his head in disbelief, “You may have hit rock bottom, but I never took you for a coward.”

His words were like a slap in the face, but Kate knew immediately that he was right. She wasn’t a coward, and she certainly wasn’t going to let the best thing that had ever happened to her slip through her fingers without a fight.

So Andrea had rejected her previous attempt at peace-making? Then she would just have to try again. And she would keep trying until she had nothing left to give.

Suddenly galvanised she shot to her feet, heading towards the bedroom.

“Whoa, where are you going?” said Tom, surprised by her sudden burst of activity.

“To London.”

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Kate had quickly showered and changed after that, trying to make herself at least vaguely presentable before she set off for London. She didn't have many clean clothes left, despite the fact that she had been living in pretty much the same ones for two weeks, managing to finally dig out a half-decent pair of jeans, shirt and light jacket. She'd decided on taking the plane to London, rather than flying there herself – the last thing she needed was a group of soldiers turning up and arresting her for unauthorised use of her powers while she was trying to talk to Andrea.

Once she'd got there she had headed straight round to Meg's flat, not bothering to call first and have Andrea or Meg find some excuse why it wasn't convenient. Only as she drew closer to the door her feelings of uncertainty and dread had started to multiply exponentially.

Finally in front of it, she could barely bring herself to knock, her fist hovering by it for long moments before she finally gathered her courage and banged on it. It took a couple of minutes, but eventually the door swung open. Kate took a large gulp of air, quickly exhaling again when she saw who had opened it.

“Hello, Meg,” she said, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Kate?” said the other woman, plainly surprised.

Kate just bet she was – no doubt she had been hoping that she would have Andrea all to herself from now on.

“Can I speak to Andrea?”

“She's not here.”

“Then can I come in and wait?” pressed Kate, not letting her off the hook that easily.

“You could,” allowed Meg, “But there wouldn't be much point, she's not staying here anymore - she left two weeks ago.”

Kate blinked, unsure she had heard correctly. “Two weeks ago?” she repeated as the words sunk in. “Where did she go?”

Meg eyed her suspiciously for a couple of seconds. “You've not seen her?” she finally asked.

“No,” said Kate tersely, “If I'd seen her would I be here looking for her?”

“Only she was meant to be going back up to Scotland,” explained Meg, starting to sound worried now, “I managed to persuade her that she ought to give you another chance.”

Kate was stunned again, not only by the fact that Andrea had supposedly been going to Scotland, but also that it was Meg who had been the one to put Kate's case. Maybe she had been a little harsh in her assessment of the other woman after all, she considered.

"She was coming to see me?" Kate asked, just to make sure she understood correctly.

Meg merely nodded.

"But I've not seen her since I was last here."

Kate's feelings of fear and anxiety were bubbling up unpleasantly now. What had happened to Andrea? Where was she? Had she merely changed her mind or had something more sinister happened.

"Do you know anywhere else she might have gone instead?" she asked Meg, trying to engage her mind into some form of rational thought despite her frantic emotions.

Meg thought on that for a moment. "Well, she was going to meet someone first, something to do with her investigation. Actually she left all her papers here, which I suppose I should have realised was a bit odd."

"Can I have a look?"

Meg gestured her inside the flat and got out Andrea's investigation notes. Kate quickly leafed through them on the coffee table, seeing that Andrea had managed to discover a surprising amount in a short space of time. From her notes it looked like Dixon was once again collecting the chemicals that had been assembled in the warehouse, only this time in much larger quantities. Kate didn't think that could be good – if the gas produced in the warehouse had killed a handful of people what havoc would a much larger dose wreak?

"Nothing happened, by the way."

Kate turned to Meg who had come to sit by her on the sofa. "Sorry?" she asked, unsure what Meg was talking about as her mind raced over implications of what she'd read.

"Between Andrea and me?" clarified Meg, "That was just her trying to make you jealous that day you were round here, by flirting outrageously with me right in front of you. But that's all it was, a show."

The degree of relief she swept through Kate was measurable. "Thank you for letting me know," she said genuinely.

"You're welcome. You may find it hard to believe, but I only want Andrea to be happy and if that's with you then so be it."

Kate felt slightly uncomfortable with Meg talking about her and Andrea, since she hardly knew the woman, and turned her eyes back to the notes. However, she still

listened to Meg's words, secretly warmed and heartened by the sentiments she expressed.

"I could tell from how she spoke that she loved you, still does love you. Almost straight after you'd been here last time she realised that she couldn't deny her true feelings, no matter how angry she might be."

A beeping from Kate's pocket broke into Meg's words and Kate reached in to retrieve her mobile phone.

"Major?" came Tom's hushed voice, "*Where the hell are you?*"

"Why?" asked Kate.

"*Because something's going on with Dixon here,*" he explained. "*I shouldn't be calling you, but I thought you'd want to know.*"

"What is it, what's happened with Dixon?"

"*Kaminski's got a lead, apparently they got a tip-off as to where he is.*"

Kate was interested, but she had much more pressing concerns right now. "That's great, Tom," she replied, "But I'm kind of busy. I'm sure Kaminski will follow it up."

"*Ok, but there was one other thing - I could have sworn she said something about Andrea being connected too.*"

The pain in her stomach was like a body blow, Kate instantly knowing that Dixon had Andrea.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"*Wait, you should have backup...*"

"Just tell me where he is, dammit!" shouted Kate. God only knew how long they'd had Andrea there already, most likely since she'd left the flat two weeks ago.

"All right, all right. They think he's got something going on at the disused Creekmouth power station. It's on the Thames, just out past London City Airport."

Kate was just going to ask for more details when there was the sound of another voice in the background at the other end. Kate couldn't make out what they were saying, but she could deduce that Tom and the person were arguing.

Finally a voice came back on the line. "*Jarvis? Are you still there?*"

"I'm here, Miss Kaminski," replied Kate icily as she identified the new speaker.

"*I'm ordering you to wait for us to come and pick you up from your position.*"

“If you’ve been listening in on our conversation, you know I can’t do that. Not only does Adam Dixon have Andrea, but I’m convinced he’s planning another ‘test’ of his deadly gas.”

“I don’t care what you think you know. Stay there and wait for pickup, that’s a direct order.”

“And this is a direct you can go fuck yourself.”

“You’re finished! Do you hear me....”

Kate cut the signal, not caring what Kaminski thought in the slightest. All she cared about now was getting to Andrea as quickly as possible.

Kate borrowed Meg’s A-Z to make a quick check of where she was going before dashing from the flat. In her desperation Kate forgot her normal caution about using her powers in public, flying directly to the disused power station. She didn’t care if the use registered in big flashing red lights back on Duransay either; they could come and arrest her afterwards.

She made a quick survey of the outside of the building, finding an inviting looking duct to crawl in via. Kate hauled herself through the filthy tunnel, trying to keep her nose closed from the dank smell. She supposed she could just have gone in blasting, but that would have been rather reckless since she had no idea where Andrea was or how many of Dixon’s people were inside. Her intelligence was so scant that they might even kill Andrea before she got anywhere near her, providing Andrea was actually still alive.

Kate felt suddenly sick, not wanting to allow herself to think what she had, but unable to banish the insidious thought now it had popped into her mind. Andrea had to be alive, she told herself, because the alternative was incomprehensible.

As she crawled on she became aware of a sound getting louder over the rushing of the air through the tunnel, unable to pinpoint what it was to begin with. It was sporadic, coming in random bursts. Then there was another blast of the sound and it became terrifyingly obvious what it was. It was screaming.

The anguished wails floated through the tunnel, echoing off the sides, causing Kate to cringe at the obvious pain the person making them was in. A sudden louder cry shot straight through to her very core, chilling her to the bone.

It wasn’t just any screaming, she despairingly realised, it was *Andrea* screaming.

She almost vomited on the spot, before starting to desperately speed on down the tunnel, bashing her elbows and knees on the metal sides as Andrea’s haunting cries continued to buffet her ears.

How long was this sodding tunnel?

She wanted to cry out herself in response, and unable to bear the torment any longer she came to a halt. She was about to blast a hole clean through the wall when the screams suddenly stopped. Kate waited, listening anxiously for anything more, but it was eerily quiet again. With renewed urgency she started off down the tunnel once more.

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Andrea could just about feel her bare feet being scraped along the floor as she was dragged along the corridor, supposing she should be grateful for the pain since it meant she was still alive. Her head hung low, Andrea not having the strength to lift it and see where they were going, knowing with an inevitable despondency what the destination was anyway. Every day was the same after all – hauled from her cell to the lab, experimented on by Dixon and his cronies and then dumped back in her cell again to wait for the torture to start afresh the next day. She wasn't sure how long it had been going on - two weeks, three? Time had ceased to have any meaning when it was just one round of abuse after another, Andrea only able to focus on the here and now and staying alive.

Her assumptions were confirmed when the two men holding her came to a halt and she heard the sound of a lock being released. The routine was complete when they bodily threw her inside, their laughs echoing off down the corridor once the door slammed shut.

Lying on the cold, unforgiving floor, Andrea knew her future looked bleak. With each day that passed she got weaker and weaker, Dixon's never-ending experiments slowly wearing away her resistance and strength.

Was this it? Was she going to die in this miserable place?

How foolish and inconsequential everything else seemed now. All that fighting and arguing with Kate, when she should have been telling her how much she loved her. If only she could have seen her one last time, told her how sorry she was. But that wasn't going to happen. No one knew where she was. Most likely no one cared where she was. Her eyes felt heavy with tears and fatigue and she allowed them to close, slipping into the welcome arms of unconsciousness.

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Kate waited until the guards had safely disappeared round the corner, before slipping down from her hiding place. She'd caught a brief glimpse of someone being hauled inside the cell but hadn't got enough of a look to confirm whether it was Andrea or not. For now she could only assume it was and hurried along the corridor to the door, trying her best to remain quiet despite the gnawing urgency she felt. After a quick furtive glance either way, she brought her finger up to the lock, directing a fine yet powerful concussion wave at it. There was a resounding clank as it broke and Kate looked anxiously around her as the sound seemed to echo loudly along the empty

corridor. There was no immediate alarm, though, and she heaved a thankful sigh as she gingerly pushed the door open.

It was dark inside and it took a couple of moments for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. Then she saw her. A figure curled up in the corner. Her hair was dirty and matted, her face was scratched and bruised and her body frighteningly thin but it was unmistakably Andrea.

Kate's heart plummeted to her feet and then back up into her mouth in an instant as she saw the state Andrea was in. She dashed over, kneeling down at Andrea's side, almost scared to touch her in case she broke the frail body before her.

"Andrea?" her voice trembled over the name, betraying her inner anxiety.

There was no response, and a fresh flash of fear shot through Kate as she suddenly wondered if she was even alive.

"Andrea!" she repeated with as much conviction as she could muster, though her heart was now beating so erratically it was a wonder she hadn't passed out.

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Andrea was sure she heard something.

Yes, there it was, someone was calling her name.

Somewhere far off through the haze, it was definitely her name. She didn't want to go back there though - it hurt there. It was safe and warm where she was.

So she ignored it.

Only now there was a shaking too - persistent, repeated.

Reluctantly Andrea opened her eyes, blinking against the meagre brightness of the cell. There was a figure looming over her, their face slowly swimming into focus...red hair...pale blue-grey eyes...

"Kate?" Andrea's voice was hoarse, hardly daring to believe the words she spoke.

She hauled herself up, her fingers reaching out tentatively for the face in front of her, worried it was going to disappear any moment, like the last remnants of a dream, gone in the harsh light of day.

Yet her fingers found solid flesh. Solid, warm, wonderfully real flesh. As her hand shook over the skin, she started to feel something else too, a wet, trickling beneath her fingers. The tears slipping down Kate's face were the final confirmation that this was no fantasy. Andrea flung herself forward, practically falling into Kate's arms, feeling the powerful surge of emotion within her, replacing what before had been a numb void.

With that emotion came her own tears, tumbling freely down her face as she shook uncontrollably in the familiar embrace. She had spent so long trying to be tough, hanging on even when it seemed all hope was lost, that her release now was unconditional and absolute. She wasn't sure how long she stayed in that warm cocoon, trembling and sobbing with abandon, but Kate didn't say anything to break the moment. She held on fast to Andrea, the young woman able to detect Kate's own shuddering breaths.

Finally Andrea pulled back, looking up into the face she never thought she would see again. "I'm so sorry," she began, but Kate immediately raised a finger to her lips.

"Shh, it doesn't matter now," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

"But all those awful things I said to you...I didn't mean them."

"I know you didn't," Kate insisted, brushing her fingertips lovingly over Andrea's cheek, "I'm sorry too, for not telling you about Dixon sooner."

The mention of his name suddenly jogged something in Andrea's memory. "Oh god! She exclaimed clutching at the sleeves of Kate's jacket, Dixon, he was expecting that you'd come – he *wanted* you to come. It's a trap..."

"Indeed it is."

Both their eyes swung to the doorway where Dixon's form was silhouetted. The fear on seeing her tormentor sent a wave of irrational panic through Andrea. She started trembling, knowing it was pathetic but unable to stop herself. Kate only held her tighter though, until the shivering stopped.

"Aw, isn't that sweet," said Dixon with nasty sarcasm.

Kate ignored him, giving Andrea a quick look to reassure her before suddenly she was up and charging at Dixon, blasting him with a fierce concussion wave.

He merely raised his hand to deflect it using his shielding power. "Good to see you too, Kate," he said smarmily, "I heard you had powers. Funny you never mentioned that before."

Andrea felt a perverse satisfaction at discovering that whatever Kate might have shared with the man, she had never trusted him with that particular secret.

"I don't need any powers to kick your arse!" stated Kate, giving up on trying to use them and instead going for the more direct approach of launching herself at him physically. Dixon seemed rather stunned at her ferocious attack, Kate managing to claw her fingers right across his face before he reacted.

So Dixon's defences could be beaten, Andrea noted, possibly if his concentration slipped.

Dixon gingerly felt the gashes as Kate made to blast him again seeking to press home her advantage. Only this time he was ready, deflecting her concussion wave again. “As much fun as this is,” said Dixon, repeatedly blocking her attacks which ricocheted off the walls of the small room causing Andrea to duck, It really would be much easier without all these nasty waves flying about

Andrea caught a brief glimpse of the needle, flashing in the light seeping in from the corridor, before it jabbed sharply into Kate’s arm.

“No!” screamed Andrea as Kate staggered back, looking down to the wound in shock.

“As you can see I used my time on Duransay wisely,” noted Dixon as Kate continued to stumble away, leaning onto the wall to hold herself up. “Especially when it came to procuring inhibitor drugs.”

Kate slid slowly down the wall, breathing heavily as she ended up crouching on the floor. The dismay sweeping through Andrea was overpowering – this couldn’t be happening, it just couldn’t! She attempted to crawl across the floor to Kate’s side, her movements agonisingly laboured. Andrea’s anguish was only multiplied further by Dixon’s next suggestion.

“Now we’re all subdued, how about we head off to the lab?”

CHAPTER 24

Andrea struggled and fought as she was dragged along the corridor, trying to twist in her captors grip so she could see what was happening to Kate. She could just about see the other woman also being hauled forcefully along behind her, her head lolling alarmingly as the drug Dixon had given her took its toll.

When they got through the lab doors, Andrea finally managed to wrest herself free, using her powerful urge to help Kate to give her strength she didn't know she had. She landed a punch on the man who held her before the other guards leapt in to aid him. Andrea frantically tried to hit out at them too, her arms and legs a frenzied blur of punching and kicking.

But she couldn't sustain it. All of a sudden a fist broke through her defences, catching her painfully across the jaw. She fell to the ground, a series of kicks reining in on her now she was down.

“Stop!”

It was Kate's voice ringing out, the men actually pausing in their assault at the commanding tone. Their eyes flicked to Dixon for confirmation as to what they should do, the dark man giving a small nod to indicate they should cease. One of them roughly picked Andrea back up, gripping both her arms from behind to stop her attempting any more resistance.

Andrea's eyes immediately shot to Kate who was staring back at her, surprisingly alert given the drugs she had been pumped with. Though she could feel the pain from the blows, it was Andrea's heart that ached much more as she despairingly held onto the blue-grey eyes across the space of the room, not wanting to lose the silent connection.

Eventually Dixon stepped across and broke her line of sight, Andrea attempting to crane her head so she could still see. “I presume you heard about my plans from a mysterious ‘tip-off’” Dixon noted as he stood before Kate.

“You fed them that information,” deduced Kate, “Why?”

“Because we wanted you to come. As much fun as it's been experimenting on your...what's the right term?... 'special friend'?” He glanced over his shoulder to Andrea. “I thought it would be interesting to see what would happen with someone with some real power.”

“You do realise that Kaminski and the other superhumans will be here soon - she knows where you are.”

“But she has to come all the way from Scotland,” Dixon reminded her, “We’ll be long gone by then and they’ll have a hell of a lot more to worry about than our whereabouts anyway.”

Andrea could see the quizzical look on Kate’s face, unsure what expression Dixon might be returning since his back was to her.

“I suppose it won’t hurt to tell you, since I’m sure you’ve guessed some of it anyway. The two canisters over there,” said Dixon, nodding his head towards two small metal tubes, no larger than a drinking flask, “Contain a fresh batch of the agent that produces the gas you already saw an example of in the warehouse over five months ago. Only they contain roughly a thousand times the amount. I’m sure I don’t have to describe to you in too much detail what will happen if it’s released into the air or added to the water supply of a large city like London.”

Andrea didn’t need him to describe it at all, she had already seen it first hand in that warehouse – the agony and excruciating death of her colleagues.

Suddenly Dixon gestured to the guards to grab Kate and drag her to the energy device. “But enough of that, we must get on,” he said. Andrea could only watch helplessly as Kate was pushed backwards towards the waiting arms of the machine.

One of the men was attempting to fasten the restraint round her right ankle when all of a sudden he was knocked away by the blast of a concussion wave. The other man’s body swiftly followed his compatriot’s in sailing across the room.

Dixon eyes shot to Kate as she stepped down from the machine, the remnants of her concussion waves still floating around her hand. “But...but...how?” he said dumbly.

Kate held up a small needle in her other hand. “You’re not the only one who knows a thing or two about inhibitors. Luckily we also developed antidotes to them.”

“You knew it was a trap?”

“Not necessarily,” allowed Kate, “But I like to be prepared. I just had to wait for it to counteract your drug.”

“Very clever,” noted Dixon admiringly, “Shame it won’t help you.”

He charged at Kate, activating his forcefield as she tried to blast him. The pair of them spiralled across the room, Kate continuing to try and penetrate his defences as he in turn attempted to get close enough to attack. Kate’s waves cannoned around the room as they pinged off his field, crashing into the equipment and wreaking havoc. The man holding Andrea swiftly let go as one headed in their direction, Andrea having to fling herself to the floor to dodge it. Andrea would have been impressed by the sheer power and force on display if she wasn’t in danger of getting zapped by it.

From her position on the floor, Andrea could see Chadwick on the far side of the room, hiding behind a chair as the waves continued to ricochet wildly round the room, smashing everything in their path.

“Dixon you idiot!” cried Chadwick, “The gas!”

Dixon quickly glanced from Chadwick to the two canisters. “You take that one,” he cried over the sound of breaking metal and glass, “The other’s mine. You know what to do.”

Chadwick made a dash from his hiding place, snatching up one of the canisters and heading for the door. Meanwhile Dixon and Kate were still battling one another, seemingly unaware of what was going on around them in the swirl of concussion waves that enveloped them. Knowing it was up to her to do something, Andrea hauled her weary body from the floor and ran from the room in pursuit of Chadwick.

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Kate sent out another fierce blast, hoping that if she pummelled Dixon enough his guard would finally slip. She was dimly aware of Andrea running out after Chadwick, but had her hands too full with the other man for the time being to go after her though she desperately wanted to. She had seen how weak Andrea was and she was scared what might happen if Andrea actually managed to catch up with her former lieutenant. Kate must have been more distracted by her concerns than she realised, as suddenly something solid cracked her on the chin, sending her crashing back onto the floor.

Dixon didn’t stop to gloat, seizing the other container and running for the same door Chadwick had already escaped from. Kate fired another wave, but it smacked into the door as it swung shut behind Dixon. The force ripped the door from its hinges, sending it flying out into the corridor beyond.

Kate charged after him, knowing she had to stop him before he got the chance to release the gas in the open air. She fired blast after blast as she saw him ahead of her, the man scooting round a corner and up some stairs. Kate leapt up them two at a time, Dixon continuing up and up, obviously heading for the roof.

When she barged out of the final door at the top she stopped dead in her tracks. Dixon was standing in the middle of the flat roof, his hand on the lid of the canister as he shot her a nasty smile.

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Andrea ran along the corridors, each step more laboured than the next, but knowing she had to keep going. If she didn’t catch Chadwick then there would be many more people meeting the same fate as MacKenzie, Humphreys and Walker. Luckily the sound of his running feet alerted her to where he was, even though she couldn’t see

him ahead of her. They had already gone down a couple of levels and Andrea had to wonder where Chadwick was leading them.

She got her answer when his steps ceased and she found herself at the top of a ladder overlooking an open room with a turbulent waterway running through it. Below her Chadwick had the canister in his hand, poised to take the lid off and dump its contents into the swirling waters that would lead out into the city's system. Knowing she had no time to lose, Andrea flung herself off the top of the ladder, tackling the burly man to the ground. The canister flew from his hand and bumped across the stone floor, away from the water. Andrea tried to get up to grab it, but Chadwick had recovered from his initial surprise, seizing her foot from his position on the ground. She stumbled, falling onto her hands, but managed to kick out at him with her bare feet at the same time. She thumped him in the face a couple of times, but still he held on. He clawed his way up her body, trying to grab onto her flailing arms. Andrea caught him a couple of times across the jaw before he found purchase.

"When are you going to learn you won't beat me?" he asked, pulling her up onto her feet with him.

"Never," she spat definitely, mustering her fast-fading energy to knee him in the groin.

As he doubled over in pain, she knew she didn't have much time. The longer they fought the less likely she was to win. With the anklet still negating her powers her energy reserves were dangerously low. So far she'd allowed adrenaline to carry her on, but that would only last so long. Sooner or later that would fade and then she'd be running on empty, in no fit state to fight anyone, let alone a trained soldier like Chadwick with her weary body.

Andrea dashed for the canister, but Chadwick was already up again, and with one resounding blow sent her flying over the edge into the water. The water was shockingly cold, and Andrea choked it from her mouth as she staggered to her feet, wading into the shallows where the current tugged at her sodden trousers. Another splash close by told her Chadwick had also jumped down, no doubt to finish her off. She supposed she should be grateful he was focussed on her and had forgotten about the canister for now.

Her gratitude didn't last long though, as another punch landed on the side of her head, sending her back down into the churning torrent. Before she could get up Chadwick's hands were on her shirt, clutching it and forcing her below the surface. Andrea gagged as the water entered her mouth, grabbing onto Chadwick's arms to try and gain some purchase to drag herself up.

Suddenly Chadwick himself pulled her torso out of the water. Andrea coughed a couple of times, trying to gulp in as much air as she could, uncertain when he would shove her back down again.

"You really have been a pain in the arse, you know," snarled Chadwick, "You lost me my job and now you're trying to fuck things up for me again."

“Glad to be of service,” replied Andrea, attempting to get her feet onto the ground under the water. The current buffeting her really didn’t help, her whole body starting to ache from fatigue now.

“But it’s time to put you out of your misery,” he added, thrusting her straight back into the murky water.

Andrea frantically grabbed at his arms, trying to loosen his hold as the icy waves swirled around her face. His grip was firm though and her fingers scrabbled uselessly at the material of his shirt. Her mind was screaming at her to do something, but her body was unable to respond, the weeks of torture and abuse finally taking their toll. She could feel the water seeping into her mouth, her reflex action to spit it out pointless.

This couldn’t be it! Not after everything, not after Kate had come all this way to rescue her. An image of Kate floated to the front of her thoughts now, just as her body floated uselessly in the water. Andrea clutched onto it, not willing to let it go, not yet.

With an almighty effort she planted her feet on the ground and thrust upwards, catching Chadwick completely unawares. He was catapulted backwards into the deeper water, giving a few desperate splashes before he was swept off down the tunnel into the depths of the underground system.

Andrea almost lost her own footing and tumbled after him, grasping for the ledge at the side of the pool to catch herself. Her fingers scrapped on the harsh concrete as she fought to gain purchase, finally hauling herself up from the water. Every movement was an immense effort. She was tired, so very tired. Once out, she immediately flopped down onto the hard floor, the water trickling off her clothes in a stream of haphazard rivulets. She merely lay there, breathing raggedly, that act now the only one her body was capable of.

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“Aren’t you going to come and get it?”

Kate inched closer to Dixon, the warm summer breeze whipping at her hair on the exposed rooftop. The direction of the wind was to the west where Kate could see Docklands and the City off in the smoggy heat haze of the horizon. None of the thousands of people there were aware of just what imminent danger they might be in.

“You don’t want to do that,” she tried, desperately trying to think of a way to talk to him, at least until she could get close enough to tackle him.

“Yes, I do,” he replied with a laugh. “It’s time we announced ourselves to the world! Why should we have to hide away because of what the ‘ordinary people’ might think? This way there won’t be an ‘ordinary people’, just our kind.”

Kate wanted to tell him that the fact they were both mutants did not make them the same 'kind', but she bit her tongue, knowing now was not the time to antagonise him further. "We could sort something out," she said instead, "Maybe you could come back to Duransay."

Dixon laughed louder now. "What? After you all treated me so well last time?"

"We treated you fine, it was you who betrayed us."

"Betrayed you, you mean."

Kate flinched at the unwelcome reminder. It was hard enough seeing Adam after all this time as it was, without having to have her nose rubbed in her abysmal error of judgement. Seeing him here now, about to kill thousands of innocent people without a thought, she couldn't understand what it was she had ever seen in him. He was so callous and cruel she must have been utterly blind or confused not to have seen it.

"Thinking about old times?" noted Dixon, breaking her thoughts.

"Not pleasantly," Kate answered.

"I'm hurt, after all we shared," he remarked sarcastically, "But I'll tell you what, in the spirit of relationships past I'll give you a final chance," he added placing the canister on the ground and standing with his arms outstretched. "Come on, give me your best shot if you really want to hurt me."

Kate stared at him, not quite believing he was giving her an honest chance.

"I don't think you will," he added, "I think you still feel something, certainly enough not to hurt me when I'm defenceless."

There was the tiniest of pricks at Kate's heart as she saw the barest glimpse of the man she had fallen for. The charmer with the winning smile. Then images of what he had done since came crashing in, the final of which was the sight that had greeted her when she had opened that cell door earlier – Andrea battered and bruised on the filthy floor.

"You know nothing."

The concussion wave lifted Dixon right up off his feet as it hit him, sending him flying across the rooftop until he crashed into the wall of an outbuilding, the bricks actually shattering with the force of impact. Kate's anger soared up within her as she flew at him again, blasting him with wave after wave, each one more powerful than the next as he desperately tried to fight her off with his force field.

Kate could sense it weakening, not letting up in her furious attack even when he was on the floor. Finally she stopped, grabbing him with her hand and dragging him to his knees. He looked groggily up at her. "It's a shame we never got you in that machine," he commented, "I wonder if you would have screamed like Andrea?"

Kate punched him in the face, a satisfying trickle of blood starting from his obviously broken nose. Dixon remained defiant. "You know the best part though?" he continued tauntingly, "When she would scream your name." He laughed nastily. "Like you were going to somehow miraculously appear and stop the pain!"

Kate thumped him again and again, wanting to hit him with her fists rather than her powers. Wanting the satisfaction of feeling the damage she was inflicting on this evil human being. She had no idea how many times she hit him, lost to her rage. When her arms finally started to ache she stopped, breathing heavily as his battered body hung limply from her hand. Amazingly he was still conscious, and he made a hacking cough, fresh blood blossoming on his lips.

"I can see she means a lot to you," he noted between rasps, "More than I ever did."

"You meant nothing to me, do you hear me, nothing!"

"I'm sorry to hear you say that," he replied, "But not sorry to do this."

Kate had completely forgotten about the gas canister in her all enveloping rage, but she saw it now as Dixon threw it across the rooftop. She hadn't seen him pick it up again, cursing herself for allowing her hatred to blind her to the situation. She flung herself after it, but her despairing lunge came too late. The canister clanked noisily on the concrete, the lid flying off.

Only nothing emerged from it.

Kate snatched it up, looking inside. "It's empty!"

Dixon's laughter was insidious, creeping across the rooftop and worming its way into her ears. Kate swung round, stalking over to him and yanking him back up by his shirt. He had the temerity to grin weakly back at her as the blood continued to trickle between his teeth. Her fist was back and poised when he suddenly spoke.

"Aren't you forgetting about something?"

Kate's fist hovered before his face, the act of will holding it back immense.

"The other, non-empty, canister?" he reminded her, "Even if your girlfriend did manage to stop Chadwick there's the small matter of the explosives wired to this whole building, set to go off in...ooo...about three minutes time."

Kate stared incredulously at him, trying to take in what he had revealed. The building was going to go up in a matter of minutes and Andrea was still inside somewhere.

"Better hurry if you want to save her," noted Dixon, seemingly reading her mind.

Kate dumped him on the ground, immediately turning and sprinting for the stairs. She could hear his laughter following her all the way down. Landing at the foot of the steps she cast her eyes anxiously around. Andrea could be anywhere in the huge building.

“Andrea?” she called out desperately, knowing it was pretty pointless but not having anything else to go on. The only reply was her own voice, bouncing off the walls. Kate tried to calm her racing thoughts and think – where would Chadwick have gone to release his canister?

Dixon had mentioned releasing the gas into the air or the water supply, and since this was a power station it probably had some connection to the latter of those for cooling purposes. Guessing that would be down below somewhere Kate continued on down the stairs to the bottom level of the building, surmising that she was now underground. She frantically ran along, calling Andrea’s name, periodically glancing at her watch as time slipped agonisingly away. The sound of running water filtered along the corridor to her and Kate quickened her pace, coming to an open room.

And there at the foot of the ladder she saw her, lying still on the stone floor, soaked to the bone and looking incredibly pale. Kate’s heart lurched painfully for the second time that day at the sight of Andrea unconscious. The only merciful things were that there was no sign of Chadwick and that Kate could also plainly see the unopened canister discarded on the floor close to Andrea. Kate leapt from the top of the ladder, gliding down to the floor using her powers, anxious to get to Andrea’s side as fast as possible. Once on the ground she could hear the reassuring yet faint sound of breathing coming from Andrea’s lips.

“Andrea,” said Kate gently, touching her sodden shoulder. The young woman’s impromptu dunking had served to clean off all the grime she had been coated in before and Andrea almost looked normal apart from the terrifyingly pallid shade of her skin and her hollow cheeks.

Slowly her eyelids struggled open. “Kate?” she registered, a tiny smile flickering across her face, “What happened to Dixon?”

“His canister was empty,” Kate answered quickly, “I left him on the roof to come and get you – he’s rigged the building with explosives.”

That seemed to spark some fresh life into Andrea, who forced herself up onto her elbows. “You have to get out of here!”

“*We* have to get out of here,” corrected Kate.

Andrea shook her head, “I’m dead on my feet, I can barely walk - I’ll only slow you down.”

“We don’t have time for a debate,” stated Kate adamantly, “I’ll carry you if I have to, I did it before.”

Kate glanced down at Andrea’s feet, cracked and broken from where she’d been running through the building without shoes. She had to fight back the sickness in the pit of her stomach on seeing the obviously painful damage. Just above Andrea’s right foot, Dixon’s device was still affixed tightly to her ankle, another surge of anger shooting through Kate on seeing further evidence of what Dixon had done.

“This might help,” suggested Kate, carefully taking Andrea’s leg in her hands. She took a moment to compose herself, not wanting to make any mistakes when directing her powers at Andrea. Then she intricately focussed a concussion beam onto the device with her finger, splitting it apart with ease.

“Thanks,” said Andrea, rubbing where the anklet had been, “Though even without that it’s going to take a little while for me to absorb enough light energy to replace what I’ve lost.”

Kate nodded – she had feared that would be the case. Without waiting for anything further from Andrea, Kate wrapped her arms around the younger woman’s waist and pulled her to her feet, Andrea leaning heavily on her shoulder once upright. Kate grunted under the weight, added to by the pull of Andrea’s soaked clothes.

“How long did you say he’d set the timers for?” asked Andrea as Kate started struggling towards the ladder with her precious cargo.

“He said three minutes, but who knows if that’s true.”

“And when was that?”

Kate looked at her watch and then grimly at Andrea. “About two minutes ago.”

“We’ll never make it.”

Kate wasn’t willing to accept that. “Yes we will,” she stated, though her stooped walk suggested otherwise, “Come on.”

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Andrea used what little strength she had to pull up, knowing Kate was deluding herself.

“Kate!”

The name held a whole host of meaning in its simplicity. Andrea stared down at the smaller woman who was hanging onto her for dear life. Kate stared defiantly back, though Andrea suspected she knew deep down that Andrea was most likely right.

Finally Kate gave a resigned sigh, lowering Andrea to the floor and crouching down beside her. “All right I have another idea,” she offered, “We’ll wait here until the explosions go off and then I’ll use my concussion waves to create a sort of protective barrier around us.”

Andrea’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Have you ever used your power that way before?”

Kate shifted uneasily on the balls of her feet. “No,” she admitted.

“This is crazy!” cried Andrea, exasperated by Kate’s belligerence.

“No crazier than expecting me to just leave you here.”

Andrea held Kate’s intense gaze, the blue-grey eyes boring right into her and letting her know that there was no way Kate was going to abandon her. For the first time in her life Andrea knew without a doubt that here was someone she could rely on absolutely, someone who would willingly give up their own life for her. Andrea also knew with total certainty that she would do the same.

“All right, we wait,” she agreed, “Though we better protect this too,” she added reaching for the gas container.

Kate sat solemnly down next to her, crossing her legs on the floor and gently taking Andrea’s hands. She softly rubbed her thumbs over them, keeping her eyes trained downwards. Andrea could see the bobbing in Kate’s throat where she was swallowing nervously as the seconds ticked away.

“How long do we have?” asked Andrea, almost unable to speak with the weight of her heavy heart.

Kate made a last check of her watch. “30 seconds.”

There was no more time for anything else. Andrea leant forward, took Kate’s face in her hands and softly kissed her. The kiss held an unspoken desperate yearning as their lips melded together. A longing for all the promise yet fulfilled, for all the future that may never be seen. Andrea didn’t want to break the contact, but she needed to say something.

As she pulled back, she stared into Kate’s moist blue eyes, her own tears making it hard to see. “I love you,” said Andrea raggedly, knowing this might be the last chance she got to say the words.

Kate’s lips parted in response when suddenly there was a deafening boom. She got up just in time as the shockwave from the explosion hit them. Kate was almost knocked from her feet as the waves from her hands sprang outwards pushing back against the onslaught.

The roaring, crashing sounds were deafening as the fire and debris battered against Kate’s barrier while Andrea could only look impotently on. More explosions sounded around them and Andrea could see Kate grimacing at the effort of maintaining their only defence from certain death. The rain of debris was relentless, the air thick with smoke outside the barrier as it got ever darker. Kate let out one last anguished, determined cry before everything went completely black.

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The faint, gentle rocking sensation was the first thing Andrea became aware of as she drifted slowly up from slumber. Opening her eyes, it took her a moment to recall where she was until the reassuring familiarity settled over her. It was Kate's boat.

Andrea pushed herself up into a sitting position, seeming to have slumped into an ungainly sprawl on the sofa. A book plopped off her stomach onto the floor, and as she picked it up she remembered that she had been reading the novel before sleep had claimed her. She was slightly disconcerted by her new found propensity for dropping off in the middle of the day, supposing it would be a while before her body fully recovered from her ordeal at the hands of Dixon.

That had ended nearly two weeks ago, and she'd been under Doc's close supervision for the first ten days of her return to the base. There had been times during that when she had come close to slapping the medic for his over-attentiveness, though she knew that he, and everyone else, were just worried about her. The labs and medical bays made her strangely uneasy, though, and as soon as she'd got the all clear she'd wanted to get off the base.

Kate had been more than happy to bring her to the boat, though she suspected the other woman had forgotten just what a state she'd left the yacht in when she'd made the invite. When they'd stepped into the cabin area, Kate had hastily binned some empty bottles, but not quickly enough for Andrea not to see the whiskey labels on them. Kate had also had to clear away a jumble of clothes and papers from the sofa just so Andrea could sit down. When she had spotted Andrea looking inquisitively at her, Kate had been forced to admit that she'd been living on the boat prior to coming to rescue Andrea. She didn't give many details, but her tone and the condition of the normally immaculate yacht were enough to tell Andrea that Kate must have been in quite a state at the time. A fresh wave of regret washed over her as she had realised that was because of her, sorrowfully recalling all the harsh words of that fateful day in the Scottish mountains. Andrea could see now that it was only a misplaced sense of protectiveness that had led to Kate not telling her about Dixon in the first place. Or maybe not that misplaced as it had turned out.

Andrea shivered slightly at the reminder of Dixon, attempting to snuggle further into her thick jumper. That was another unwelcome after effect of her incarceration – chills that seemed to strike without warning. Doc had reassured her that they would go away, pointing out that not only had her body been subjected to prolonged abuse, but also that she had lost a fair bit of weight as the result of it.

The smell of food wafted across the cabin to her now, and she saw something freshly cooked sitting on the kitchen counter. Smiling to herself at Kate's continued efforts to fatten her up, she shuffled along the sofa and picked up one of the wedges on the plate. She wasn't sure what it was, but it looked invitingly chocolaty so she took a bite. Whatever it was, it tasted fantastic and Andrea quickly devoured the whole thing, wondering how rude it would be to help herself to the rest of the plate.

There was no sign of Kate herself, Andrea presuming she was up top doing something boat related. Kate was doing everything she could for Andrea, though Andrea thought that maybe she was trying just a bit too hard at times. It was almost as if she was afraid of damaging Andrea if she asked anything too strenuous of her. They'd

certainly not been intimate since they'd got back from London, even the kisses they shared being oddly chaste.

Of course Andrea wasn't the only one who'd been affected in London, and Kate herself had also been subjected to some of Doc's scrutiny after her efforts in protecting her and Andrea from the collapsing power station. When they had finally been dug out of the rubble of the building in one piece, the sight of Colonel Parsons and the rest of the superhuman team had greeted them. One person notable by the absence had been Anna Kaminski.

It appeared that the Colonel had finally stepped in and overridden the government official on hearing about Kate and Andrea's predicament and Kaminski's reluctance to help out. When it became apparent that Kate and Andrea had saved the entire non-mutant population of London from a gory death, his decision had been wholly vindicated. After a few formalities Kate soon found herself back in a job and back in command of the unit. Andrea had no idea where Kaminski had been shipped off to and she didn't really care – the woman had dared to try and replace Kate and she deserved all she got.

The sound of footsteps on the short ladder to the cabin alerted Andrea to the fact that company was approaching. As Kate opened the door Andrea saw that, unlike herself, Kate was sporting clothes more befitting the season – a plain white vest top and khaki shorts with a pair of deck shoes on her feet. It was now just into September, but it was still sufficiently warm for the summery clothing. Kate smiled warmly when she saw Andrea was awake, the simple gesture doing far more to raise Andrea's temperature than anything she had attempted herself.

"How are you feeling?" asked Kate, crossing to sit down next to Andrea.

"I'm feeling like I might go insane if you ask me that one more time!"

"I'm sorry, darling, it was just so...scary finding you like that, seeing what Dixon had done to you."

"I'm all right, really," insisted Andrea, attempting a soft smile, "Though your concern is touching."

"I'll never stop worrying about you."

Andrea's smile spread further. "And I wouldn't want you to, despite any protestations I might make," she admitted, "I secretly hoped you'd come and rescue me. Every day of those two weeks, that's what kept me going – thoughts of you. And you didn't let me down. Lucky for me you're just so goddam stubborn and didn't give up."

"Me stubborn? I think I might have a sentence involving the words kettle, black and pot in reply to that!"

"All right, I might have to concede that one," noted Andrea sardonically, "Did I already say how sorry I was for the awful way I acted and what I said?"

Kate made a show of thinking for a moment. "At least two dozens times," she said eventually.

"Still it can't hurt once more," Andrea suggested before shaking her head ruefully. "I'm not sure how you put up with me sometimes," she noted, "I know I've been a right pain in the arse at times this past few months, but I'm not normally quite this impetuous and hotheaded. It's almost like there's been too many things happening at once, and my judgement's been a bit off. There was the accident in the warehouse, finding out that I had these amazing powers, not to mention the effect you were having on me! I was so intent on finding who was responsible for that accident that I didn't stop to think I might be getting in over my head."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," insisted Kate, "We've all made a few mistakes these past months. At least you have strong convictions and determination, it's just that it can veer into headstrong stubbornness sometimes. But I know I'm far from innocent where that's concerned either."

"True," agreed Andrea, "It seems we're both emotionally inept in a few ways, how will we cope?"

"I suppose we'll just have to muddle through some way," remarked Kate with a shrug, Andrea able to detect the humour in the tone, "You never know, we might be able to teach each other a few things. I'm willing to give it a go if you are?"

"Hmm," said Andrea, stroking her chin in consideration as Kate narrowed her eyes at the hesitation. Kate had apologised many times already over the way she had kept secrets from Andrea, but it didn't hurt to make her stew for just a moment. Finally Andrea smiled. "I think I can manage that."

Kate rolled her eyes at the stalling, before getting back to what they had originally been talking about. "It's just a shame both Dixon and Chadwick got away."

"Yes," agreed Andrea, "But I've done enough thinking about them for a lifetime, I'm sure they'll get their just deserts one day."

"Let's hope so," agreed Kate. She shuffled closer to Andrea on the seating, her hand coming to rest lightly on Andrea's thigh though it didn't go any further. "You found the fudge cakes then?" she noted.

"How did you...?"

"You have some chocolate on your lip," pointed out Kate, reaching up to brush it off with her thumb. The gesture sent a small shiver through Andrea, a welcome reminder of former closeness.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist," remarked Andrea, wishing that Kate hadn't dropped her hand away again.

“It’s all right, they were meant for you. And you should make the most of it since they’re about the extent of my home-cooking abilities. Consider them an alternative to a birthday cake.”

Andrea looked at Kate in some bemusement. “It’s not my birthday.”

“I know; I missed it,” said Kate sorrowfully, glancing away.

Andrea squeezed the hand on her thigh gently. “Don’t worry, it was hardly forefront in my mind either while Dixon was torturing me.” She instantly regretted the ill-judged words, seeing Kate looking pained at the reminder. “But thank you for the cakes,” she quickly added, “Perhaps we can think of them as just lovely cakes rather than birthday cakes?”

“Ah, I see, you won’t want this present then?” remarked Kate, producing an envelope and tapping it teasingly on her hand.

Andrea narrowed her eyes, happily seeing the cheeky half-grin that had replaced Kate’s former worried look. “I didn’t say that,” she said.

Kate’s smile widened, stopping the tapping and handing the card over. “It’s not exactly the most romantic thing in the world, but I hope you’ll like it. If you’d rather not think of it as a birthday present, then how about considering it an anniversary present?”

“And what anniversary is that exactly?” asked Andrea taking the envelope.

“Our six month anniversary.”

Andrea’s confusion was only deepening, her brow furrowing. “But we haven’t been going out for six months,” she reminded Kate.

“No, but it is six months to the day since we first met.”

Andrea smiled, realising that Kate was right – they had indeed first met on the 9th of March that year. How things had changed from that day when they had been frostily sizing each other up across a desk in an interrogation room.

Turning her attention back to the envelope she ripped it open, finding a booklet of tickets in the card inside. She read the text of the first one, a smile spreading across her face as she realised it was a season ticket to Liverpool. “How on earth did you manage to get this?” she asked in wonder.

“I have a few contacts,” explained Kate cryptically, tapping the side of her nose, “We did save the whole of London after all; I think we’re owed a few favours. You like it then?”

“Like it? It’s brilliant!” gushed Andrea suddenly, reaching over to hug Kate who looked slightly abashed, and not a little surprised at the embrace. “Though I will need permission to go off base every other weekend,” she added. They hadn’t actually

discussed what the future held, though Andrea had always suspected she would find herself back on Duransay after her recuperation, it was her home now after all.

“Well, we couldn’t have you going unaccompanied,” started Kate thoughtfully, “So it’s a good job I got this as well,” she added producing a second set of tickets with a flourish.

“You brought yourself one too?” asked Andrea incredulously, “Who was this present for exactly?”

“If you’d rather take someone else they can have mine...”

“Funny! You know there’s no one I’d rather go with.”

Kate smiled, her hand coming back to rest on Andrea’s thigh. This time Andrea slid her own hand across, slipping her fingers between Kate’s. When Kate’s eyes came up to look questioningly at her Andrea merely leant in and placed her lips softly on the other woman’s. She could feel Kate’s warm lips yielding to her, no restraint in this particular kiss.

When Andrea pulled back Kate’s blue-grey eyes were staring directly into Andrea’s own from mere inches away, hopeful and alluring.

“But I can think of something I’d much rather have for my birthday stroke anniversary,” whispered Andrea.

The lop-sided grin on Kate’s face showed she knew exactly what Andrea meant. “Oh, by the way,” said Kate, her voice dropping to Andrea’s favourite husky level, “Back in the power station, there was something I didn’t get the chance to say.”

Andrea raised her eyebrows inquisitively.

“I love you too,” said Kate simply.

Andrea smiled, bringing Kate’s hand up and kissing it. Without any more words she pulled Kate gently to her feet and led her to the bedroom.

EPILOGUE

Callum Chadwick didn't think he had been quite so nervous in his life as he stood in the dimly lit room. All those times he'd been in trouble in the army had never been as bad as this. At least on those occasions he knew that the worst that could happen would be a stay in military prison. That seemed like a walk in the park compared to what he might face any moment now; he was scared to even contemplate what might happen to him. The anxious sweat was trickling down his neck and on under the material of his shirt, the palms of his hands clammy as he clasped them by his side. Next to him Dixon looked as cool as usual, Chadwick not knowing how the man did it. He'd just got his arse kicked by Jarvis and made a complete balls-up of pretty much everything and he was standing there as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Finally the door at the back of the room opened and a figure crossed to sit at the desk in front of them, remaining in the shadows for the time being. They didn't speak immediately, Chadwick just listening to the sound of his hammering heart in the otherwise silent room. It was Dixon who finally broke the silence.

"I'm sorry about the cock-up with Hallstrom and Jarvis, he began, But if..."

His voice cut off in a choking gasp, his hands darting up to his throat as he struggled to breathe. Chadwick gulped in fear as the figure opposite rose from the desk, their hand outstretched in Dixon's direction.

"You're....sorry....?" they repeated slowly.

Dixon couldn't reply, still gasping for air as his windpipe was invisibly crushed.

"You acted without authorisation and brought suspicion on the whole organisation and you're 'sorry'? Not to mention that you dared to kidnap Andrea Hallstrom of all people. Did you seriously think that I wouldn't find out?"

Chadwick was trembling where he stood but risked a sidewise glance at Dixon, the other man now going a decidedly red colour in the face. Chadwick could see that he was actually also hovering a few inches off the ground, suspended in mid air as he went through the final throes of life.

"It's too late for sorry, Mr Dixon. We do not tolerate failure, and you are most certainly a failure."

Dixon let out one last strangled cry before his body went limp. The shadowy figure dropped their hand and instantly Dixon's body crashed lifelessly to the floor. It was all Chadwick could do to maintain control of his bladder as the head of the figure now swivelled in his direction.

"And what of you, Mr Chadwick, are you a failure too?"

"Uh..uh..I..uh..." was all Chadwick could stutter in answer.

“We can’t lose all our loyal servants, so we’re willing to give you one last chance...on one condition.”

Chadwick was relieved beyond measure, willing to do anything if it meant he didn’t meet the same fate as Dixon. “What is it?” he asked.

“We want you to become one of us?”

“One of you?” he repeated dumbly.

“It’s an honour really,” continued the other person, “You will be the first to test our new serum that mutates the cells in otherwise normal human beings.”

Chadwick wasn’t liking the sound of this, but what choice did he have.

“What do you say?” pressed the figure.

“I’m not sure...” mumbled Chadwick

Suddenly his throat was tight, the figure’s hand was up again and now they were stepping round the table towards him. As they stepped from the shadows the light caught the brilliant golden colour of the woman’s hair. She was somewhere in her fifties, though even in his present situation Chadwick couldn’t help thinking that she was incredibly beautiful for an older woman. The fine contours of her face were held in an even expression despite the fact that she was presently strangling Chadwick using some unseen superhuman power. The only thing that gave even a flicker of emotion was her eyes. Their pale blue depths pierced into Chadwick with such venom that he thought that if the strangling didn’t kill him, they could well fry him on the spot.

“I said,” repeated the woman in a low, menacing voice, “What do you say?”

“Yes, Dr Hallstrom, I say yes!”