



CHAPTER 1

TREMORS UNDERFOOT ALERTED CLEO BEFORE she heard the growl of distant engines and saw plumes of dust rising across the desert. Motorcycles—not on the road, but racing in leaps and jerks across rough terrain.

Ash saw them an instant later. “Cleo! Ours?”

“No. Not ours.” Cleo and engines shared a common language, learned as a child raised above her uncle’s automotive repair shop. She shaded her eyes against the unrelenting sun. “Coming too fast for us to make it back to the jeep and get it going.”

She’d disabled the vehicle herself as an excuse to drop behind the convoy and spend an hour or two exploring the ancient ruins of a walled palace built over a thousand years ago and deserted for centuries. Ash had read about El Ukhaidir when she’d studied anthropology in college, knowing she’d be deployed to the Middle East and figuring she might as well know something about its history.

The turrets in the wall and the graceful, elegant arches within—some crumbling from the weight of years—were fascinating, and the courtyards still showed traces of great clay pots where flowering fruit and nut trees might once have grown. Probably almond and apricot, according to Ash. There were even remnants of a low wall that would have encircled a shallow pool.

A place well worth visiting, exploring, even fantasizing about, although Cleo’s fantasies ran more to envisioning harem girls lounging beside the pool, while Ash kept talking about a famous woman who’d discovered and mapped ruins like this, an eccentric British explorer who’d become an expert on the desert and its tribes,

and been called by some “The Desert Queen.” Cleo had listened, but more to the point as far as she was concerned—even more than imagined harem girls—was the chance to be with Ash. Alone. A chance they’d taken as much advantage of as they could in the limited time they’d dared to stay.

But now enemies were approaching, and Cleo and Ash were less than halfway back to the jeep. As easy as repairs would be, no way could she do it fast enough to be gone before the oncoming motorcycles arrived.

Damn! Cleo knew better than to believe morning reports that a sector was secure. Why had she chosen to believe them today? Hope overriding skepticism, that’s why.

The stone ruins were already too far away to reach before they could be seen. Besides, that would be too obvious.

“This way!” Ash ordered. She veered from the path and bolted across sand and gravel toward the dry ravine, a *wadi* in Arabic, that must once have provided water for the palace in the brief rainy seasons. Cleo gripped her rifle close and slid down the steep bank behind her. No need for Ash to look back to make sure she followed; they both knew by now that Cleo would follow her lieutenant anywhere, even to the depths of hell—which this might very well be.

The undulating *wadi* was wide and shallow, the bank just high enough to hide them if they stood erect, but not from an observer on the edge looking directly down. There were overhangs left by erosion in many places, some deep and cave-like. One hollow, where the dry streambed turned sharply, looked big enough to hold them. They scabbled inside, making it still deeper and higher, clawing desperately at the packed soil and gravel, glad of the dirt that collapsed behind them across the entrance and provided more concealment.

“Behind me,” Ash panted, wriggling so that Cleo was shoved further into their burrow. “That’s an order, Sergeant Brown!”

“I’m the one with the rifle!” Not to mention the one with sharpshooter rating. But when the lieutenant called her “Sergeant”

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in that tone, arguing was out of the question, so she crouched behind with the gun angled across Ash's shoulder. If they were discovered...

By the noise and clouds of dust, there were too many cyclists to defend against. Cleo knew what the fate of two captured woman soldiers could be. Her own skinny ass might have no more than propaganda appeal, if they even noticed her sex before shooting to kill. She'd been mistaken for a teenaged boy often enough. But Lieutenant Ashton, an officer and most definitely a woman for all her tall, strong frame, would be a rare prize.

The growls of engines rose to a roar, louder, closer, closer—Cleo estimated a dozen machines—and stopped.

They'd found the disabled jeep.

Ash shifted in the confined space, trying to draw her sidearm. The slight movement triggered a shower of sand and stones from above. Cleo felt Ash flinch as something struck her right hand. Body pressed hard against Ash's back, head against her thick, dark hair, cheek against her face, Cleo steadied her. Enough light came into their hiding place to show a trickle of blood along Ash's hand, already beginning to crust over with the dust that covered every inch of them. Sweat trickling down their faces turned into gritty mud. Ash reached down with her left hand, groped for the stone that had hit her, and stared at it in the dim light. Cleo strained to see it too, without success.

Voices carried through the dry desert air—shouts, questions, orders, all too far away to make out individual words. The convoy Ash and Cleo had lagged behind had left plenty of tracks, so the newcomers might conclude that the jeep's occupants had gone on in another vehicle. Or they might not. The women's own boots wouldn't have made much impression on the hard ground, but a really skillful tracker might notice something. Cleo herself would have noticed.

The voices came gradually closer, paused for some sort of discussion, then moved on toward the arches and turrets of the ruins. Ash and Cleo dared to draw a few breaths, then froze as boots—more

than one pair—crunched over pebbles until they stopped not far away near the rim of the *wadi*.

Two voices, arguing. The others must have gone on to search the interior of the fortress while these men checked out the *wadi*. One of them cursed and moved off to follow the rest, but the other could be heard starting down the bank and then, after the first step or two, setting off an avalanche of dry soil.

Under cover of the clamor outside, Ash tried again to get at the holstered sidearm at her hip. Cleo's leg was pressed so hard against the pistol that it bruised her knee. There was no room for her to shift—but suddenly the gun wasn't there anymore. It was in Ash's injured hand. A hand that hadn't moved, and couldn't possibly have reached for the pistol.

The sound of boots on gravel moved away.

"How...?" Cleo murmured.

Ash's hand began to shake. The lieutenant's hands *never* shook. They'd been in tight spots before, with their whole squad in danger, and she'd stayed cool as an October breeze in Montana.

"Something's...strange."

The faint quaver in her whisper scared Cleo, but she didn't let it show. "Later. It's okay. Hold steady."

Cleo felt Ash brace and take command. "Sergeant. I'll save two bullets. You know what to do, if it comes to that."

"Yes, ma'am." One for each of them. They would not be taken alive. Cleo'd be the one to do it, as she'd promised once before, when it hadn't quite come to that.

The sound of boots approached again. No more time for talking. Maybe no more time for living. Cleo drew in a slow, silent breath, and held it—a breath filled with the aroma of Ash's sweat, the lemon soap she used, and an essence all her own that only Cleo knew. If there'd been rumpled lavender-scented sheets beneath them instead of acrid desert, it would have been almost like that tiny room in Paris where they'd spent a glorious secret week of leave. Add in the musk of their lovemaking, just Ash and Cleo together, no barrier of rank, no sense of shame; and their reflections in the wall mirror

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framed by carved wooden curlicues and cherubs, with Ash's dark, tousled hair just long enough to brush her jaw and Cleo's cropped coppery hair pressed against her cheek. A memory to cling to. All the more if it would be the last memory ever.

A breeze had sprung up outside, sending little puffs of dust through the slit at the cave's entrance. Anyone looking there directly would notice the opening. Cleo let her breath out slowly and drew another one.

The pistol appeared suddenly in Ash's left hand, while the stone had shifted into her right. Bit by bit, with quiet rustlings and scrapings, the entrance to their hideaway changed form to allow them both a better view—yet Ash still hadn't moved.

Cleo tensed. She must be hallucinating. Stress, heat, dust-filled air, fear for Ash, all screwing with her mind. *Focus! Concentrate! Brace for whatever you have to do!*

There was a hint of movement outside. Now she could see, clearly, the man pausing just beyond them under an overhang that jutted out like the prow of a ship.

He began to turn. Ash's hand didn't move, just stiffened, and a tremor shook the overhang. She raised a finger, and a clod fell. Another twitch of her finger, and a bigger clod fell, then another, and another. With a loud crack the whole formation began to capsize, stones and dirt pelting down, almost hiding the man. He yelled and struggled, lurched as though he'd been shoved from behind, and managed to stumble away before the full brunt of the landslide hit. When the noise and dust subsided, he could be heard some distance downstream scrambling up the side of the *wadi*.

The returning silence felt louder than the turmoil just past. What had happened? What had Ash done? And how?

Ash kept on staring at the object in her hand. Cleo, with no idea what to say, said nothing. Eventually, the men who had been searching the ruins could be heard on the path back to the road, but it was a while before they revved their engines and roared away. Cleo knew all too well what they'd probably been doing in the meantime.

At last, desperate to move her aching joints and feel more air and space around her, she lifted the end of her rifle and began to knock bits of dirt and pebbles out of the small opening in front of them. Ash looked up, and all at once great gaps appeared, as though some giant hand was punching through the wall.

Ash lurched forward and scrambled out on all fours, dropping the pistol along the way while favoring the hand still holding the hidden object. Cleo tumbled out behind her. They sat a few feet apart in the dry streambed, gulping fresh air, dazed, but not so much so that Cleo wasn't on alert for any sign that someone had stayed behind.

"Cleo," Ash said at last. She hesitated. "Sergeant Brown."

This was serious. Cleo waited. Usually when Ash shifted into full lieutenant mode her clear gray eyes took on a steely glint, but not now. This time they begged for reassurance.

"Sergeant Brown, what...what did you just see?"

"I saw you save our sorry asses, ma'am. I don't claim to understand what happened, how things moved the way they did, but I saw it."

"So if I'm hallucinating, so are you."

Cleo could get away with a lot when it came to most folks, but she could never lie to her lieutenant. To Ash. "We're not hallucinating. Just because we don't understand something doesn't mean it isn't real. I know plenty of things for sure without understanding them. Objects moved, and from what I saw, you made them move. How did it feel to you?"

"It was...strange. Things happened because I thought about them, but it wasn't just me. It was this." She opened her right hand at last and showed what she'd been holding, what Cleo was pretty sure had fallen on her in the cave and drawn blood. "Her."

Not stone, at least not any kind Cleo had ever seen. Ivory, maybe, yellowed by age. Whatever it was made out of, the carved figure was clearly, extravagantly female, four or five inches high, with three pairs of full breasts springing from her torso. Some kind of ancient goddess. She wore a sort of high crown that must once have been even higher but had been broken off. Her legs were obscured by a

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skirt incised with unidentifiable designs. Her face had lost part of its nose, but was otherwise intact, with a regal look about the chin and the direct gaze. Her arms, too, were mostly missing, although you could see where they'd been, and there was enough left of one of them to form a sharp point where it had broken—a point stained with recently shed blood.

Ash's blood. All that mattered to Cleo right then, besides the unlikely fact that they were still alive, was Ash. The lieutenant was... shaken. Not scared, not confused, not angry, exactly, but struggling with something made up of all of those, and more.

"She's stuck in my mind," Ash blurted out at last. "Trying to control me. She may have saved us, but I want her out. I get all the orders I can stand from my commanding officers."

Defiance! Cleo nearly shook with relief. Ash was going to be all right.

"Toss her to me, Ash. See how you feel then."

She held out her hand, then tried to duck when the figurine shot up and hurtled toward her head, stopping with a sudden jerk just before it hit. Ash's face was taut with strain. A fierce heat flowed from the hovering figure, feeling as though it would sear Cleo's skin. Then all at once the goddess, or whatever she was, vanished. A few pebbles could be heard dropping inside the cave. Maybe she'd burrowed back into it.

Cleo's whirling mind took refuge in crude humor. "Guess I'm not this particular Desert Queen's type. Just as well. She wants somebody like one of those Hindu Kali statues, with a bunch of extra arms and hands to do justice to all her extra boobs."

"What she wanted," Ash said, standing somewhat stiffly, "was to hurl herself right through your head. I struggled to stop her, and I won. Now she's gone. I made her go away. It's over."

Cleo got to her feet with an effort. It seemed like they'd been scrunched up in that cave in fear for their lives an hour or more. "So it was only your ass she intended to save, and mine was just collateral non-damage? I can live with that."

“If you’re lucky,” Ash said. “She may be bound to this place. Not to the palace over there—that’s only about 1,300 years old—but to something much older. Astarte, Ishtar, Ashtoreth—many names for more or less the same goddess. Maybe some temple was here thousands of years ago that left no trace—except for Her.”

“A real Desert Queen, then? But ‘Ashtoreth’? Really? That name?”

“Don’t go there! It’s just a coincidence. Besides, in this area her name would most likely be Ishtar.” Ash’s irritation was an improvement on worrying about possible hallucinations. “A hundred years ago the clerks at Ellis Island didn’t bother with figuring out how to spell immigrants’ names. My great-grandfather’s name became ‘Ashton’ instead of ‘Athnasiou.’ Greek. A whole different crew of goddesses.” Her expression warned Cleo not to mention her actual first name, Athena. “Anyway, enough of that. She’s gone now. End of story.”

“Sure.” Cleo watched Ash bend down for the pistol she’d dropped, now half-buried in gravel. The gun rose to meet Ash’s hand. “If you say so.”

“It’ll wear off,” Ash muttered, still looking down.

Cleo groped for words. What must it feel like, some impossible, unnatural power being thrust into you without your consent? Something that couldn’t be explained by experience, or training, or instinct? For that matter, was Cleo herself suffering from shellshock, to willingly believe in a stone goddess controlling her commander?

Right now it didn’t matter. She found her words. “Whether it wears off or not, you’re still you.” She reached out, and Ash’s hand met hers in an entirely natural grip.

“We’re still us,” Ash said.

What flowed between them when they touched needed no explanation at all. Ash rested her gritty cheek against Cleo’s until a stronger breeze sprang up, signaling the lowering of the sun toward the vast desert horizon.

Ash stepped back. The lieutenant in command resurfaced. “It’s time to get back to the jeep and out of here.”

Cleo didn’t have much hope that it would be that easy. There was nowhere anyone could hide between where they were and the

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jeep, and Cleo was sure, as much by instinct as by sight, that no motorcycle lurked behind its low profile. One man might be hiding there, prone, but with no motorcycle left behind she doubted that. They'd have thought of a different plan. She held her rifle ready just in case.

"They've booby-trapped it. Or maybe planted the explosives on the periphery. Let me check it out. If they've just left a few IEDs in the road, I can find and avoid them, and we might yet be able to drive out of here." This was one of Cleo's areas of expertise. She'd developed an instinct for it. For all kinds of explosives, in fact, even guns; she knew when a gun was about to fire, and from roughly what direction. Just something you picked up from experience, she figured, if you were wired like that. So she was sure there was no gun aimed at them from behind the jeep—and equally sure that there were explosives nearby.

She led the way slowly, carefully, focusing intently on the terrain, not even looking away at the sound of another vehicle coming fast.

"Ours," she said briefly. "Signal him not to come too close." She knew which vehicle it was by the sound, and who'd been driving it in the convoy. Somebody must finally have noticed that they were missing and sent Corporal Jones back to check on them. Not a good choice. He was new to the country, ignorant of the terrain.

Cleo didn't need to look to make sure Ash would signal, but the new arrival was speeding faster than he should, and not braking soon enough. Ash shouted. Cleo looked up and shouted too, but of course he couldn't hear them.

"Stay back!" she yelled at Ash, and began to run right toward the oncoming jeep. Jones braked at last, went into a spin, slid toward their disabled jeep—and suddenly the earth fell away under Cleo's feet. Or, no, she'd been lifted high by some strong, invisible hand, then set down hard against the ground at least twenty feet from where she'd been.

Jones's brakes squealed. He slowed way down in a cloud of dust, but there was no way he was going to escape a collision. Cleo, still holding her rifle, lurched toward Ash to protect her, to shield Ash's

body with her own. The lieutenant evaded her and extended her right hand toward their jeep, which leapt suddenly high into the air, flying at least fifty feet while a series of explosions shook it. And then a surging mass of flames erupted, far more than the gas in the tank could account for.

Yeah, it had been booby-trapped. Cleo's head pounded with the frantic beating of her heart, or the explosions echoing off the stone walls of the distant fortress. Or maybe both. She found herself crouching on the ground at Ash's feet, and noticed the lieutenant beginning to slump just in time to catch her and ease her down.

Jones, staggering out of his undamaged jeep, hardly registered in Cleo's consciousness. Ash in her arms was all that mattered.

"I don't know how..." Ash muttered. "I thought she was gone, but it's not over after all."

"Shush. It'll be all right." Cleo stroked her back. Being able to do what Ash could now do might not be such a bad thing. This didn't seem like a good time to say that, though. Cleo's arms tightened around her. The hell with what Jones would think. Technically it wasn't illegal anymore to be lesbian or gay in the Army, but they could always get you for something. Fraternization between officers and enlisted was high on the list.

Ash pulled free and stood. So did Cleo. By the time Jones started toward them with questions, Ash was every inch Lieutenant Ashton, and Cleo was Sergeant Brown.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" he asked.

"Just a little shaken. How about you?"

"All in one piece, I guess, but what..."

"That was really something, wasn't it?" Ash said casually. "Those guys are getting mighty creative with their explosives." Then, sternly, "You'd better learn to approach any possible booby trap situation more carefully. If they'd buried IEDs out at a distance from the disabled vehicle you might not be all in one piece."

"Yes, ma'am. But what..."

She ignored him, moving off toward his jeep. He turned to Cleo.

"What was all that, Sergeant?"

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She outranked him, but he'd had a big shock, and was honestly curious, so she let him get away with questioning her.

"My fault. Clogged air filter. I always check, but didn't today, so I had to stop to clear it, and then we saw a gang coming fast on motorcycles. Lieutenant Ashton and I managed to hide over in the *wadi* until they were gone. The rest you've seen." She turned away and followed Ash.

She'd actually fiddled with a different system to disable the jeep, but nobody was ever going to find out anything from that still-glowing hunk of twisted metal. A hunk of twisted metal that had been her jeep. Her responsibility. She knew better than to get sentimental about machines, but this was the one she'd driven the lieutenant in for two years, the closest thing to a home together they'd had.

Her eyes stung, but it couldn't be tears. She hadn't cried in twenty years. Well, except that once, in Paris, with Ash, but that wasn't the sad kind of crying. Anyway, she wasn't crying now. It was just all that sand and grit getting into her eyes.

But it *was* her fault. She shouldn't have believed the all-clear report, shouldn't have given in to the lieutenant's obsession with ancient ruins, shouldn't have let their mutual desire to steal some time alone together make her expose Ash to such a risk.

Guilt kept her quiet on the ride to rejoin the convoy. Cleo generally couldn't stand to ride with somebody else driving, but this time she put up with it. She deserved it. The lieutenant sat in front with Jones, while Cleo sat in back, simmering with guilt and trepidation. How much had he seen? Had he believed Ash's quick-witted story about the enemy having "creative" new explosives? Who might he tell?

Above all, what was happening to Ash? Would the kind of power she'd shown, if it lasted, turn her into somebody entirely different? Somebody who wasn't the Ash who was closer to Cleo than she'd ever thought anyone could be? Wasn't the Ash who could love her? The Ash who could sometimes read Cleo's mind, as Cleo could read hers.

Ash turned a bit to look over her shoulder. “Hot enough for you?” she asked.

They were going to be all right. “Hot enough for you” was their private code phrase, almost the first thing she’d ever said to Cleo, just a casual, clichéd remark that had come to mean so much.

Cleo had been sent to pick the lieutenant up at the airport in the capital city, and yeah, it had been hot, but it was always hot. Cleo was used to it. Her sweat and foul temper had been due to a hit-and-run fender-bender on the way and then an altercation over a parking space, not the temperature. It hadn’t helped that even travel-worn and jet-lagged, Lieutenant Ashton was all too attractive. Not beautiful, exactly, except for the swallow-wing curve of her dark eyebrows, but definitely intriguing. That didn’t matter, couldn’t matter. As an officer she’d be strictly off-limits even if by some miracle she were interested in dating women.

The greeting her and schlepping of luggage had gone okay, but Cleo had been overly forceful heaving the duffle bag into the jeep, and had to wipe the sweat from her face before turning to open the door. At her passenger’s casual, “Hot enough for you?” Cleo had decided she was too dumb to care about one way or another. But some perverse impulse that got her in trouble now and then had made her want to see if she could shock the new lieutenant.

“You bet. Hot enough to steam my clams.”

One eyebrow had gone up. “Sounds like you must come from near the ocean. Where I come from we have prairie oysters, but I’ve never taken much interest in those.”

Cleo’s mouth had dropped open. Somewhere in her varied past she’d heard that term for fried bulls’ testicles, but coming from this woman it was a shock. She’d just mumbled something about being from upstate New Hampshire, not exactly on the coast. Lieutenant Ashton had said that she was from Montana, and they’d conversed sporadically and impersonally all the way to the base where they were stationed.

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Just as she was getting out, though, while Cleo was handling her luggage, the lieutenant had said casually, “I’ve heard that clams are good raw, too, with just the right tangy sauce.”

Cleo had hoped there was nothing fragile in the bag she’d dropped. And while the lieutenant had sauntered toward base headquarters, the sergeant had watched her eloquent backside and realized that, for better or worse, she’d met her match. And, as it turned out, her soul mate.

CHAPTER 2

THE SUN SET IN A shimmering red haze well before they approached the multi-national base. Under a crescent moon, the desert lay still and serene, as though never swept by storms of war or nature. The land sloped gently down toward a river flowing from distant mountains, a mere trickle at this time of year.

From a distance, the rows upon rows of tents inside the walled perimeter of the camp glowed golden with interior light. Ash and Cleo had been stationed there for three months before the mission they'd just completed but had never approached by night before. To Ash, nearly dozing, it looked like a palace from some fantastic Arabian Nights tale. Or like a futuristic outpost under an invisible dome on a far-off planet like Mars.

Once through the gates, they were back in the military world they knew so well. Corporal Jones dropped them off in front of Headquarters, one of the few permanent buildings in a city of canvas. Staff and vehicles were coming and going in spite of the late hour; there was no chance of a private conversation.

"I'd better go file my report with the motor pool office right away and face whatever I have coming." Cleo sighed. "I'm responsible for letting my jeep be destroyed." It went without saying that she wouldn't bring up the flying-through-the-air parts, either hers or the jeep's.

Ash nodded. They knew without discussion that Corporal Jones was a problem. Had he been distracted enough not to notice Cleo being raised so far and dropped? Or Ash with her arm outstretched toward the jeep as it lifted? He'd certainly been jittery during the rest

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of their journey back, casting all too many sidelong looks at Ash, but that could have just been a reaction to seeing Cleo's arms around her. He hadn't actually said much of anything beyond comments on the weather.

"Good luck, Sergeant. I'll take some of the blame if it comes to that."

"No worries." Cleo's flashing grin said more than any bystander could have understood. Her guilt was fading, and she headed for the motor pool with a jaunty stride that would have convinced anyone else of total confidence. Ash watched her go, wishing they'd dared at least a quick hand clasp. Her arm twitched. If she really tried, could she just yank Cleo back to her? She suppressed the urge, but barely. Impulse control was going to be a problem.

Ash did worry, but not about Cleo's standing in the Army. Nothing short of a dishonorable discharge would bother Cleo much, and that wasn't likely. Nobody could handle motor vehicles like Sergeant Brown, or diagnose their problems, or come up with creative ways to fix them. Command had been pressuring her to rethink her decision to quit as soon as her current (and fourth) tour of duty ended in three months.

Ash was getting out, too, in about eight months, when the obligatory years of service for her Army ROTC college scholarship were completed. Both of them had thought about making the Army a lifetime career, but that was before they met, before sparks flew between them as intense as whatever had happened to Ash in that cave. Laws or no laws, being a lesbian couple in the military would be uncomfortable, to say the least. They had other plans. Cleo could easily get a civilian job with a contractor in the capital to keep her in the country until Ash was free, and then they'd be off to make a life together.

But now, in spite of Cleo's reassuring grin, Ash had other worries. If this mysterious new power turned out to be permanent, what would that do to their plans? Their lives? Everything they thought they knew about the world? She didn't even know if she was the same person she'd been all her life. There was something new going

on inside her, something she could feel if she focused on it, a buzz verging on a burn in her joints, her skin, her mind.

“Lieutenant?”

Ash had stopped at the foot of the walkway to Headquarters. She swung around and stepped aside. “Sorry!” She’d been standing in the path of two men trying to carry a load of long steel pipes up the walkway. A truck bed on the roadside was half-full of similar pipes. Looked like something to do with heating, hard as it was to imagine that this desert could get cold. The load was heavy, and while trying to work his way around her one of the guys stumbled. A couple of the pipes began to slide off his shoulder, down his upper arm, totally out of his control. He let out a loud curse, and suddenly, impossibly, the pipes retreated back into balance. It wasn’t until then that Ash noticed she’d raised her arm. The realization shook her. *Impulse control, damn it! Get a grip!*

She followed the men through the door, then turned to the office on the left, steeling herself to report to Colonel Rogers if she was still on duty this late—and hoping she wasn’t.

This time luck was on her side. No report possible tonight. And tomorrow all she’d really be expected to report on was the successful mission they’d completed before joining the convoy for safety on the way back. Their all-female squad of Army nurses and doctors from the capital city, along with escorts and a mobile medical facility, had gone from village to village in a district where a UN relief worker had persuaded the tribal leaders to let their women be treated by other women. Ash had plenty to say about that, and the explosion near the end could just be tossed in casually. Remembering it all, though—if you could call it remembering, when she’d scarcely been conscious of what was happening—set off a burn in her right arm and side and, in fact, her whole body.

Just an effect of all that riding with no chance to limber up, she told herself. After grabbing a bite at the Officers’ Club and then strolling briskly along the walkway inside the perimeter wall, she did feel better, mentally and physically.

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There were manned watchtowers at the four corners of the wall and at regular intervals in between, and a walkway all along its top, with now and then an angle where the terrain was especially uneven. In some of those angles, sandbags were heaped, ready for filling gaps in case of explosive attack. Ash had a favorite shadowed spot where occasionally at night, feeling unbearably penned in, she climbed the sand bags, hooked her fingers over the edge of the wall, and scrambled up. It was no harder than some of the obstacle courses where she'd trained.

Being on the wall wasn't strictly forbidden. Ash had trained, in fact, for back-up status as a leader of extra observers in case of emergencies. Whether she could be there whenever she chose was a gray area, regulation-wise, and the closer she got to leaving the Army, the more inclined she felt to push the military envelope. Sure proof that she wasn't career-officer material. If all her duties were like the successful medical mission, she might have reconsidered, and so would Cleo—but that wasn't going to happen.

From her position on the wall, Ash could look behind to the bright ant-hill bustle of the camp and enjoy an illusory freedom from it all, but more often she'd gaze out over the darkened desert toward a horizon where, if the moon were full or a faint glow still lingered from the sunset, she could see an irregular line of mountains.

Cleo knew about the place on the wall, and had joined Ash once, but the apparent privacy was deceptive. Resisting temptation was too hard, and Cleo hadn't come again. Tonight, though, after Ash had been there for half an hour practicing tossing pebbles in the air with her mind and making them move in unlikely ways as they fell, Cleo came.

She hauled herself up, sat cross legged several feet away, and eyed Ash's progress. A pebble left Ash's hand, hurtled toward Cleo, stopped just short of her nose, then slowly returned to Ash. Cleo never flinched.

"Nice yo-yo effect," she commented. "I thought you might be up here figuring out how to move mountains." She gestured toward the

range far to the northwest. “Moving them pebble by pebble might be the best plan, though. Sneakier. Stealth terraforming.”

Ash flipped another stone toward Cleo, who caught it in the natural, old-fashioned way, then hurled it outside the wall. It fell, in the old-fashioned way, and could be heard hitting the sandy earth below.

“Try that again.” Ash dug another pebble from her pocket and tossed it to Cleo. “Surprise me.”

Sitting high above both desert and camp, bantering with Cleo, accepting everything about themselves, loosened the knots of stress that had been binding her. The tension of watching for Cleo to throw the stone wasn't stress, it was just play.

Cleo tossed the pebble upward over and over, keeping the timing between flips as random as she could, whistling softly all the while. Her actual throw, when it came, went straight up over her own head, fell back toward her, and veered off into Ash's hand at the last nanosecond. Cleo didn't look up to watch it coming. “You could be handy to have around,” she said lightly. Then, as if it had just occurred to her, “Hey, they finally got that enclosed firing range finished while we were gone. Want to meet up there tomorrow afternoon? Shooting under a roof without getting sand in your eyes or your gun barrel. Pure luxury.”

“Sure. I'll call you when I know my schedule. The colonel wasn't in tonight, so I have my whole report to get through.”

“I figured. Nobody will read mine until tomorrow, and then I may get hauled over some coals. Or maybe not.” Cleo shrugged. “Whatever.” She shifted toward the inner edge of the wall “I'd better get back before somebody comes looking for me. They've been saving all the most fucked up jeeps and trucks for me to diagnose all the time we were gone.” She flopped on her stomach, swung her legs over the side, and poised facing Ash with her weight on her elbows and arms. Ash moved swiftly on hands and knees until she was close enough to get her lips on Cleo's, gently, not wanting to knock her off the wall, but Cleo raised herself into a deep, passionate kiss, held it for half a minute, then slid down out of sight to the sandbags below.

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* * *

Ash was at Headquarters early the next morning, but not early enough to be the first to get to Colonel Rogers. When Corporal Jones came out of the office, saluting on his way past without meeting Ash's eyes, she knew luck wasn't on her side after all. There was still a wait before she was called into the office. She could hear someone talking and wondered who else might be there, but the colonel was alone when Ash was finally admitted. She must have been talking on the phone.

Colonel Rogers, behind the desk in her small office, did meet Ash's eyes, but with a perceptible effort. "Glad to have you back, Lieutenant Ashton. I've had excellent reports of you and Sergeant Brown from the medical team you accompanied. What was your impression of the mission?"

So they'd get the easy part out of the way first.

"My impression, Colonel, is that more missions like that would get us a whole lot further than any combat actions. It's not just the 'honey catches more flies' thing, but a way for all sides to see the others as real people not so different from themselves. And in spite of all the tribal restrictions, the women here have significant influence in their own ways. Winning them over would be better than winning a battle."

"You'll get no argument from me." The colonel sighed. "As I told you before you left, though, this was a one-shot affair. We can't get funding for more. There was a trial program like this several years ago, and I was involved, but in spite of being clearly successful, the budget for it was scrapped." She shook her head in disgust. "Plenty of funds for weapons, almost none for humanitarian purposes. Don't quote me on that." She and Ash were on generally friendly terms, but Ash was still surprised that she'd spoken so frankly. Possibly she, too, was uneasy in this formal interview. "Well, write up your report in detail, and we'll hope that a time comes when we can use it as support for a new program."

She stood and moved to look out a window, dusty from the sand outside. Ash could see the tension in her shoulders, and feel it in her own.

Colonel Rogers turned back. “Enough about that. I hear you had some excitement yesterday on the way back, but Corporal Jones’s account seemed confused. What was all that? Tell me about it.”

Ash was weirdly relieved to finally get down to it. “Yes, ma’am. It was pretty intense, and I’m hazy about some of it. All that time hiding, cramped up, breathing dust...” Her shiver at this point was entirely genuine. She went on through the part about the disabled jeep. “I think Sergeant Brown said something about a clogged air filter. Anyway, when we saw the motorcyclists in the distance, she knew by the sound of their engines that they were the enemy’s. There were some ruins nearby that seemed too obvious as a hiding place, so we went down into a dry *wadi* and managed to crawl into a sort of a cave under an overhang. We could hear them stopping by our jeep, and then passing by on foot to search the ruins, but one of them came down into the *wadi* and nearly found us. We were there, in the cave, for a long, long time, firearms ready if it came to that.”

The colonel’s brief nod showed that she understood. “So. What then?”

“They finally left. Sergeant Brown suspected a booby trap or peripheral IEDs, so we approached cautiously, with her in the lead. She’s had a great deal of experience in mine detection.”

“So I’ve heard. One of her many useful talents.”

Ash eyed the colonel sharply. Was there an implication of more intimate skills? Did it matter? “While still some distance from the jeep, we saw Corporal Jones coming at a high speed. I signaled him to stay back, in case of IEDs, but he ignored me, so Sergeant Brown ran toward him at risk of her own life to slow him down. I’m not entirely clear about what happened next. All I can tell you is what I think I saw.”

Did that flicker of the colonel’s eyes mean she sensed an evasion? Ash forged ahead, closing her own eyes to focus on what she had actually seen. “His jeep swerved, and skidded, and looked like it

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would hit ours. Sergeant Brown ran toward me as though to shield me. Just before a collision, our jeep seemed to leap high up and sideways, then exploded on landing. To my shame, I think I passed out briefly right about then. Sergeant Brown seemed certain that it had been booby-trapped. I think she's filed a complete report."

"Yes. I've seen the report. Much like yours, but with speculation as to what new explosive techniques the enemy might have developed."

"As I said, I was pretty much in a daze by then, so that's all I remember."

The colonel began pacing slowly back and forth between the window and her desk. "Corporal Jones tried to reach me here last night, as did you, apparently, because he saw you outside. He particularly remembered because a strange thing occurred just then. Did you notice two men carrying steel pipes on their shoulders, one stumbling, and several pipes very nearly falling off?"

Oh, damn. Here it came. "That was my fault, Colonel. I'd been, well, daydreaming, and was in their way. He tripped trying to get around me."

"Did you observe the pipes roll back up onto his shoulder in a way that can't be explained?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did. It startled me."

Colonel Rogers stopped in front of her desk and leaned back against it. "Lieutenant Ashton. 'Dazed' and 'daydreaming' and being 'startled' are not terms that I would associate with you. Your record has been exemplary, especially your cool competence in dangerous situations. The medical personnel on your mission had high praise for how you handled some very tricky confrontations. I have to ask, are you feeling quite well?"

Ash was in fact feeling suddenly strong, and confident. The colonel's words were like a switch that connected who she'd always been with exactly who she was now. "Quite well, thank you. Yes, I was shaken by yesterday's occurrence, but I think I've completely recovered."

It was true. There was no point in worrying, in questioning. She thought about how much more she could have done on the medical

mission, actions in her power now but not then, like moving an injured child into the X-ray van without causing pain. While there was still much to learn, she knew without a doubt that she had people to save, and missions to carry out that were far beyond anything she could do in the Army.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Colonel Rogers sat back down at her desk. “I’m required to report yesterday’s incident to a special unit where they take an interest in things not easily explained, like your jeep leaping high up and away before exploding. That level of weapons technology must be investigated, and, if it exists, used for our side. I expect them to send an operative here to interview you, possibly even this afternoon.” Her expression relaxed. She very nearly smiled. “Take the rest of the day off, Ash.” The informality would have been routine for the Officers’ Club, but was seldom used in the office.

“Thank you, Colonel.” Ash saluted and began to turn away, but the colonel went on, “Just one more little detail in Corporal Jones’s report that I’ve been curious about. Are you in the habit of raising your arm in front of you when inexplicable things are about to happen?”

Ash had no power to deflect this kind of missile, but she took it without flinching. “Something reflexive, I guess. Do you suppose there’s such a thing as an instinct for self-defense that kicks in even before a danger is apparent?”

“Who knows? But if such occasions arise in the future, it might be just as well if that reflex isn’t so obvious to onlookers. In some cultures that might even suggest, say, witchcraft. Just something to consider carefully.”

Ash nodded, saluted again, and left to find Cleo, mulling over what had been said. Just how many of the colonel’s statements was she meant to consider carefully? *“Plenty of funds for weapons?”* *“Weapons technology put to use by our side?”* Was she herself in danger of becoming a human weapon? *Get a grip.* More likely paranoia had come with whatever that cantankerous goddess idol had injected into her. In any case, Ash had already resolved that she alone would

be the one to decide how and when she used this questionable gift, in the Army or out of it.

Cleo was puttering around outside the motor pool's repair facility, sitting in a patch of shade and poking at some bit of mechanical gadgetry. She set it down when Ash approached.

"Hot enough for you?" Ash murmured. Then, a bit louder so that anyone nearby could hear it, "You said they'd finished the enclosed firing range here, Sergeant. How about it? If we're going to get into any more messes, I'd better do something to sharpen my marksmanship."

"Firing range" was another turn-on phrase for them. Places where most people are wearing earplugs are good for private communication if you know how, and if your timing is right, there might not be anybody else there at all.

"How did your report go over?" Ash asked on the way.

Cleo was nonchalant. "There'll be some flak to face, but I can deal. You?"

"Corporal Jones was coming out as I was going into the colonel's office. Things are hitting the fan. She asked about the medical mission, and wanted to know about the 'incident' yesterday, and how I was feeling, and then said someone from a special unit was flying in to interview me. They want to figure out what the hell kind of technology could have sent that jeep flying."

"I'll just bet they do."

"I need to figure it out for myself, but I'd rather leave them out of it. Whether it's technology or some woo-woo power, whatever it is, it's mine, and I've still got it." She stared at the canvas flap leading to the firing range twenty feet away and lifted her hand just a little. The flap rose slowly in a series of jerks, then folded itself back to let them in.

"Can you do that with no hands?"

"Let's see." Ash clenched her fists at her sides and concentrated on the canvas. It twitched upward a couple of feet, but that was all.

“You just need practice. C’mon. Whatever this thing is, we should take it for a spin and see what it can do. What you can do.” Cleo led Ash into the tent. Nobody else was there.

“I’ve been doing that already. As far as I can tell, I have to be able to see something to...to affect it. My aim isn’t always good, either, and I can’t lift anything much bigger than a suitcase. Yesterday must have been...I don’t know what. Maybe it will all fade away after a while.”

“Like some kind of virus? Do you *want* it to fade away?”

Did Cleo want that? Ash didn’t dare go there. Did she wonder why the power had come to Ash, but not to her? And why had that goddess figure had it in for Cleo? Maybe she’d been a strictly feminist goddess and was fooled by Cleo’s boyish impression. Ash shook it off. The important question was whether it would change things between them.

“No, I don’t want to lose it,” she said bluntly. “That whole affair was my fault, wanting to explore those ruins, and I couldn’t stand it if you’d been...hurt. If I’d lost you. Just the same, I don’t want to lose this now that I’ve got it. I want to make it even stronger. There’s no going back. I almost get the sense that she’s still watching to see what I’ll do. It’s like she’s in my blood.” She rubbed her hand where the cut was already mostly healed. “I honestly don’t know what happened with the jeep; maybe it was the motivation. And adrenaline. I couldn’t do it now. But I’m going to learn.”

She still had her sidearm and began to draw it out, then paused, concentrated, and the gun rose by itself, executed a wobbly flip, and settled in her hand. She gave a rueful laugh. “Not too smooth with the old-time gun slinger tricks yet. I’m hoping working on target shooting will help my focus on more than one front.”

The best part of target practice was always when Cleo stood behind with her body pressed close, reached her arms around, pressed her cheek against Ash’s hair, breathed in her scent, and guided her stance and aim. It hadn’t yet done much for Ash’s so-so marksmanship, but it did a whole lot for both of them just the same.

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This time, when Cleo backed away and Ash started firing, at first she was missing as much as she ever had. Gradually, though, she learned to focus, not hitting the bull's eye, but at least nudging the bullets into its neighborhood. Cleo was impressed, but not deceived.

“Hey, you're really working it, aren't you?”

“Yeah, focus is exactly what I need. I could affect the damned bullets better if they didn't go so fast, but I'm getting the hang of it.”

“Keep it up, and maybe you'll be able to launch them just as well without benefit of the gun at all.” Cleo's tone was joking—or maybe not.

“That'd look suspicious, wouldn't it?” Ash turned, grinned, and held out the gun. “Here, you take over and see if you can beat my score.”

Cleo returned the grin, clearly glad that the cocky lieutenant she loved was back. Ash knew there was still a hint of brittleness to her own mood, but what the heck, they'd both been through some severe trauma. Not that Cleo would cut her any slack when it came to marksmanship. She'd always beaten Ash's scores right into the ground. She'd know what that challenge was really about.

Cleo's first three shots centered or edged the bull's eye. The next one barely clipped it. When she missed by an inch, first to the right and then to the left, she stopped and set down the gun.

“Impressive,” she said. “The real challenge is whether you can divert a bullet coming right at you. Better yet, stop it in midair. But we're sure as hell not going to test that notion.”

“Maybe with a Kevlar vest? But I'd need to be able to see the bullet, and that wouldn't be possible.”

Cleo ignored her. “You couldn't actually see our bullets in flight just now, but you knew their trajectory well enough to divert them. Maybe you don't have to literally see a thing.”

Ash thought about that. “Maybe it just has to be in my line of sight.”

“How about if you know exactly where something is, even if it isn't entirely in your line of sight?”

“Hmm. Let’s just see about that.” Ash drew back a few feet. Her mouth twitched into a little smile and there was a subtle movement in Cleo’s right pants pocket where she kept her key ring, attached by a chain to her belt. For a moment, it felt exactly like when she’d slid her hand deeply into that snug space and teased Cleo’s all-too-sensitive thigh while they’d strolled through a Parisian evening, but now Ash was standing four feet away with both hands in her own pockets.

Cleo, startled, drew a sharp breath. Ash’s smile widened. She extended her hand with the key ring dangling from one finger. Cleo grabbed reflexively at the chain, still attached to her belt. Very slowly the key ring drifted through the air between them until it almost reached her, then blinked suddenly out of sight, secured once again to the chain.

“Show off!” Cleo blurted, and then, “What does it feel like, doing what you do?”

Ash considered. “At first, in the *wadi*, it was like pulling strings, or pushing buttons. I felt something like a vibration, and things would move the way I wanted them to. The jeep thing was so sudden I didn’t think at all, an explosion in my head before the actual explosion. I may have been thinking when I threw you out of the way, but I’m not even sure of that.”

“What about the target shooting? Can you really move the bullets the way you want them to go? That’s some major voodoo!”

She shrugged. “Focus. Bearing down, sort of boring a hole through space and sending orders through it. I worked on focus this morning when I was sure nobody was looking, opening and closing things, making pencils float around. Just moving things through the air feels different from making them disappear and appear somewhere else, but I don’t know exactly what the difference is.”

“How about taking the keys out of my pocket?”

Cleo had looked like she’d felt something more than just the keys moving. Ash was sure of it. Was it only because she wanted to be sure of it?

“That was...” Ash paused. “What did it feel like to you?”

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“It felt like your hand, your actual hand, in my pocket, feeling me up. The way you did in Paris.”

“I felt it, too. Like real touching. Nothing else I’ve moved felt like real touching.”

How far could that go? Ash guessed Cleo was wondering that, too. She focused again on the hand deep in her own pocket, and imagined it reaching out invisibly to stroke down Cleo’s back and over her tight butt. By the way Cleo twitched, that butt must be tingling. Ash’s actual hands moving in her pockets made her own flesh tingle, too.

“Ash! How far can we take this?”

Ash smiled. Cleo’s keys began to move again—and then the canvas flap lifted. Someone peered in.

They stood immobile, still four feet apart, but clearly not shooting at the targets. The intruder backed out without a word.

Ash sighed. “I’m being followed. They’ll want to know where to find me when that specialist arrives.”

Cleo got her breathing under control. “So maybe playing hide-the-keys isn’t our best strategy right now.”

“It was your idea,” Ash said reasonably. “You challenged me to move something out of my line of sight. And you said we should take this power thing for a spin. Why not have some fun?” Her tone changed. “There’s so much to learn, so much I don’t know. And I don’t dare let anybody but you know too much.”

“There was this movie a while back,” Cleo said carefully. “Something like *Men Who Stare at Goats*, about trying to use people with psychic powers in the military. Stupid damned movie, but I just wondered whether that specialist flying in to interview you might be involved with something like that, instead of regular technology.”

“Of course he is! Probably some character who thinks he can read minds. But there’s no way I’ll let them use this...this thing, for destruction, no matter how noble they think their motives are.” Saying it to Cleo strengthened Ash’s resolve. “I have to use it, not let it go to waste. It’s going to be *me* deciding what’s worth doing. I’ve

given the Army everything they asked of me up to now, willingly, but this is different.”

“No disagreement there, except...” Cleo sank onto the bench behind them, looking like she was envisioning some grim possibilities. Ash sat too, her head drooping into her hands. So much for cockiness. She wished Cleo hadn’t shot down her good mood, but knew they had to face things squarely.

“I was just wondering,” Cleo said after a while. “You moved me away from the explosion. Could you move yourself like that? I mean, if...”

Ash raised her head. “You mean if I were restrained somehow? In prison? Or worse?”

“Right.” Then Cleo went on, clearly trying to divert her, “Hey, how about we experiment now? I’ll try to restrain you, and you see if you can get away without a physical struggle.”

“You’ll do anything to get your arms around me, won’t you?” The mounting desire that had been derailed by the momentary intruder came surging back.

“Absolutely,” Cleo said, and didn’t say more because then, snoopers be damned, their arms wrapped tightly around each other, no brittleness at all in their eager bodies, and their mouths got too occupied savoring whatever skin was within reach to bother with words. Ash nearly managed to subdue the fear that this might be the very last time she’d ever have a chance to kiss Cleo, and hold her, and be held.

They’d paused for breath by the time they heard the approach of people, maybe really coming, this time, to use the range. All at once Ash was three feet from Cleo and aiming toward a target, revolver in hand. She thought for a moment that she had moved herself away until she remembered what their relative positions had been. She’d moved Cleo away from her instead. She glanced sideways, gave a subtle shake of her head, and shrugged. One question, at least, answered; she couldn’t use her power to move herself. Not yet, anyway. It didn’t much matter as long as she could move an attacker away, but prison walls could be a problem.

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A few more practice shots to make things look normal, and then they left, walking slowly.

“What are you going to do when this hotshot specialist gets here?”

“Get out of here as fast as I can.”

Cleo must have suspected that already, but she looked as though hearing it was a punch to the gut.

“I can’t do it on my own,” Ash went on, “out here in the middle of nowhere. He may even arrive today. I’ll just say as little as possible, like, ‘I don’t know what happened, everything was a blur. Maybe it was one of those things you hear about people doing under extreme stress. Maybe it really was some super-strong explosive we’ve never heard of’—you know the kind of thing. And if I have to, I’ll pretend to go along with whatever they want, whatever tests they have in mind, and learn all I can from them. If he’s flying in, chances are he’ll need to fly me out to whatever headquarters they have for things like this. Who knows, they might even want to use me for some humanitarian cause that I can’t refuse, but if not, I’ll take off before they can get much of anything going.”

There was another possibility she hadn’t mentioned. “They might want to talk to me, too,” Cleo said, “as a witness. Or something. From what Corporal Jones saw, they might even think it was me doing some fancy mechanical tricks.”

“But it wasn’t. You can’t take the rap for me, any of it. And you can’t outright lie to them.”

“Wanna bet? I’m good at it. I won’t tell them anything about what happened in the *wadi*. I’ll just say pretty much what you said you’ll say. ‘All a blur, don’t understand, extreme stress, yadda yadda yadda.’” Cleo looked behind them, then all around. “I’m surprised they aren’t keeping us apart so we won’t collaborate on what to say.”

“No surprise to me. We’re being watched. Those two at the range? One of ’em is a file clerk at Headquarters. Look, she’s just walking behind that tent over there. Mighty short shooting practice. I’ll bet she never willingly touched a gun in her life.”

Cleo began to look over that way, then suddenly, intently, stared into the too-bright sky. A few seconds later, Ash caught the pulsating soundwaves, too. A chopper. And another one quite a bit farther away.

“Could that be your guy already?” Cleo asked. “Seems too soon.”

Ash shaded her narrowed eyes. “That’s a medevac, with both patient transfer panniers filled. I hadn’t heard that there was any fighting today in this sector!” She started off toward the hospital landing pad, Cleo following.

There was a crowd there waiting. Ash saw a nurse she knew. “What’s up?”

“Village kids,” the nurse said bitterly. “Stumbled over old landmines while they were herding goats. I’ve seen this before, but it never gets easier.” She couldn’t say any more. Ash put a comforting arm around her.

“That chopper has problems,” Cleo said urgently. “The rotors are out of sync. Just a little, but I know by the sound, and it’s getting worse.” People close enough to hear her looked up, and others caught the tension and looked too. By then the helicopter was jerking and shaking so much that anybody could tell it was in big trouble. A transfer pannier was even drooping at one end, some of its supports shaken loose. Could the bird manage to land safely? Would the pannier hold on?

“Ash!”

Her body tensed like a bowstring, and she and Cleo instinctively backed away from the crowd. She aimed her focus at the incoming aircraft, feeling power shoot from her like a bright arrow. In the turmoil all around, while emergency fire and rescue personnel swarmed through the crowd of onlookers, she stood straight and still, heat rising inside her, and Cleo stood with her. No one else could have seen the arm at Ash’s side reach forward slightly, fingers curving just enough that they could have held something precious, and fragile, if it had been there to hold. The late afternoon sun glaring onto the pavement cast a dark shadow of Ash and that hand, magnifying them to huge proportions warped by the angle of the

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light, but no one saw that, either, besides Cleo, or would have thought anything of it if they had.

Everyone looked up in horrified fascination. Just two hundred feet above the earth the helicopter began to spin entirely out of control, falling fast—but at fifty feet it abruptly slowed, still wobbling, moved just the amount needed to hover over the landing pad, and settled onto the ground as though some giant hand had caught it and set it gently down.

Ash looked down, saw her own huge shadow, and felt in danger of settling down onto the ground herself, but Cleo was right there to support her.

Her nurse friend, still nearby, came to help. “That was... incredible!” she said. “I’m in the business of praying for miracles, and seeing them once in a great while, but that was something else! It would shake anybody up.” She did look rather oddly at Ash, but had to rush over to help unload a patient from a pannier. Ash caught a glimpse of a child cocooned in bandages, a girl with long, bloodied hair.

The second helicopter, the daily Black Hawk transport to and from the major airfield near the capital city, landed at some distance from the first without anyone paying much attention. In a few minutes Ash recovered enough to walk away with Cleo, mingling with the crowd. As far as she could tell, they’d lost their tail, at least for the moment. They strolled around inside the perimeter walls as though just getting some mild exercise.

“Cleo,” Ash said at last, “all that with the helicopter—it couldn’t have been rigged, could it? To test what I could do?”

“No! That ‘copter was about to crash, I guarantee, and everyone in it was going to die, including the little girl being unloaded. There was a malfunction that unbalanced the rotors. I knew by the sound even before the flight got erratic.”

Ash picked up on Cleo’s icy tone and knew her question had sounded—had been—incredibly self-centered. “I’m sorry. It’s just that...if I could keep that huge piece of machinery from crashing,

could I learn to make one crash, instead? Maybe even bring down low-flying planes?”

“I don’t know, could you?” The chill lingered in Cleo’s voice.

“I don’t know either.” Ash shook her head slowly. “I don’t know what I could do if it mattered enough to me. Like keeping you from blowing up with the jeep. But if that guy is really coming from some unit where they study this sort of thing—telekinesis, I guess they call it, or something paranormal, anyway—who knows what they might want me to do?”

“Having second thoughts? You said you were going to see what you could learn from them, at least for a while.”

“I am. I have to. But I’ve got to move on pretty soon. This guy may be my ticket, at least part of the way. Wherever he’s coming from, it has to be somewhere other than in the middle of endless desert. I agree to go along with what they want for a while, find out what, if anything, they can teach me, and then I get lost, disappear, hit the road, and figure out what’s really worth doing with what I’ve been given.”

“Sounds like a bad case of save-the-world syndrome.” But Cleo didn’t sound so upset with her anymore. “Most of that makes sense, except assuming that you can scarper off whenever you decide it’s time. Not that I’d bet against you.” She laughed a little. “Did you read superhero comics when you were a kid?”

It felt good to be joking around again. “Not much. My brother did, but I was more interested in the girlie magazines he hid under his mattress.”

“Well, of course! But next thing you know you’ll find yourself in a skin-tight onesie, a mask, and a billowing cape.”

“What, no sparkly bikini with boots? Just as well. And I draw the line at wearing a cape.”

“It could have a have a big dark silhouette of a hand on it.” Ash flinched at that, but Cleo didn’t stop. “A Shadow Hand! And you could have cards printed with a black hand on them, to leave at the sites of your victories.”

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“Forget the costume. And the cards.” Ash got serious again. “First I’ll have to figure out where I can do the most good. I’m damned sure not going to be bringing down planes or helicopters, no matter what.”

“That’s good to know, in case I get an urge to fly someplace myself.”

Ash gave her the mock swat that comment deserved.

They kept on, together, but Ash couldn’t help wondering whether they could ever be together again the way they had been before all this weird drama came along. She was sure Cleo wondered that, too.

There was a limit to how long they could take to walk around the base, and somewhere along the line the clerk who had been sent to follow them picked up their trail again. By that time, they were approaching Ash’s tent, and there was no more good excuse for them to be hanging out together. Neither had approached the issue of what role, if any, Cleo could play in all of this.

Through two years of being together in the jeep almost daily, carrying out missions that could go from routine to deadly in an instant, they had opened themselves to each other bit by bit. They’d grown closer, laughing, sharing memories, bonding, becoming more than comrades-in-arms, much more than friends. Those days and years were over now. The jeep was gone, and Ash was, one way or another, going. Even camaraderie seemed to be draining away.

Cleo jerked her head sharply in the direction of the dutiful spy lurking behind a trash bin. “How about putting on a show worth watching? What have we got to lose?” Her tone was harsh, not disguising the emotion beneath. “How about I fuck you up against a wall?”

“Don’t.” Ash’s voice felt rough, too, in her throat. “Keep it together until your tour is up and you’re legit to leave. I’ll probably have disappeared by then, and they may follow you to see if you know where I’ve gone.”

“So I don’t get to know.”

Anything more Ash might have said—not that she could think of anything—was cut short. Colonel Rogers was waiting at her tent.

“Lieutenant, your contact is here, and wants to see you right away.” She glanced at Cleo, her expression sympathetic. “Maybe Sergeant Brown can help you pack your bags. I’ll send someone to pick them up. You’re being transferred for an indeterminate period.”

“Ma’am, but I’ll be out of the service in eight months. Is that long enough to bother...?”

“Lieutenant, I’m sure you’ve read the small print. You serve at the pleasure of the president. Your tour can be extended for purposes of national security.” She seemed about to say more, but instead turned aside to let them enter the tent alone.

What did it mean that the colonel had come herself instead of sending a messenger? It did seem like she wanted to let Ash and Cleo have a few last minutes together.

“Transferred!” Cleo folded what few bits of clothing Ash had unpacked when they’d returned to base and shoved them savagely into a duffle bag. Everything in the jeep had been destroyed, but most of their gear had been in a baggage truck ahead in the convoy. “How do they know already that you have what they want? Does this guy think he’s some kind of psychic?” She slumped onto the stripped bunk. “Maybe he really is.”

Ash grasped both arms and pulled her up, squeezing hard enough it had to hurt. Something in the back of her head that wasn’t quite her own mind, something like the buzz that came with using her power, urged her to move away from Cleo. She tried to resist it. “Cleo, you’re the best, most real, true thing in my world, even though I have to do this. You know I do. Maybe someday...”

But the colonel lifted the tent flap, Ash gave Cleo one huge damn-the-consequences hug, and then she left.

* * *

The “guy” waiting in Colonel Rogers’s office turned out to be a dangerously attractive major, fortyish, strong and elegantly built, with hair as dark as Ash’s except for silver wings at her temples. Her well-cut uniform included a trim, mid-length skirt—as rare as it was impractical here in the desert where minor sandstorms weren’t

rare at all. She looked like she should have been in an office at the Pentagon.

Colonel Rogers made the introductions. “Mac, this is Lieutenant Ashton, Ash to her friends. Ash, this is Major Margaret McAllister. She and I were in training together, as well as on that trial medical mission I mentioned. We’re lucky she happened to be in the country on other business just now.”

The major strode toward Ash, or appeared to, even though the office was too small for actual striding. Her energy made it feel even smaller. Ash saluted and then reached out to shake hands, but the major grasped both of her arms.

“Lieutenant Ashton, I have never seen anything like what you did for that helicopter today! Magnificent work!”

It was a statement of certainty, not a question. How did she know? Had someone seen and told her? That might leave some room for denial. Or had she seen for herself? Ash tried to play for time. “When did you get here, Major? I didn’t expect you so soon.”

“I was in the other helicopter, the one that’s waiting for us right now for our first lap on the way to Berlin. I hope never to have such a heart-stopping view of tragedy in the making again, but your extraordinary save almost makes the experience worth it.”

This wasn’t an interview at all. No questions to answer. Ash figured she might as well ask some of her own. “I was as terrified as anyone else, Major. What makes you think I had anything to do with that?”

“I don’t need to think. I know. I have an instinct for these things. That’s why I have this job.” She turned to the desk and picked up a cup of coffee. “You’re wondering whether I read minds, right?”

Something about the woman raised Ash’s hackles, but appealed to her anyway. Something about her also made Ash forget about deference due to rank. “Do you read minds, Major?”

“No. Not word by word. But I know truth from lies, and I know when a certain energy is present. An energy you might call power. Yours, by the way, is off the charts.” She emptied the coffee cup and smiled like the Cheshire cat in Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland*. “Yes,

there are folks in my department obsessive enough to make charts of these things. Those who can do; those who can't make charts. And those of us in between, like me, sniff out new talent the way a bird dog flushes pheasants."

"So you see me as a pheasant?"

Major McAllister seemed to be enjoying the exchange. "Lieutenant, you're from Montana, right? Do you hunt birds with dogs out there?"

"We hunt bears with dogs."

Colonel Rogers tried to hide a smile. Major McAllister laughed out loud. "Bears! I like the sound of that. My bosses would rather I brought them pheasants, or rabbits—anything timid or malleable. Someone with an inner bear is going to make life interesting."

"As long as it isn't boring." Ash realized that she was tacitly agreeing to go along with this woman. Not that she had any choice. Yet.

The helicopter with the damaged rotors was still on the hospital landing pad, so the bigger, long-distance Black Hawk took off from farther down the field. There were people milling around—mechanics, curious onlookers, MPs. When Ash looked down from a few hundred feet in the air, one slight figure stood out from all the rest. Cleo was gesturing and conversing with a group of mechanics, but as Ash's gaze fell on her, she looked up, stood straight and rigid as a flagpole, and watched until the helicopter banked, turned, and rose high into the blazing sunlight, heading west until Ash could no longer even pretend that she still saw her.

CHAPTER 3

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, CLEO strode purposefully up the Headquarters walkway, nearly running down a messenger Colonel Rogers had just dispatched.

Once in the office, Cleo saluted, then got bluntly down to business. “Colonel, you’ve got to find me something to do. Something that matters. I’ll go crazy without important work to distract me.” By the colonel’s expression, she understood Cleo’s underlying anguish. Cleo forged ahead, slightly more diplomatically. “That medical mission you sent us...me...on was so rewarding that I’m spoiled for just hanging around the motor pool being the go-to advisor for every little glitch of a fractious jeep.” Drat, poor choice of words for someone who’d just allowed her own jeep to be destroyed.

“Sit down, Sergeant,” Colonel Rogers said calmly. “We have a good deal to discuss.”

Cleo pulled over a metal folding chair and sat on its edge, unable to relax.

“I’ve read your report, and heard Lieutenant Ashton’s, and had confirmation from someone trained in these matters, so certain things are not in doubt. I’d still like to have the benefit of your expertise on one point. Do you consider it really possible that the odd behavior of your jeep was due to technological advances known to the enemy?”

Cleo’s mouth opened. No words came out. How much to say?

“Let me rephrase that, Sergeant. Do you consider it at all likely that that could be the case?”

Damn the torpedoes. Full speed ahead. “No, ma’am. Not at all likely.”

“Thank you. That’s all I needed to ask.” She hit the intercom button and ordered coffee brought in for two.

“Now, on to the subject of missions. I’ve been thinking along those same lines. With only three months left in your tour, it would be a shame to waste your skills.”

An aide brought in the coffee, poured it, and left. The colonel shifted gears. “I don’t suppose I could persuade you to rethink the matter of re-upping?” Cleo could almost hear the omitted words—“under these changed circumstances”—meaning now that Ash had gone. “I understand you’ve already been offered promotion if you stayed on. I might even be able to arrange one of greater magnitude.”

Cleo’s curt, direct “No, ma’am,” brought an understanding nod from the colonel, who returned to the previous topic.

“There may be a mission in the works. I’ve had a dozen messages this morning already that lead me to think that what happened to those children yesterday, common as it unfortunately is, has been some kind of tipping point. Come back at 1700 hours and we’ll see what’s developed.”

Cleo’s stride was as brisk leaving as when she’d come, but her mood was less grim. A mine-clearing assignment was just what she needed. Humanitarian mine-clearing—as opposed to the military kind that used big machinery to clear routes for troops to advance—worked best with manual detection, something she was as good at as anyone she’d ever met. At least, anyone left alive. Metal detectors are sensitive enough to pick up most mines, but they also yield about a thousand false positives for every correct identification, and minimum-metal mines are almost impossible for them to detect. Areas that had theoretically been cleared by machines were the most dangerous of all to villagers, especially children, since they’d think the area was safe.

Cleo returned to Headquarters at 1600 hours, a bit early, and was called right into the colonel’s office.

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“Pack your bags, Sergeant. You’ll be leaving at dawn with a combined UN/US Army demining squad.”

“Bags already packed, Colonel.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Colonel Rogers grinned, and Cleo mustered something closer to a legitimate smile than she would have thought possible eight hours earlier.

Fourteen hours later, she was behind the wheel of a new jeep, part of a convoy of deminers and their gear. Quite a few of the guys were old friends from the days before she’d known Ash, when she’d done demining most of the time. So much territory had been cleared—and the use of whole fields of mines largely discontinued by the enemy in favor of roadside IEDs and targeted rockets—that demining hadn’t been high priority any more. She’d been reassigned. This was like a high school reunion, with explosives instead of a cash bar.

The first day, in the province where the kids had been injured, they found and detonated six mines, a couple so old they might have been there for fifty years. Cleo found those two, buried deeper than the others, and signaled to her partner.

“Hey Cleo, still got it, I see.”

“Both still just as crazy, right?”

“And lucky,” Mitch said, but as the sapper who did the detonating, he was the one who needed the most luck. Cleo could detect a concealed explosive from far enough away to keep mostly out of danger. She’d tried to teach others her methods, but it seemed to be an instinct that couldn’t be passed on.

They moved across the province slowly, thoroughly, then on to another further south, eliminating hundreds of deathtraps, not that Cleo kept score.

She did keep score of the erratic mail deliveries—the post office back at base always knew where she was, and would forward any mail—but nothing came from Ash. Not that she’d expected anything.

Two weeks before her tour came to an end, she was summoned back to base, and to Colonel Rogers’s office. The colonel wasn’t alone.

“Major, this is Sergeant Brown. Sergeant, Major McAllister is with the PsyOps division. She escorted Lieutenant Ashton to one of their training facilities.”

Cleo’s first thought upon meeting the major was, *No wonder Ash went off with her! I might have done it myself.* Her next was to wonder why she was being questioned, when they already had Ash and must know what she could do. A glance at Colonel Rogers assured her that there wasn’t any tragic news involved, so she just waited in at-ease stance to find out what was what.

The major greeted Cleo warmly, commenting on her excellent performance as a mine detector, but that was clearly just a prelude to whatever she’d actually come for.

“Colonel Rogers was telling me that she hasn’t heard from Lieutenant Ashton since leaving her at the PsyOps facility,” the major said conversationally, “so we were wondering if you’d had any letters.”

So Ash had gotten away! And hadn’t contacted Cleo. “No, nothing. Nothing at all.” Cleo let her pain show through. “I figured you folks were keeping her too busy with whatever it is you do.”

“As a matter of fact,” the major said, “she hasn’t been seen since a few days after she arrived.”

“You mean she’s either gone AWOL, or been...been...” Cleo pulled herself together. “What happened?”

“I was away on other business, so all I know is what I’ve heard, but there isn’t any doubt that she left on her own accord. Apparently she literally “lifted” documents and a military ID from a staff member who fit her description closely enough to get her on a commercial flight to Amsterdam. From there she transferred multiple times, and effectively disappeared.”

Major McAllister watched Cleo keenly as she spoke, obviously to see whether she knew the details of Ash’s escape already. She might even have deliberately changed details to see Cleo’s reaction, in case it revealed that Ash had communicated with her in some way.

Cleo didn’t try to conceal her hurt that she hadn’t—or her happiness that Ash had pulled off the caper. Served them right.

Any agency claiming to specialize in paranormal powers that didn't realize what someone with telekinesis could do to evade them clearly had nothing Lieutenant Ashton wanted to bother with.

Neither did Cleo Brown, she thought, then mentally kicked herself. What she didn't know, she couldn't tell. And even though she'd never tell, she might follow, and be followed.

Major McAllister switched the conversation back to Cleo herself, showing an interest in her uncanny talent for detecting even the oldest, most deeply buried mines, and in her record of extraordinary skills with all kinds of machinery. She even made a subtle reference to the possibility of promotion if Cleo changed her mind and stayed on, just as Colonel Rogers had.

Something about the major's voice, her expressions, her apparent warmth, was dangerously appealing. Cleo didn't think she could read minds, and suspected that what she did owed more to intuition and presence than to any paranormal ability, but whatever it was, she was damned good at it. If Cleo did have any idea where Ash was, or even where she might be, would she be able to hide it from this woman? Yes, Cleo thought, she would, but it was just as well she didn't have to try—although that battle of wits might have been highly enjoyable.

By the time their meeting was at an end, Cleo had an odd impression that Major McAllister had discovered things about her that she didn't even know herself.

Cleo spent that night at base, her last before rejoining the squad of deminers and heading toward the capital city, where she'd officially part ways with the Army. She lay sleepless on her cot for a long time, wondering if things would have been different if she'd suggested to Ash that the two of them together could make a big dent in the landmines and IEDs endangering, among many others, children herding their goats. With Cleo's instinct for pinpointing camouflaged explosives, and Ash's power to move them to a safe area for detonation, or disarm them at a distance once Cleo explained exactly how to do it, they could have covered twice as much territory as most squads. Would she have stayed around longer? Would that

kind of mission have satisfied her determination to do great work with her new power? Would she have been allowed to? Not likely.

Cleo twisted and turned on the hard bed. The squad's route would take them right past that same ruined fortress, that same *wadi*. The place where her life had been changed, and Ash's, and the lives of who knew how many people in the future. If only she could find that damned statue, smash it, grind it into tiny specks of sand! But it was too late now.

Better, she reasoned, to do what she could with what basic talents she had, and wish Ash well on her crusade to do big, important things—more important, at least, than Cleo ever would.

Reason didn't cut it, though, when she was tossing on her cot in the desert heat, mind spinning through endless loops of memory. She was fixated on desperate longings for what might have been, and useless speculation on what might be happening now. Was Ash safe? Did she think of Cleo at all, or had power made her so full of herself that there was no room left?

"Stop it!" Cleo told herself severely, and eventually managed to obey. She must have slept, because dreams came—dreams of Ash, in the little room in Montmartre, where the whole world had contracted into just the two of them, together, touching, loving. Ash's hand stroked Cleo's cheek, moved down over her neck, shoulder, all the way to the warmth between her thighs, and Cleo was brought to a shuddering peak. She woke slowly to a sense of joy. A good dream. And what harm was there in thinking of how it had felt when Ash had probed her pocket for the keys with her mind, and said she'd felt it, too?

Only a dream. Cleo knew that. Ash wasn't dreaming of her at the same time, wanting her, touching her. It might not even be night where she was. Cleo put herself back to sleep trying to compute what time it was in various zones in the world, while still, down deep where reason and common sense couldn't reach, a lingering memory whispered, "*Just like real touching.*"

The squad stopped for a lunch break in sight of the ancient ruins. They'd all heard the story about what had happened to Cleo

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and her jeep there, or at least a small part of the story, and they humored her when she said she'd lost something over in that *wadi* and wanted to take a look to see if she could find it. Alone.

Down in the dry river bed, the area where they'd hidden was pretty much all rubble now. The air was still, but every now and then dust swirled around her head, and pebbles slid and bounced from the bank, some even hitting her. She had a definite sense of being unwelcome, even though her rational side knew it must be her imagination fueled by memories.

Ash thought the damned statue still kept an eye on her. Did that mean the goddess would know where she was? Cleo had about got over wanting to smash the figurine, but why not give in to imagination and try making use of it? Not so easy, since the bitch had taken a disliking to her, but Cleo had been wondering for a while whether that was a case of mistaken identity. Maybe the goddess had been fooled by her boyish looks.

A quick glance up at the rim of the bank showed that her privacy was being respected. "Look, you!" She unbuttoned her shirt and wriggled out of her sports bra. The dust stopped threatening to get into her eyes, at least. She cupped her small breasts in her hands and turned in a circle to display them, torn between laughing at her own absurdity and longing for the touch of Ash's hands instead of her own. "Look, you," she repeated, "whatever you are, I'm a woman, and Ash needs me whether she realizes it or not. If you know where she is, tell me right now!" She unbuttoned her belt and let her pants drop. "See?" Then she thought all those words again as hard as she could in case the goddess didn't speak English. After all, why should she?

A very small opening appeared right about where they'd been able to see out when they were hiding, and no more pebbles rolled down the bank. Cleo stared, wondering whether it would expand, what might come out of it, until she began to feel dizzy. Her vision clouded, darkened, then suddenly cleared, but what she saw wasn't the *wadi*. It was an opening, like an airplane window. It *was* an airplane window! She could look down through a widening gap in

the clouds and see the earth beneath, close enough that the plane must be planning to land within the hour. The landmarks below—the oxbow of a river, a short, low line of green hills, a sprawling reservoir—were as familiar to her as any in the world.

The vision faded slowly, and before it was gone completely Cleo had pulled up her pants and buttoned her shirt. There was no way some ancient piece of stone or bone far in the Middle East could have made up that scene. She needed to believe, *had* to believe that it was what Ash was seeing right now—which meant that Cleo knew exactly where Ash was, and where she was going, and where she herself was going to go as soon as she possibly could. If Ash was going to Boston, it could only be because she hoped to find Cleo there. Because Ash needed her.

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SHADOW HAND

BY SACCHI GREEN

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