



# Duty and Desire

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Will they choose love, or sacrifice it all for duty?

Dive into a forbidden, age-gap romance filled with intense passion, military duty and a love that breaks all the rules. As always with an Emily Hayes book, super steamy and always a Happy Ever After. General Ros Carson has spent a lifetime putting duty first, keeping her emotions locked away. But when Captain Scarlett Bennett, a bold and brilliant rising star, lands under her command, Ros faces a temptation that shakes her to the core—an irresistible attraction that could jeopardize both their careers.

Ros and Scarlett must tread carefully, balancing their growing connection against the rigid military rules that could ruin them. As passion flares and emotions run high, they're forced to confront their deepest desires and the dangerous consequences of crossing the line between personal and professional.

**Total Pages (Source):** 38

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ROS

The rumble of engines filled the air as the convoy rolled through the gates of Fort Independence. The base sprawled across a mountainous valley, thick pines enclosing it at one end. The sky was so close, a cold crystal blue. General Rosalind Carson sat in the lead vehicle; her expression set in a familiar, stern mask that had long since become second nature over her illustrious career. Her sharp gray eyes scanned the base as they rumbled past rows of barracks, training grounds, and milling soldiers. A new command, a new challenge?

The convoy rolled to a halt outside the front of the command center, a sturdy, utilitarian building nestled in the heart of the base. Cold mountain air greeted Ros as she stepped from the vehicle, brisk and unforgiving, much like the reputation she had built for herself over the years. Tugging at her lapels, she straightened her uniform to get rid of any creases formed over the long journey. It would not do to appear scruffy when making first impressions.

She took a moment to survey her surroundings; the base was larger than she'd expected. She knew it was a critical outpost in the region and its location was of strategic importance, but all that information would do nothing to actually prepare her for the work needed.

Awaiting her was a small group of senior officers standing at attention; their postures were rigid and expressions carefully blanked, but Ros could see a hint of caution. She knew what they were concerned about; stories of her rigidity had undoubtedly

preceded her. It was no matter. She had never been one to concern herself with what others thought. Her job was to command, lead, and ensure the success of any missions that came their way. If her officers obeyed orders, they had nothing to worry about.

As she approached the officers, one stepped forward and saluted. The eagle pinned to his collar marked him as Colonel Hale, the highest ranking officer under her new command. He was a tall man in his late forties with a square jaw and serious demeanor. His eyes betrayed a hint of nervousness as he met Ros's gaze.

"General Carson, welcome to Fort Independence," he said, his voice steady. "I trust your journey was uneventful. We're honored to have you here."

"Thank you, Colonel." She saluted with precision. "I trust everything is in order?"

"Yes, ma'am. We've prepared a briefing on the base's current operations, as requested."

Ros nodded. That was a good start. There was little time to waste on pleasantries, and she would much rather dive straight into the work.

"Well, then, let's get to it. Lead the way."

Without further ado, the officers led her inside the command center. The interior was as utilitarian as the exterior: steel-gray walls lined with maps, screens displaying real-time data, and a large table in the center of the room for briefings. Desks lined the walls, each with three to four monitors. As Ros entered the room, the techs popped up their heads and scrambled to stand and salute. "At ease, soldiers. Don't let me distract you from your work." Ros took her seat at the head of the table, the other officers quickly falling into place around her.

Colonel Hale began the briefing, outlining the base's primary objectives: monitoring insurgent activity in the surrounding region, coordinating supply routes, and maintaining the security of the nearby civilian population. Ros listened intently, her mind already running through strategies, potential weaknesses, and areas for improvement. She interrupted only to ask pointed questions, her tone sharp and direct, cutting through any unnecessary detail.

"The most pressing issue we're facing, General, is the increasing activity of insurgents in the mountains to the north," Hale explained, pointing to a cluster of red markers on the map. "They've been using the terrain to their advantage, making it difficult for us to track and engage them effectively."

Ros leaned forward, her eyes narrowing as she examined the map. "And what's our current counterinsurgency plan?"

"We've been conducting regular patrols and aerial surveillance, but the results have been mixed," Hale admitted, glancing at his colleagues for support. "Our resources are stretched thin, and the insurgents seem to be getting bolder."

Ros considered this information, her mind racing. This was exactly the kind of challenge she had expected: complex with high stakes requiring a firm hand. "We'll need to increase our intelligence operations. If they're recruiting locals, we need to know who, where, and how. We need to know how prepared they are. Their equipment, numbers, and artillery. I want our best people on this. And double the aerial surveillance. I'll personally review the patrol routes and adjust them as necessary."

"Yes, ma'am," Hale replied, taking notes.

The briefing continued much the same, each officer presenting the current numbers, state of their troops, and any issues they faced in personnel, training, or supply. It was

mostly what she'd expected: recruitment was over, supplies were low, and morale was jittery with insurgents so close to the base.

A clear voice cut through her thoughts.

"Captain Bennett, company of four platoons."

Ros focused on the speaker, a young woman with auburn hair tied neatly back in a bun and warm hazel eyes. She knew from reading the files that Captain Scarlett Bennett was a recent transfer and was highly regarded at her last posting as a rising star shooting up through the ranks.

She waved for the captain to continue.

"Troops appear to be adjusting to the new command well. My engineers have reported some potential issues, and having reviewed them, my primary concern is the integrity of the base's communications infrastructure.

"The harsh conditions up here take a toll on our equipment, and with the recent increase in insurgent activity, we can't afford any weak links. We've already begun upgrading the main communication lines, but it's a work in progress. We need funding and equipment to continue."

Ros listened carefully, noting the earnestness of Scarlett's report. There was something about the captain that commanded attention—not just her intelligence and competence, but the way she held the room and the way she spoke with such certainty. Ros found herself intrigued, an unexpected spark of admiration flickering in her chest. She quickly pushed the thought aside and refocused.

"Captain Bennett, having reviewed base reports prior to my arrival, your assessment is accurate," Ros said, her tone neutral but approving. "Prioritize those upgrades and

coordinate with Colonel Hale to ensure that all essential systems are fully operational. I want a status report by the end of the week.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Scarlett replied, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Ros watched as she quashed the smile, a blank expression coming over her face.

She must have been nervous requesting that after only recently arriving herself. Well, at least I know one officer is interested in the good of their soldiers more than the game of politics.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:46 pm*

Ros had never been able to respect those who rose through the ranks by stepping on those beneath them.

With the briefing concluded, Ros stood, signaling the end of the meeting. “ Thank you, officers. We have a lot of work ahead of us. Dismissed.”

As the officers filed out, Ros lingered for a moment, her mind already spinning with plans and strategies. But as she glanced toward Scarlett Bennett, who was gathering her materials, Ros couldn’t help but feel a flicker of something she hadn’t anticipated—a sense of curiosity that caught her off guard.

The sun climbed steadily as General Ros Carson moved through the base. Her quiet, authoritative presence drew eyes wherever they went. Her tour had begun immediately after the briefing; there was no sense in dallying.

As she made her way through each building, she maintained her austere demeanor with the officers, letting a small ghost of a smile play across her face when talking to the boots. She ensured to speak with officers, NCOs, and soldiers alike, each interaction brief but intentional. Ros knew that the troops rarely trusted new brass; she would have to earn their respect—andunderstandably so. A bad general would put service members at risk. Ros held the very lives of her soldiers in her hands and while she knew that she would never use them as pawns, her new division had no reason to trust that yet. It would come in time. Her father, who had also been a general, had taught her that a commander’s strength came not from their own strategic genius but from understanding the people they led.

At the barracks, she observed the living conditions—spartan but sufficient. In some

areas, the heating had obviously malfunctioned as there were space heaters dotted around. Captain Bennett was correct then. There certainly were some infrastructure issues that needed fixing promptly. Space heaters would work as a temporary fix, but her soldiers would not perform at their peak if they were frequently freezing.

The mess hall was orderly, and the kitchens were clean and well stocked. The soldiers seemed disciplined, from what she could observe, and the training areas were well maintained. There was certainly room for improvement, though.

She made a mental note of anything that caught her eye to make a record later. As amusing as it might be, it wouldn't do any good to make her new officers anxious by scrawling on her clipboard the whole time. With how nervous some of them already were about General Carson's arrival, she thought they might have a breakdown if she did that. Perhaps she'd reserve that special treatment for any of them who really ticked her off.

No matter how much she immersed herself in the day's duties, Ros couldn't fully shake the image of Captain Scarlett Bennett from her mind. The captain's confident manner and the way she had held the room during the briefing lingered with her like a shadow she couldn't quite dispel. The fact that she had obviously managed to begin gaining trust from her new company was telling too. Ros got the feeling that Captain Bennett was someone she ought to enjoy working with, someone who held herself to the same high standard that Ros held herself.

As she walked through the engineering sector checking in on the ongoing repairs and future planning, Ros found herself involuntarily comparing every officer and soldier she met to Scarlett. None had the same sharp fire in their eyes. Certainly, none kept themselves as calm when presented with the opportunity to meet with the new general as Bennett had. After the briefing, although the captain had lingered, she didn't make a beeline to introduce herself as others had. Ros had gotten the impression that Scarlett didn't feel the need to ingratiate herself, a quality Ros

couldn't stand. Scarlett had impressed her, certainly, but there was something more, a sort of pull that made Ros uneasy.

Pausing in front of a massive satellite dish, Ros watched as engineers worked on calibrating the equipment, their movements precise and coordinated. The captain's voice echoed in her mind, her clear and composed briefing replaying itself like a song on loop. Bennett's slight smile was engraved on the inside of her eyelids. Ros had been around confident officers before, but there was a steadiness to Scarlett, a quiet resolve that Ros couldn't ignore; she just couldn't figure out what it was about her that had captured her attention so completely.

Ros's hand tightened on the edge of the blank clipboard she carried. She had always prided herself on her ability to compartmentalize, to separate her personal feelings from her professional responsibilities. But something about Scarlett was different. Perhaps it was nothing. Or perhaps it has been too long, and she was craving a close connection.

"General Carson?" The voice broke through her thoughts, pulling her back to the present. It was one of the engineers, a young sergeant with a hopeful expression. "Is there anything specific you'd like us to focus on?"

Ros blinked, refocusing on the task at hand.

"Ensure the primary communication lines are fully operational by the end of the day," she said, her tone all business. "And double-check the backup systems. I don't want any surprises."

"Yes, ma'am," the lieutenant responded, snapping a quick salute before hurrying off to relay her orders.

Ros watched him go, her thoughts still swirling. As she continued her tour visiting the

medical facilities, the armory, and finally the command center's tactical operations room, she found herself more and more distracted.

It was late afternoon by the time Ros finished her rounds, the day fading into dusk as she made her way back to her office. The base was alive with activity, soldiers moving about with purpose, vehicles rumbling in the distance, and the hum of generators filling the air. She paused outside her office door, taking a moment to breathe in the crisp air, trying to clear her mind.

But as she stood there, the image of Scarlett Bennett persisted, more vivid than ever. Ros could almost see the captain's confident smile, the way her eyes had held Ros's gaze without flinching. It was a dangerous distraction, one that Ros knew she needed to address, but she couldn't deny the stirrings of something she hadn't felt in a long time.

She shook her head, willing herself to focus. There was work to be done, and she was determined not to let anything—or anyone—distract her from her duty. But as she finally entered her office and sat down at her desk, Ros knew that keeping her thoughts purely professional when it came to Scarlett Bennett was going to be more challenging than she had anticipated.

As the day drew to a close, the vast expanse of Fort Independence began to quiet down. The hustle and bustle of soldiers going about their duties gave way to a more subdued rhythm. The fading sunlight cast long shadows across the base, and the temperature dropped as evening settled in. General Carson found herself alone in her office, the solitude amplifying the weight of her responsibilities.

The office was a mix of the old and the new—a functional space with its steel-gray walls and utilitarian furnishings, but with personal touches that hinted at Ros's long career: framed commendations, a well-worn leather briefcase, and a meticulously arranged desk. As she sat at her desk, the day's events replayed in her mind—each

briefing, each interaction, and the steady hum of operations. But amid it all, there was one distraction she couldn't ignore: Captain Scarlett Bennett.

Her mind kept drifting back to her—the captain's confident demeanor, her clear and direct communication, and the unsettling way her eyes had met Ros's. It wasn't just admiration or professional respect. There was a spark there, something more personal, more intense. It was a feeling Ros hadn't experienced in years, one she had no intention of exploring, especially not in her current position.

She leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples as if to physically push away the thoughts. Her career had been built on maintaining control, on suppressing personal feelings to focus solely on her duties. It was a strategy that had served her well, earning her respect and success in every command she had held. But now, faced with this new and unexpected complication, Ros found herself struggling to maintain that same level of control.

As she reviewed her notes from the day's briefings, her gaze repeatedly fell upon a photograph on her desk: a snapshot from a past mission, a reminder of her years of service. It was meant to ground her and remind her of the larger purpose of her work. But today, it seemed to offer little comfort. The image of Scarlett Bennett kept intruding, vivid and persistent.

Ros sighed, reaching for a stack of reports to review. She tried to immerse herself in the details of logistics and strategy, but her concentration was fragmented. The paperwork became a blur of text and figures, the numbers and charts failing to capture her full attention. She knew she had to stay focused, to keep her emotions in check, but the attraction she felt toward Scarlett was proving to be a formidable challenge.

She stood up abruptly, deciding that a walk through the base might clear her mind. The crisp evening air would be a welcome distraction and perhaps a brief respite from

the relentless cycle of her thoughts. As she walked through the quiet corridors and out into the open air, she pulled her coat tighter against the chill, hoping the solitude would offer some clarity.

The base was bathed in the soft pinkish glow of the setting sun, the mountains surrounding it casting long shadows. Ros walked purposefully, her steps echoing in the stillness. She glanced around, taking in the serene beauty of the landscape, a stark contrast to the turbulence within her. The base was functional and efficient, a testament to the hard work of those who served there. It was a place of discipline and dedication, qualities that Ros had always embodied.

Yet, as she looked out over the base, the image of Scarlett—her assured stance, her bright eyes—haunted her. Ros knew she had to keep her distance from Scarlett to prevent these feelings from affecting her judgment. It wasn't just about professionalism; it was about ensuring the effectiveness of her command and the integrity of her decisions.

Back in her office, Ros made a resolute decision. She would maintain her distance from Captain Bennett. The attraction she felt was a dangerous distraction, one that could undermine her authority and cloud her judgment. She would not allow personal feelings to interfere with her responsibilities. The base and her command over it came first.

### SCARLETT

Scarlett checked her pack for the umpteenth time. Picks, check. Crampons, check. Flares, check. First aid, food, knife, clips, rope, radio. Check. Check. Check. Yes, she had everything. This would be her first lead mission under the formidable General Carson, and the last thing she needed was to make a bad impression by forgetting the essentials.

Glancing around the room, she could see her squad nearly ready to ship out.

“Right then, listen up, you lot.”

Their heads snapped to attention, listening for their orders.

“The general has received reports of insurgents forming a base on the other side of the range. I don’t have to explain that that’s too close for comfort. This squad is to gather intelligence on their movements. Numbers, equipment, you know the drill. The general has allowed us to use snowmobiles up to the edge of the forest, but after that, we’re on foot. It’s going to be a hard climb up the peaks. Any questions?”

“No, Captain,” they said in unison.

“Good. We’ll be ready to depart in five. Reconvene by the snow mobiles.”

“Yes, Captain,” they all said then started to gather their materials.

Scarlett nodded and shrugged on her pack, snatching up the snowshoes and poles stacked by the door on her way out. She wasn't bringing her full company on this mission. Stealth was the order of the day, and a hundred soldiers would be difficult to hide, even in camouflage. She and General Carson had decided on only bringing a single squad along for the ride.

Harsh wind blew flecks of snow into her eyes as she stepped outside in the dark. The sky was still blanketed in peach and didn't seem as though it would let up any time soon. At least they wouldn't risk leaving any tracks now.

The remainder of her squad filtered from the building in trickles, loading their packs and taking position on their snowmobiles. After a final headcount, Scarlett was satisfied everyone had arrived. Clicking on her radio and raising a fist into the air, she gave the order.

"Okay, squad, move out."

The drive along the edge of the forest was uneventful. Each vehicle had a soldier armed and ready, standing while facing the rear in case of an ambush, but an attack was unlikely with them this close to the base.

Reaching their disembarking point, the soldiers clambered from the vehicles, shouldering their packs and strapping the snowshoes to their boots.

"Captain Bennett to command. Forest reached; now approaching on foot."

The radio crackled to life and General Carson's voice echoed back. "Received, Captain, over and out."

Scarlett was surprised that the general herself would be the one running point on this mission. Her previous commanders had been much more hands-off, especially on a

relatively small mission like this. The more Scarlett learned about General Rosalind Carson, the more impressed she was.

After reaching the other end of the forest, Scarlett was relieved to see the sky lighten; sunrise was close. The peak they were set to climb was not far, just across a snowfield. The ground before them was powdery, untouched. The ground crunched beneath their feet, and the air rumbled with the mountain's groans. Behind her, Scarlett could hear several soldiers chatting quietly. She should probably join in; it would be good to start bonding with her new troops.

"So, how long has General Carson been stationed here?" she asked Lieutenant Jay West over her shoulder.

"Not long, Captain. She arrived not long before you did. I heard the last general retired, so she's his replacement," he said.

"And what was your last general like?"

He hesitated. "I wouldn't know much, Captain. Your predecessor had more to do with General Avery than I ever did."

"Say no more, Lieutenant. I understand." She laughed. "Well, I have high hopes for Carson."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ckkk. The radio crackled, startling Scarlett.

Shit. Had her radio been on that whole time?

No, she could see the green flashing light indicating an incoming message.

Thank fuck. That would have been mortifying.

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:46 pm*

“Come in, Captain,” Carson’s voice floated across the radio.

“Go ahead, General.”

“What is your position? Over.”

“Forest cleared, proceeding over the snowfield. Over.”

“Speed it up, Captain. There’s a storm incoming. Over.”

“Roger that. How long till it hits?”

“Best guess, six hours. Do you need to turn back?”

“Negative, General. We will proceed.”

“Roger that. Over and out.”

This was not good, but she wasn’t going to fail this mission. This was her chance to impress the new general. She turned back to her squad trailing behind her.

“You heard the general; storm due in six hours. Let’s pick up the pace.”

“Yes, Captain,” everyone said in unison.

She glanced upward and saw the rising sun had stained the clouds a deep pink. They didn’t want to still be out here when that storm blew in. Trudging as fast as they

could, they cleared the ice field before catching their breath as they stared up at the glacier. Scarlett was the first to steel herself, unclipping the snow boots and replacing them with her crampons. She dug around in her pack, pulling out her axes and screws and clipping them to her carabiner.

“I’ll head up first. Lieutenant, you bring up the rear. I’ll call when the belay is fixed.”

“Yes, ma’am, copy that.”

Right, she thought. Let’s do this.

Scarlett centered herself with a breath before striking her axe into the ice. She gave it a tug, and it held. Good. Slowly, she climbed—one axe, one foot, one axe, one foot. Looking down, she could see the soldiers feeding out the rope, ready for the next soldier to follow her up. She hacked at the wall; the ice was brittle here. A clump of snow fell away, revealing the hard, rock-like ice beneath.

“Ice!” she warned as the clump fell toward the ground. The soldiers scattered out of its way.

At least they’re listening. Scarlett was well aware that being new to the base meant she didn’t hold the authority she was used to yet. She would have to prove herself to earn their respect. Her frozen, gloved fingers fumbled with a screw, unclipping it from her waist. It nearly dropped from her grip.

That would not be a good way to prove my competence.

She screwed it into the wall, clipping the belay into it.

“Belay is on. Climb up.”

“Copy that. Climbing,” a soldier called.

Wind blasted down the mountainside, spraying snow and ice shards into Scarlett’s face; freezing rivulets of water ran down her neck as they melted against her skin. She braced, pulling herself up and climbing a few feet between each fierce gust. Each time she paused to wait for the wind to pass, she added another screw to the wall. She was nearing the top now, not far left to climb. Glancing back, she could see that Lieutenant West was now just beginning to climb, bringing up the rear. Clambering over the top, she sighed in relief, dropping to her knees to catch her breath. That was the one benefit of going first; she would be able to rest until the last climber summited.

“Captain Bennett to command.”

“Come in, Captain,” General Carson replied.

“Ready and in position, General.”

“Go ahead, Captain. No comms until you have established it’s safe.”

“Yes, General, over and out.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:46 pm*

SCARLETT

Show time.

Waving them over, her squad trudged through the snow to huddle around.

“From here, we are on our own. No talking unless necessary. This is a stealth mission. If we’re spotted our information will be useless. Stay out of sight, low to the ground.”

Once they had neared the edge of the outlook, Scarlett dropped to the ground, her white camouflage now hopefully obscuring her movements if the insurgents had surveillance.

Crawling through the ice and snow was difficult, the still-dropping ice shards complicating it even further.

Scarlett reached the edge of the outcrop; she could just about make out some dotted figures milling around in the distance.

So, they are here then.

Slowly, carefully she pulled her binoculars from her pack and zoomed in on them.. Tents littered the valley with the largest encircled by smaller ones in the center of the encampment. Insurgents wandered in and out of the tents, each one armed with an assault rifle. Snow mobiles patrolled the edges of the valley, packed with even more militants. Next to her, Scarlett could hear Private Lance muttering under his breath,

counting the number of insurgents present at the camp—or at least all the ones he could see.

Scarlett slipped her binoculars back into her pack and pulled out the camera. Moving as little as possible, she photographed the insurgent camp. The central tent, the snow mobiles on patrol, the soldiers wandering about. Anything she could see was captured. Lance stopped muttering; he must have completed his count. Scarlett glanced at her watch. They didn't have much time until the storm hit.

Discreetly gesturing to her troops, she signaled their retreat.

“Good work, squad. The intelligence we've gathered today will go a long way to help command. Time to head out. We don't want to risk getting stranded out here when the storm hits.”

Scarlett had plenty of time to think once they reached the cliffs again. Being the lightest of their squad, she would descend last, clearing the screws and making sure the only evidence of their ever being there were merely two holes in the ice where they tied their anchor.

She watched as the last private backed up over the cliff and waited for the signal to begin her own descent. Being the last, she wouldn't have the peace of mind that the anchor was backed up by screws; she would have to trust the ice and her squad mates below to keep her from falling.

“All clear, Captain.”

Scarlett had never been overly fond of abseiling. Going up was fine, but she wasn't in control if something went wrong while rappelling down. She noticed clouds darkening in the distance and knew she couldn't delay. If they were still at the base of the cliff when the storm began, they ran the risk of the ice collapsing on them.

Clipping the screws onto her belt, Scarlett tugged hard on the anchor; it didn't budge.

Thank god.

Eyes closed, she backed over the edge, letting out an unsteady breath. Willing her heart to slow its frantic beating, she began making her way down the cliff. Steadily, one foot then the other, not looking down as she went.

After what felt like an eon, her feet hit solid ground.

Thank fuck that was over.

She pulled the last of the rope through the drilled anchor, watching it tumble toward them.

"Rope!"

She could hear the young privates chattering away behind her again as they made their way back across the snowfield. She didn't mind; they had done well today.

She grabbed her radio. "Come in, command."

"Go ahead, Captain," General Carson said.

"Mission successful., Now returning to base."

"Very good, Captain."

"Over—"

A crack behind her echoed through the valley. She spun around to see a hole in the

snow field and one private staring at it in shock.

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:46 pm*

“Shit. Private, what is that?” Scarlett asked.

“Private Radley, ma’am. He...” Scarlett rushed over.

“Get away from there, Private.”

He was too busy scrambling away from the chasm to respond.

Scarlett reached the hole.

What the fuck? Holy hell, we’re on a lake.

“Lake! We’re on a lake. Radley’s under.”

She began scooping the snow from around the hole, hoping to catch a glimpse of the missing soldier beneath the ice. He wouldn’t last long if they didn’t find him.

“Lieutenant, I need help. Radley’s under the ice. Someone needs to tie in a support in case it cracks further; we don’t all need to go swimming.”

Scarlett saw her lieutenant issuing orders from the corner of her eye while she continued to dig. The ice was so thick she couldn’t see anything.

Shit, I’m not going to lose a soldier on my first mission!

The general’s voice broke through her panic. “Captain, you don’t have time. You can’t afford to delay; the storm will bury you all alive if you don’t make it back.”

No, she wasn't going to leave him behind. She clicked the receiver off, wincing. She was sure she would regret it later.

How the hell was she going to get him out? He'd moved away from where the ice had broken and could be anywhere.

That might work. She threw her pack to the ground, digging to the very bottom.

"Stand back."

The flare rocketed into the water, and a second later the ice sheet was lit up in a bright, glowing red.

"There."

A patch of darkness moving in the sea of red.

"Someone secure themselves and let's start digging."

She didn't wait before sprinting over, axe at the ready, hacking into the ground right next to Radley's shadow. Her squad mates dropped beside her, all furiously slashing away at the ground.

Lieutenant West reached in and pulled Radley up under the arms, dragging him onto the ice. He was shivering violently and coughing up a lungful of frigid water. Scarlett tugged her foilblanket from her pack as the lieutenant stripped Radley of his sodden uniform.

"One of you pass over your camo. Mine won't fit him," Scarlett ordered.

Three of them rushed to start unzipping.

“Just one will do, but quickly, we need to get him warm.”

Scarlett looked down at the radio clipped to her chest. This wasn't going to be fun.

“Come in, command.” She held her breath as she waited for the response. After a few seconds, it came.

“Captain.” The general did not sound pleased.

“Requesting emergency medical support, ma'am.”

“You got him then?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:46 pm*

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I will send the medics and approve evacuation for one.”

“Two, General.”

“Two?”

“Yes, General. Private Lee should also return to base quickly, on account of no longer having full cold-weather protective layers.”

A cold silence sat between them.

"Very well. Evacuation for two.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Captain. You and the rest of your squadron will be returning as planned, storm or no.”

With that, the line went dead.

As they piled in base, exhausted and frozen, Scarlett saw the general standing blank-faced awaiting their arrival.

“The privates?” Scarlett asked.

“In med bay,” she replied shortly. “Good work, soldiers. Go rest. Any intelligence you have collected can be passed on to your captain in the morning.”

“Yes, General,” the soldiers said as they moved to their bunks.

“Not you, Captain. You’re needed for debrief.”

Scarlett closed her eyes; her first mission, and she’d pissed off the general. Lieutenant West met her eyes pityingly before he left. She was in for a dressing down then. At least the general was feeling kind enough to do it in private.

Best get this over with.

She dragged herself through the door and followed Carson’s retreating form down the corridor and into what Scarlett presumed were her quarters.

She mustn’t be too mad, then, if this chat is happening in her private rooms.

The door was shut when Scarlett reached it. She rapped her knuckles against its hard surface, her heart pounding.

“Enter.”

Scarlett pushed open the door, striding in with a mix of determination and apprehension. General Carson looked up from her desk, her exhaustion evident, and gestured curtly toward the worn couch.

“Sit down, Captain. If you stand there, I’ll strain my neck trying to look up at you.”

“Yes, General. Thank you,” Scarlett replied, lowering herself onto the couch, trying to mask her discomfort.

Carson's gaze was unwavering, and there was a hard edge to her voice. "So, you can follow orders after all. I wasn't sure."

Scarlett flinched, the jab stinging more than she expected. "General, I?—"

"Let's get one thing straight," Carson cut in sharply, leaning forward. "You did well leading your team under the circumstances. Your efforts were impressive, and you managed to get everyone back safely. That's a commendable achievement."

"Thank you, General," Scarlett responded, though her tone was defensive.

Carson's expression hardened. "But let's not gloss over the facts. You knowingly put your squad in extreme danger. You knew the storm was coming. What if it had hit earlier? What if the vehicles failed? You could have left several people to die in that storm. What if Private— whatever his name is— what if he had succumbed to the cold?"

Scarlett stood abruptly, her voice rising. "I understood the risks, General, but I couldn't just abandon him. He's young. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try to save him."

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Carson's eyes flashed. "And maybe you've done something good, but maybe you haven't. Captain, you have to understand you are responsible for the lives of every member of your squad. There will be times when you need to weigh the value of one life against many. You have to make those hard decisions with the bigger picture in mind."

"I get that!" Scarlett shot back, moving closer to Carson's desk. "But you don't know what it's like to look into their eyes, to see them as real people and not just numbers on a report!"

Carson stood, her chair scraping back, and closed the distance between them. "And you don't know what it's like to be the one making those tough calls, to carry the weight of every decision on your shoulders."

Their faces were inches apart now, the charged air between them palpable. Scarlett's breath quickened, and Carson's steely grey gaze softened momentarily, the sternness giving way to something more personal.

"And don't even get me started on you shutting down the comms line," Carson continued, her voice lower but no less intense. "If you ever do that again, I will have your rank stripped. Do you understand me? You may disagree with me, but you do not cut me off. Those soldiers are mine too."

Scarlett's eyes locked onto Carson's, the unspoken tension hanging heavy between them. "Yes, ma'am. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

Carson took a deep breath, her own composure faltering. She stepped back, forcing

space between them, but the energy lingered. “Dismissed, Captain. Get some rest. I’ll expect the intelligence report on my desk first thing tomorrow.”

“Understood, General. Good night,” Scarlett said, her voice softer now, though her eyes still held a trace of defiance.

Scarlett needed to clear her head. She felt hot and flushed, like her head was filled with steam. The general reprimanding her should not have made her feel this way. Nervous, angry, yes. But turned on? What was wrong with her?

Without wasting time, she turned on the shower and adjusted the water to its coldest setting. As the icy spray hit her, she gasped, her body tensing at the shock. The cold was harsh and invigorating, cutting through the fog of attraction and frustration that had settled over her. Scarlett stood under the frigid water, letting it wash over her. Still, the general’s gray eyes flashing with anger wouldn’t leave her mind.

The water beat down relentlessly, and Scarlett closed her eyes, focusing on the chill and the way it made her skin tingle. She forced herself to concentrate on the here and now, pushing aside the lingering thoughts of General Carson.

After she fully acclimated to the temperature, Scarlett turned off the shower and stepped out, wrapping herself in a towel. She could still feel the lingering chill on her skin. The clarity she sought was beginning to surface, but the exhaustion was creeping in.

Collapsing onto her bed, Scarlett let out a weary sigh. The soft, cool sheets felt comforting against her skin, a welcome respite after the day’s turmoil. Her mind continued to buzz with the echoes of her interaction with General Carson, but her body was too tired to fight the exhaustion any longer.

ROS

The days at the base had grown increasingly intense. Each mission brought new challenges, and the pressure on General Carson to maintain a tight grip on her command was relentless. But it wasn't just the military operations that weighed on her; it was the constant, growing tension between her and Captain Scarlett Bennett.

Scarlett had proven herself time and again, her quick thinking and sharp instincts repeatedly turning the tide in their favor. She was a natural leader, commanding respect from her peers and admiration from her superiors. But for Ros, there was something more. Every time they worked together, every time Scarlett looked at her with those clear, confident hazel eyes, Ros felt her control slipping.

Today had been no different. Intelligence suggested that the insurgents were planning to sabotage supply routes crucial to the base's operations, so Ros tasked Scarlett with leading a small team to deliver supplies to an outpost while gathering information on insurgent movements. It was only due to Captain Bennett's quick thinking that her entire platoon had avoided the ambush planned to take out the supply route. If she hadn't noticed the signs of the insurgents' presence, Fort Independence would have been without supplies for some time.

"Captain, good work today out there. Color me impressed."

"Thank you, General. Just doing my job."

"Of course, of course. Still, such competence deserves some recognition. Why don't you swing by my quarters this evening? We can share a drink to celebrate."

Ros saw the tips of Scarlett's ears tinge with pink.

Damn, I've pushed too quickly. Why would she even want to spend time with her

general?

She began to retract the invitation. “Not that—” “I’d love to, yes. Thank you, General.” She smiled.

Relief and warmth rushed through Ros. Phew, she hadn’t pushed the captivating captain away. Not that the drink would mean anything, of course. Just rewarding a promising young soldier for her good work. Just getting to know her better, making her comfortable in her new posting.

Ros’s mind suddenly flooded with images of her making the young captain very comfortable indeed. The bed would be the most comfortable, naturally, though the couch could suffice in a pinch.

I wonder what her beautiful red hair looks like released from that harsh bun and splayed across my pillows? I wonder what her face looks like when she climaxes?

What was she thinking? Captain Bennett was her junior; she couldn’t abuse her position of power like that. And while she got the impression the captain found her interesting, she wouldn’t want to shack up with an old soldier like her. Feeling a coiling in the pit of her stomach, she looked up to where the subject of her reveries had not moved and was still staring at her.

“Ahem, good. Well then, Captain. I’ll see you later for that drink. Dismissed.”

“Yes, General.” Bennett saluted, a bemused expression on her face, before leaving the room.

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Why have I gotten myself into this? I've set myself up for an evening of torture now.

The rest of that afternoon, Ros hadn't been able to focus no matter how hard she tried. Scarlett Bennett, in her quarters tonight. She couldn't get the thought out of her head.

Dinner had come and gone, and Ros had sat stoically at her desk, papers in hand. She hadn't been able to read a single sheet, her head so full, so overwhelmed, so confused. Why had she done this to herself? No other pretty soldier had ever caught her attention like this before. She had always kept her head down, kept working, kept progressing. She'd had no time for romance, not even dalliances. What was so different about Captain Bennett? The woman intrigued her. She seemed so fearless—fearless enough to disobey her—but so human and caring at the same time. Ros couldn't understand her, couldn't wrap her mind around her own fascination, though she wouldn't mind wrapping herself around the figment of her obsession.

God, why couldn't she get her out of her head? And why wasn't she here yet?

A rap at the door saved Ros from further spiraling. She shot up from her chair, scraping the legs across the hard floor. She hadn't changed out of her uniform. Was that a good thing? Would Scarlett think that was strange? No, it would help her keep her distance. This was a celebratory drink between two colleagues, that was all. She tugged at her jacket and ran a hand over her cropped silver hair, smoothing it into submission.

With a centering breath, she pulled the door open. Scarlett was looking down the hallway, her hands clasped behind her back. She was in her fatigues, and her auburn

hair was tied back.

She looked back to where Ros was standing.

“Good evening, General.”

“Good evening, Captain.”

“May I come in?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Ros stumbled over her words, realizing she was blocking the captain from entering. “Come in, come in. Make yourself comfortable.” She waved the younger woman inside, only now realizing just how barren her quarters were.

Ros gestured toward the couch and dragged her desk chair over to sit opposite her. She didn’t dare risk sharing the couch, not with the possibilities her mind had been conjuring earlier.

An uncomfortable silence settled between them, both women acutely aware of the undercurrent that had been growing stronger with each passing day. Finally, Ros gestured toward the small table where she had set out two glasses and a bottle of whiskey. “I thought we could toast to our success.”

Scarlett hesitated for only a moment before nodding. “I’d like that.”

They sat across from each other, the whiskey smooth and warm as it slid down their throats. The silence stretched on, heavy with unspoken words. Ros found herself staring at Scarlett, her mind a tumult of emotions she had tried so hard to bury. This woman—so capable, so sharp—was becoming more than just a trusted officer to her. And that realization terrified her.

“To a successful mission.”

“Agreed, to a successful mission,” Scarlett echoed back as they clinked their glasses together, the ringing filling the otherwise silent room.

“So, Captain, how are you settling in at Fort Independence? Finding your feet okay?” Ros asked, questing around for some kind of casual conversation to fill the awkward pause that was sure to build.

“Yes, thank you, General. I’m settling in well. It’s been good to jump right in. If I hadn’t been so busy, I think it would have been more nerve-wracking.”

“So, you prefer risking your life to having make conversation. A woman after my own heart. And please, we are in my quarters; you’re not on duty. Call me Ros.”

“Yes, Gener—Ros. But if I’m calling you Ros, you’d better call me Scarlett. It would be very odd for me to be the only one keeping rank.” She laughed.

“Very well then, Scarlett.” The name felt foreign in her mouth. Though it had filled her thoughts for some time now, she hadn’t allowed herself to call the captain by her name, fearful it might lead to her own integrity slipping.

A silence settled between them, Ros too caught up in her own thoughts to notice.

“So, I hear you’re new to the base as well, Ros. How are you finding things?”

“Oh, well, everything has been running smoothly. Though these insurgents making themselves a nuisance isn’t the most peaceful thing to establish command under.”

“Ha. I can imagine. Still, from what I hear, the boots think you’re doing a good job.”

“Ah, I won’t ask for gossip. As much as a part of me wants to know, I don’t think it’s fair on the soldiers. Or on you for that matter. Can’t establish trust within your company if they can’t bellyache about command. It’s not that long ago I was in their shoes, and I certainly had plenty to grumble about. I don’t begrudge anyone their complaints.”

“Fair enough.”

Ros cringed; she’d killed that line of conversation. She’d never been good at this.

“How did you end up in the military?” Scarlett blurted.

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Ros's smile slightly upturned. At least one of them seemed able at keeping the conversation going.

"Family tradition. Grew up with my father being military; his father was too. Couldn't let the tradition die out. Besides, I wasn't sure what else I could possibly do with my life. No, it was always going to be the army for me."

"Oh wow. So, your whole life has been this?"

"Yeah, no idea what I would do without it, to be honest. What about you? I've seen your file, of course, but what made you want to switch into this kind of life?"

"Honestly, I just wanted a change. I landed a job after college, but life just felt empty, like I was floating with no direction. I've always thrived under pressure and can't get a whole lot more pressure than this." She grinned, her hands gesturing around them as she talked.

"Well, the swap seems to have worked out for you. Look at you, shooting through the ranks. You'll be after my position in no time!"

Scarlett looked at her with big hazel eyes. Her cheeks flushed slightly. She was very beautiful and Ros couldn't keep her illicit thoughts from flashing back into her head.

"You're too kind, Ros."

Ros leaned back slightly in her chair, a playful glint in her sharp gray eyes. "Too kind? Hardly. I've seen the way you handle yourself under pressure. It's impressive,

Scarlett. But I'm sure you hear that all the time."

Scarlett chuckled, the sound light but tinged with something more. "Only from those trying to get on my good side. But coming from you, it feels...different."

"Oh?" Ros arched an eyebrow, her gaze lingering on Scarlett a moment longer than necessary. "And why's that?"

Scarlett hesitated, feeling a flicker of nervousness. But there was a challenge in Ros's eyes, a subtle invitation that made her bolder. "Because you're not someone who gives out compliments lightly. You mean what you say."

Ros smiled, a soft, almost secretive curve of her lips. "I do. And I meant it. You've got talent, Scarlett. I can see you going far."

Scarlett felt warmth spread through her chest at the sound of her name on Ros's lips. It sounded casual, almost like they were old friends. "I appreciate that, really. But I have to admit, it's a little intimidating trying to live up to your expectations."

Ros tilted her head, studying Scarlett with a mix of curiosity and something deeper, something unspoken. "Intimidating? You don't strike me as the type who's easily intimidated."

Scarlett's smile widened, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "Maybe not by the usual challenges, but you're not exactly 'usual.'"

Ros's gaze sharpened, her amusement deepening. "No? What am I then?"

"More like a puzzle." Her tone was teasing but with a thread of sincerity woven in. "Complex, challenging, not easily solved."

Ros's laughter was low and warm, filling the space between them. "A puzzle, huh? I suppose I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was meant as one," Scarlett replied, her voice softening.

There was something intoxicating about this moment, the way they were tiptoeing around the edge of something more, something they both seemed to want but were hesitant to acknowledge.

Ros leaned in slightly, her eyes locked on Scarlett's, the distance between them narrowing. "Careful, Scarlett. You might find that solving this puzzle isn't as easy as it seems."

"I've never been one to shy away from a challenge, Ros."

She was leaning so far forward on her chair she was almost touching the couch. Her face felt warm from the whiskey or perhaps just from being so close to the subject of her recent dreams.

The air between them felt heavy and charged, as though filled with unspoken feelings and intentions.

She could see Scarlett felt it too. Her lips were slightly parted, and her hazel eyes glazed. Her skin was flushed, and her breathing had quickened. Ros leaned even further forward, so close they almost touched. The edge of her seat bit into the back of her legs, startling her back into reality.

She jolted backward.

What was she doing? She couldn't be acting like this toward any soldier, let alone one who reported directly to her. How could she even think about putting Scarlett in

such a compromised position. If she didn't feel the same, she could hardly say no to her superior, could she? God, what was coming over her?

"Scarlett I?—"

But before she could finish, Scarlett moved. In an instant, she closed the distance between them, her lips crashing against Ros's in a kiss that was all heat and desperation. Heat enveloped her lips, soft hair stroked against her cheeks. It took a second for her mind to catch up. Scarlett Bennett was kissing her.

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Ros hadn't kissed anyone in a very long time.

She relaxed into the kiss, her hand reaching around to the back of Scarlett's neck, pulling her in closer, deepening the kiss until it threatened to consume her. The force of it stole Ros's breath, her carefully constructed walls crumbling as she kissed Scarlett back with all the intensity she'd been holding in. Scarlett's lips were chapped from her recent excursions, and Ros gently ran her tongue over them, the taste of whiskey coating them. She felt Scarlett's hands bunching in her jacket, pulling her hips forward. The world around them blurred, reduced to the press of lips and the taste of whiskey.

The kiss was fierce, hungry, and a release of everything they'd both been trying to deny. Ros could feel Scarlett's heartbeat against her chest, matching the frantic rhythm of her own. For the first time in so long, Ros felt alive, the fire inside her burning brighter than ever.

But then, with a sharp intake of breath, Ros pulled away. The loss of contact was like a slap to the face, and she was left gasping, her heart racing as she struggled to regain control.

Scarlett's breath was ragged, her lips swollen from the kiss. She stared at Ros, confusion and longing written all over her face.

"We can't," Ros said, her voice rough, barely able to form the words. "You know we can't. The consequences..." Ros ran a trembling hand through her hair, trying to steady herself. The reality of what they'd just done hit her like a wave, cold and unforgiving. "We have to stop this before it goes too far. If anyone finds out, it could

ruin us both.”

Scarlett’s jaw tightened, but she nodded, the fire in her eyes dimming to a smolder. “I understand,” she said, though the words were heavy with disappointment.

They sat there, inches apart, but it felt like miles. The kiss hung between them, a forbidden act that neither of them could take back.

“Sorry, I-I thought...” “No, no. Don’t be sorry. I shouldn’t have invited you back here. I should have better control of myself.”

“Control? Oh.”

“Scarlett. Captain, I shouldn’t have encouraged this. There can be nothing between us. Fraternization simply isn’t worth the consequences. God, you’d think I’d be old enough to know better.”

“Ros”—Scarlett sighed as Ros turned away from her—“you’re right, I should go. Thank you for the drink and the chat.”

Ros didn’t answer. She didn’t trust herself to speak as she watched Scarlett stand, her movements stiff, as though she was fighting every urge to stay.

“Good night, Captain. Strictly professional from now on.”

“Yes, General, good night.” She gave a sad smile.

Their eyes met one last time, and in that moment, Ros wanted nothing more than to reach out, to pull Scarlett back, and feel what she’d denied herself for so long.

But she didn’t. She let Scarlett walk away, the door closing softly behind her, leaving

Ros alone with the echoes of what had just happened.

Ros stared at where Scarlett had stood. The door, so cold and solid, a reminder of all the reasons she could never have the love life she wanted.

The couch groaned as Ros collapsed on it, her head in her hands, breathing in Scarlett's scent still lingering on the fabric. Her lips still tingled, and she ran her finger over them. How was she ever going to be able to look at her again?

She sat alone in the dim light, the taste of the kiss still fresh in her mind, and the weight of what had just happened settling heavily on her shoulders. She had always prided herself on her discipline, on keeping her emotions in check. But now, she felt that control slipping away.

And as much as she tried to push it aside, she couldn't bring herself to regret the kiss. For the first time in years, Ros felt truly alive, even if it meant she was now walking a dangerous line.

As Scarlett left Ros's quarters; she felt a rush of emotions surge through her. Her heart was still pounding, and her lips tingled from the kiss they had just shared. She walked down the dimly lit hallway, her footsteps echoing in the stillness of the night.

As she walked, she struggled to keep her emotions in check. Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing was still uneven. She felt exposed, as if the lingering heat from their kiss was visible to anyone who might see her. Scarlett turned down an empty corridor, heading toward her own quarters, her thoughts tangled between what had just happened and what it meant for her future.

Scarlett couldn't deny the longing that still lingered, the desire to turn back, to return to Ros's quarters and continue what they had started. But that longing was tempered by a deep sense of uncertainty.

Where did they go from here? Could they really keep things professional after crossing such a line? And more pressing—did she even want to?

5

## SCARLETT

Ablare startled Scarlett from her rest. Hurriedly, she threw off the comforter and got dressed. That alarm meant she was needed for something urgent; the faster she made it to the briefing room, the better.

Reaching the large planning room, Scarlett saw several other officers awaiting orders. Ros was not there yet, though it likely wouldn't be long before her arrival.

General Carson strode through the doors, pointedly not looking in Scarlett's direction. She was stern. Gray eyes impenetrable. Her short gray hair immaculate and neat. The sharp angles of her face set as though in granite. The softness Scarlett had seen inside was nowhere to be seen. The pure lust Scarlett had seen in Ros's hungry gaze was completely gone.

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The last several days had been the same. Scarlett missed the general's eyes on her. She liked being able to look at the older woman and see that she was being looked at too. But since that kiss, Ros had been fastidiously avoiding her gaze, and Scarlett was pretty sure she was being dodged around the base as well. That or before their kiss, Ros had been surreptitiously seeking her out.

Ros reached the front of the room, and Scarlett watched as she quickly did a head count, making sure all the senior officers were present. An imperceptible nod followed; they were all there then.

“Listen up. An avalanche has hit Fort Kirk. Communications are down, and many soldiers are in need of rescue. You will each be leading your squadron to assist in the evacuation. Captain Bennett, with your background, you will also be leading a team of engineers to try and get the base operational again. Once you have succeeded, you will rejoin your squadron in the evacuation efforts.”

She addressed me directly and still wouldn't look at me. Is this how it's going to be between us now? I almost wish I hadn't kissed her at all. Better to have that unfulfilled spark than whatever this is.

“I will be running point from here,” the general continued. “Several heat source imaging cameras will be operated from the helicopters going with you, and I will be communicating with each of you when we find the locations of trapped service members.”

A nod from each officer confirmed their understanding.

“Good. Now, go brief your teams.”

Scarlett saluted and left the room, her mind pulled between thoughts of the mission and Ros.

Scarlett felt a tug on her arm and spun round. Lieutenant Colonel Izzy Oakley was beside her, a concerned expression across her face. Izzy had been a close friend of Scarlett’s since they’d met at a joint training exercise. “Scar, you okay?”

“What? Yeah, of course. Just thinking about the mission, you know?”

“No, there’s something else. You’ve been on missions before. You’re never like this.”

“I’m fine, Iz, honestly. It’s nothing. Just in my own head.”

“Yeah, tell me why I don’t believe you, then?” Izzy replied, obviously unconvinced by Scarlett’s weak excuses. “Give me the truth, Scar.”

“It’s dumb. It’s the general.”

“Carson? Why? What’s she done?”

“No, nothing like that, Iz. I’m just all flushed around her, that’s all.”

“You have a crush on the general?” Izzy laughed.

Scarlett sighed; she could feel her face red with mortification. Maybe getting it off her chest would help her concentrate on the mission. Izzy didn’t need to know all the details, though, and Scarlett didn’t think she could survive the embarrassment of telling her about the kiss.

“Yep, Izzy, I have a crush on the general.”

“Oof, I mean I can see where you’re coming from, but good luck getting past that stony exterior. I’ve never seen a fortress that well guarded. Stay focused out there today, soldier.” Izzy gave her a hard slap on the shoulder before heading out the room, leaving Scarlett alone with her swirling thoughts.

She was almost hanging out the side of the chopper when Fort Kirk came into view. Nearly the whole site had been buried. Any deeper and no one would ever know an army base had existed at all.

Teams of junior soldiers were working to dig out paths to the buildings. They wouldn’t be able to get in to fix anything or pull anyone out if the doors couldn’t open, of course.

Lamp posts had been bent almost in half, and the few windows visible above the snow line had been smashed—whether by snow, rescuers, or those trapped inside, she couldn’t tell. It would take a lot of time, effort, and money to get this base running properly again. But that was the risk of positioning all these bases in the mountains.

They hit the ground running, and Scarlett glanced over her shoulder ensuring the engineers were following her lead. Lieutenant West was leading the rest of the company in the opposite direction to look for anyone trapped under the snow or inside buildings.

Scarlett headed for the back of the main building. She saw the power grid off to the side, poles bent and snapped and cables hanging loose, crackling in the frigid air. That was not something she could fix with a small team of engineers, though.

The base had been cut off from communications for hours, and restoring the lines was crucial for the rescue efforts, both for those trapped outside under the snow, but also

those trapped inside buildings; the doors would not open without power.

“Alright, team,” she called out, her voice firm and clear despite the harsh winds. “We need to clear a path to those communication lines. The avalanche has buried them under several feet of snow, and there’s no telling what kind of debris we’ll find underneath. Safety first—stay vigilant for any signs of shifting snow or potential secondary slides.”

Her officers nodded before they turned, issuing orders to their own squadrons.

They began the arduous task of digging through the snow. Not one to sit on the sidelines, Scarlett joined them, her shovel biting into the frozen mass over and over. The dig was tiring work, but it kept her warm at least. As they worked, the sounds of shovels scraping joined the already cacophonous array that filled the air—the mountain groaned and rumbled, helicopter blades whirled, the shouts of soldiers and the barks of search and rescue K-9s mingled together in a chaotic orchestra.

A twisted antenna poked through the snow, its form bent and crushed. Farther down, there were the mangled remains of a thick cable, its casing torn open by the sheer force of the avalanche.

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Scarlett crouched near the exposed cable, pulling a multimeter from her pack. “Let’s see how bad the damage is,” she muttered to herself, connecting the device to the cable. The screen flickered to life, showing no signal at all—completely dead.

“Signal’s down across the board,” she reported to her team. “We’ve got physical damage here, but we need to check for electrical shorts and any possible interference further down the line. Start testing the other cables and keep an eye out for anything that looks like it might’ve been damaged by the snow or debris.”

While one of her lieutenants oversaw the cable repairs, Scarlett moved her focus to the relay station. It was still partially buried, its metal casing heavily dented. After excavating it from the snow, she pried open the access panel. The wiring and circuit board looked untouched, but a single reading told her the power supply was unstable, likely damaged by the impact.

“We’re going to need to replace the supply here. Get me a new unit from the cache, and we can get this thing back online.”

Within minutes, a new power unit was delivered and Scarlett supervised her engineers as they carefully installed it—reconnecting wires and properly grounding it. It powered to life with a gentle hum.

Scarlett’s radio crackled; the transmission lines were back up.

“Command, this is Captain Bennett. Do you read?”

“Loud and clear, Captain. Looks like we’re back online.”

Scarlett allowed herself a brief moment of satisfaction and pride in her platoon. But the work was not done yet; there were still hundreds of soldiers awaiting rescue who were trapped beneath the ice.

“Alright, soldiers, we’ve got people buried under tons of snow. We’ll be rejoining the rescue teams now. I want each sergeant to take their team and fan out. All officers stay ready to receive comms. General Carson will be relaying location info from the heat imaging.”

With a squad of her own, Scarlett headed to the west of the base. General Carson’s voice crackled across the radio.

“Captain Bennett, imaging is picking up several hot spots in your vicinity. Marking the coordinates for you now.”

Scarlett couldn’t help the slight flutter in her chest at the sound of Ros’s voice, but she quickly shoved it aside. This was no time for distractions.

“Copy that, General. We’re ready to move on your command.”

“We’ve got a heat signal about a hundred feet to your east, approximately six feet below the surface. Another group is showing up about 150 feet north, but they’re deeper—maybe twenty feet down. Prioritize the closer one first; I’ll keep the coordinates coming.”

Scarlett waved her team forward, moving toward the first set of coordinates. The snow was deep, but they trudged through it. As they reached the designated spot, Scarlett stopped, her breath coming out in controlled huffs as she gauged the best approach.

“Here’s where we dig,” she said, planting her shovel into the snow. Her team

followed suit.

Scarlett's shovel met something solid. She dropped to her knees, scraping the snow away with gloved hands, and uncovered fingers pointing up at the sky. This soldier had at least remembered some of their avalanche training then. With any luck, they'd have remembered to dig an air pocket too.

"Got 'em," Scarlett yelled, her team falling in beside her.

Her team helped her clear the remaining snow, and soon they uncovered a soldier. His eyes were closed, frost clinging to his eyelashes, but he was breathing. Scarlett gently shook him, and his eyes fluttered open. "We've got you," Scarlett reassured him, her voice firm but kind. "You're safe now."

The rest of the team worked to pull him out with the medics on standby while Scarlett turned her attention back to the radio. "General, we've got one out. Moving to the next coordinates now."

Ros's voice was a steady anchor in the chaos. "Good work, Captain. The other group is deeper; expect harder digging. We're seeing at least five individuals down there. Proceed with caution."

Minutes felt like hours as they dug, their breaths coming out in sharp puffs. Scarlett's muscles burned, but she didn't let up. Finally, they broke through to an air pocket beneath the snow, revealing a cluster of soldiers huddled together, their faces pale but alive.

"We've found them," Scarlett reported, a wave of relief washing over her. "They're all alive."

The team carefully began extracting the soldiers, wrapping them in thermal blankets

and administering basic first aid. Scarlett's hands moved on autopilot, her training kicking in as she checked each person for injuries.

"General," Scarlett said into the radio, "we've got five more out. Requesting immediate medevac for hypothermia and minor injuries."

"Helicopters are en route," Ros responded, her voice filled with calm authority. "You did good, Captain. We'll have them out of there in no time."

As the helicopters hovered above, lowering stretchers and rescue personnel, Scarlett took a moment to glance up at the sky, the snow still falling lightly around them. The roar of the helicopter blades filled the air, and she could feel the vibration through the ground as the medevac team touched down.

"Captain Bennett," Ros's voice crackled through the radio one last time, soft but filled with the weight of everything left unsaid, "we're bringing you and your team back to base. You've done enough for today."

Scarlett allowed herself a small smile, the tension in her shoulders easing ever so slightly. "Copy that, General. We'll see you back at base."

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The base was eerily quiet in the late hours of the night, the stillness only interrupted by the hum of generators and the rhythmic footsteps of soldiers out on patrol. Inside the dimly lit control center, Scarlett sat, finishing up her report of the day's activities. The mission had been a success, and the adrenaline that had fueled her through it was beginning to give way to exhaustion. Still, there was a restlessness within her that she couldn't shake.

Just as she finished and was ready to leave, the door creaked open and General Ros Carson stepped inside. Scarlett's heart fluttered as their eyes met. Ros looked as composed as ever, her uniform pristine despite the day's chaos. But there was a softness to her eyes that Scarlett had never seen before.

"Captain, you did some excellent work today."

"Thank you, General."

"If you're not too tired, there are some details I'd like to go over with you."

"Not at all, General. I'm at your disposal."

"Good. My office?"

Without waiting for a reply, Ros turned on her heel, leaving Scarlett to scramble out the room after her.

Memories of the last time she'd been in the general's private rooms spiraled through her mind. After Ros's reaction, she hadn't thought she would even consider inviting

Scarlett into her personal space ever again.

Reaching the office, Scarlett entered to find Ros already hovering over mission reports piled neatly across the desk.

As they picked through the reports, Scarlett noticed the way Ros's hand lingered near her own on the table. What did it mean? Had she changed her mind or was it involuntary? Scarlett could feel the heat radiating from Ros, the proximity quickening her pulse. The tension between them was palpable, a magnetic pull bringing them closer and closer. The words on the page became a blur as Scarlett found herself only watching Ros. How her hands twitched as if wanting to move while she spoke. How her tongue danced over her lips to wet them. The promise she'd made to herself to keep her distance shattered under the slightest strain.

Ros closed a file and straightened, turning to Scarlett, her expression unreadable.

"You did an excellent job today, Scarlett. I don't know what we'd have done without you there."

Hearing her first name tumble from Ros's lips sent a shiver down Scarlett's spine. Tentatively, she took a step forward, bringing their bodies closer together.

"It was a team effort." Ros's eyes met her own, searching. All the walls she had built crumbled to dust in an instant. Without thinking, Scarlett reached up on her toes and pressed her lips against Ros's.

Once again, the general froze, and Scarlett pulled away. Had she misread the energy between them again? Once might be forgivable, but twice in a row? Ros would not be forgiving of that.

Scarlett wished the ground would swallow her whole. She wasn't long for this base

after all. And just as she was earning the respect of her troops, she screwed it all up over some crush.

She couldn't help the hunger she had for the icy general. She craved Ros's attention and she craved Ros's strong hands on her body.

When Ros responded by deepening the kiss with a hunger that mirrored Scarlett's own, all her doubts and fears vanished.

Their kiss became more urgent, more desperate, as weeks of pent-up tension and unspoken feelings spilled over. Ros's hands, which had always been so controlled and deliberate, now gripped Scarlett's waist, pulling her closer. Scarlett's fingers tangled in Ros's cropped silver hair, her body pressing against the older woman's, craving more of the warmth and closeness she had been denying herself.

Ros pulled back slightly, her breathing heavy, her forehead resting against Scarlett's. "Scarlett, we shouldn't..." Her voice was filled with conflict, but even as she said the words, her hands remained firmly on Scarlett's hips, unwilling to let go.

Scarlett shook her head, her voice hushed but firm. "I know, but I can't stop. I don't want to stop. I want this; I want you."

They stumbled toward the small couch in the corner, their kisses growing more frantic with each step. Ros's hands roamed Scarlett's body, relearning the feel of another person so close after years of solitude. It was both overwhelming and liberating, a flood of emotions she hadn't allowed herself to experience in so long.

As they collapsed onto the couch, Ros's breath hitched. She hesitated, the gravity of the moment washing over her. This was more than just a physical release—it was a crossing of lines, a shattering of the discipline that had defined her for decades.

But then Scarlett's lips were on her neck, her breath warm and her hands sure, and Ros's doubts melted away. She let herself be swept up in the moment, giving in to the passion that had been simmering between them for so long. The sensation was both familiar and foreign, like rediscovering a part of herself that had lain dormant for years.

Scarlett's shirt was tugged frantically over her head, her bra unclipped with ease. Goosebumps prickled across her skin as cold air hit her breasts.

Head thrown back, Scarlett gasped as her nipple was captured in Ros's mouth, sucking and loving it with her tongue.

The number of silver buttons on Ros's jacket was driving her mad as she fumbled with them, half her brain rendered useless by Ros's ministrations.

Ros switched to the other nipple, circling round and round with her tongue. Scarlett arched her back into it, head hitting the back of the couch.

"God, yes... this feels so good..."

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Ros grinned and reached out her hand for Scarlett to take. She stood, once more foraying into battle with Ros's buttons. One by one, they were unfastened, all the while Ros was doing her best to distract her—flicking, stroking, squeezing at her body.

The jacket finally fell to the floor, only for Scarlett to be greeted with even more buttons.

Ros chuckled at her expression. "Allow me."

Scarlett watched hungrily as Ros unbuttoned her blouse, one by one, each agonizingly slow. Scarlett couldn't take her eyes away as the blouse slid off Ros's shoulders revealing her lean frame.

Finally, she was finished and the blouse was on the couch.

Stepping closer once more, Scarlett spun her to face away. She danced her fingertips across Ros's shoulders, down herback, up her sides. Ever so softly, ever so slowly. All the while she lay gentle, barely there kisses along her long neck. She enjoyed Ros shivering under her touch and gooseflesh rushing across her skin.

Unclasping her bra, she moved her hands around to Ros's small breasts, cupping and squeezing, repaying the older woman for her earlier teasing.

Ros moaned and the sound of it sent shivers through Scarlett. Ros's nipples became hard under her fingers.

Leaving the embrace, Ros pulled her over toward a closed door.

Her bedroom.

Scarlett followed her in and her hair being released from its tie, followed by Ros pushing her onto the bed, and Ros slowly peeled her pants and her underwear from her. She looked up at Ros from under heavy lids. She felt more turned on than she could remember. She had wanted this so very much.

Seeing the frosty general like this, in a state of undress, looking at her body hungrily. This was an exquisite forbidden pleasure.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful, Scarlett.” Ros’s gaze cruised unashamedly over every part of her body lingering on her breasts and then lingering again at the pubic hair between her legs.

Scarlett flushed, unsure how to respond to such earnest praise. She pushed herself up onto her elbows, desperate to be close to Ros.

“No. No, don’t get up.”

Head flopping back against the mattress, Scarlett lay back.

“Open your legs,” Ros growled and Scarlett although feeling entirely exposed by it, obeyed eagerly and parted her thighs.

Within seconds, Ros was kneeling between her legs and dipping her head. Scarlett saw the silver flash of her hair and she couldn’t contain the moan that escaped from her as Ros’s warmmouth enveloped her pussy. Her tongue ran through her folds and encircled her already throbbing clit.

“Oh fuck...”

Scarlett thought she might implode there and then.

General Ros Carson was going down on her. Hungrily and enthusiastically. From swirls and teasing of her anus, to hungry licks of her pussy and then feasting on her clitoris as though it was the first meal she had had in years.

Scarlett felt Ros’s fingers beginning to open her up and push inside of her as her mouth continued to work magic on her clitoris. Fingers, multiple fingers seeking out her G spot and beginning to fuck her. In and out.

“Oh, my god...”

The sensations washed over Scarlett, her core winding tighter with every stroke.

She felt the fingers still fucking her, picking up in rhythm. Harder, faster. She liked it.

She felt her own moans increasing and her breath coming in short pants.

She felt her clitoris sucked deep into Ros’s mouth and massaged by her tongue.

It all felt too much. All the sensation. Her mind began to flood with a kaleidoscope of colors and then all she could see in her head as her orgasm began to flood through her was those hungry gray eyes of General Ros Carson. Hungry like a wolf for her.

Scarlett’s orgasm came and came throbbing and pulsing through her whole body.

“Oh, Jesus,” she murmured. “That was incredible.”

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She let her climax subside and felt Ros's fingers sliding out of her before opening her eyes to see Ros, still situated between her legs, a pleased smirk across her face. Her gray wolfy eyes were dancing in the light. She looked beautiful and predatory and Scarlett liked it. Ros pulled her up into a kiss, and she could taste herself on Ros's tongue as she lost herself in kissing Ros. She wanted to please Ros in return so she flipped their positions, rolling Ros over so Scarlett was now on top. She rolled Ros one more time so that Ros was lying prone beneath her. Face down in the pillow. Scarlett lay on top of her with all her weight pressing down on her. Ros, however ferocious as a general was actually smaller than her and Scarlett enjoyed the feeling of covering Ros with her body and feeling her own breasts pressing into Ros's back.

She kissed Ros's ear, her neck. Kissing, nibbling, licking. She felt Ros shuddering beneath her and moans escaping her mouth. Deep guttural moans.

She likes this.

Scarlett did more of the same, her mouth, tongue and teeth working completely synchronized to tease Ros's neck shoulders and ears. All of her senses were alight.

Scarlett positioned her mouth exactly at Ros's ear.

"I can't wait to taste you," she whispered and Ros responded with a loud moan and a shiver ran right through her body.

"I want to push my tongue inside of you," Scarlett whispered, her lips to Ros's other ear.

Ros moaned again, her body beginning to writhe beneath Scarlett.

Ros's right hand started moving beneath her. Scarlett took her hands both of them and pinned them by the wrists with Scarlett's own right hand above her head near the headboard.

"No hands, General Carson," she whispered again in Ros's ear.

Ros's body was writhing again as though trying to find something to press down upon to seek out some pressure for her clitoris.

Ros was clearly very very turned on. A thought flashed through Scarlett's mind.

"Maybe you could come for me just like this," she growled into Ros's ear.

"Just thinking of what I want to do to you should be enough... shouldn't it?"

Scarlett paused watching the visceral reaction Ros's body was having.

"Just imagine my fingers pushing slow and deep inside you and beginning to fuck you..."

Ros moaned again, her breath now coming in short pants.

"I want to take you from behind, open you up, make you take all of me inside you until you are stretched and full..."

"Why don't you come for me?" Scarlett went back to sucking and licking at Ros's earlobe, at her neck, at her shoulder and pressing her body down into Ros's.

She felt Ros tense beneath her and cry out in climax. Scarlett felt Ros's orgasm

screaming through the both of them. She smiled to herself and held Ros as she rode out the orgasm. She kissed her neck lightly and she noticed tears on Ros's cheeks as she finally rolled off her.

She didn't mention them. Ros didn't say anything either so Scarlett took her in her arms and just held her as more tears came.

It wasn't long before Ros fell asleep in Scarlett's arms. She wasn't entirely sure how they had ended up here, but she had to say, she liked it.

The early morning light had just begun to filter through the windows as Scarlett quietly dressed, careful not to wake Ros, who lay beside her in the peacefulness of sleep.

She turned to look at Ros one last time before leaving, her heart clenching at the sight. She was so strong and composed in the daylight, but now looked vulnerable and serene in sleep. The lines of worry and responsibility that usually etched her face had softened, replaced by an almost youthful calm. Scarlett wanted to reach out, to brush her fingers against Ros's cheek, but she resisted. They had already crossed one too many lines.

Scarlett quietly opened the door, taking one last look at Ros before stepping into the dimly lit hallway. The base was still, the usual bustle of soldiers and staff not yet beginning for the day. As she walked, Scarlett's mind raced. She longed to turn back, to return to Ros's side, but knew she couldn't. Their actions had been risky, reckless even, and the consequences could be severe. Yet the memory of Ros's touch, her kiss, the way she had held Scarlett as if she was something precious made it impossible to regret.

## ROS

Back in her quarters, Ros lay awake, her eyes fixed on the door Scarlett had just closed behind her. The warmth of Scarlett's body beside her had already begun to fade, leaving Ros alone with her thoughts. She knew she should feel regret and be preparing herself for the fallout of what they had done. But instead, all she could think about was how alive she felt and how Scarlett had reignited something within her that she had thought long been extinguished.

Ros ran a hand through her hair, mussed from sleep, and let out a long breath. She was in dangerous territory now, both professionally and personally. She had spent her entire career upholding the rules, setting an example, and maintaining the strict boundaries that came with her rank. And yet, in one night, she had shattered them all for the sake of one woman.

She was a general, a leader, someone who was supposed to uphold the rules, not break them. And yet, here she was, having crossed a line she knew could have serious consequences.

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She moved slowly to the window, pushing the curtain aside to watch the first light of dawn creeping across the base. The horizon was tinged with pink and gold, the promise of a new day. But all Ros could think about was Scarlett—how she had felt in her arms, the way she had looked at her with such intensity, such raw emotion. It had been years since Ros had let anyone in like that, years since she had allowed herself to be vulnerable, and now that she had, she wasn't sure what to do next.

The base was a buzzing hive of activity as the details of the counterinsurgency operation were laid out. General Carson stood at the front of the operations room, pointing at a digital map displayed on the wall. The town was spattered with red dots, marking where intelligence had identified potential insurgent locations. The mission was clear: remove the insurgents' influence on the townsfolk, disrupt their activities, and prevent any attempts of sabotage.

Scarlett was seated toward the back, her eyes firmly fixed on the map. The water supply and power grid were crucial targets; if the insurgents gained control over them or caused any damage, the consequences could be severe. The last thing they wanted was for the insurgents to gain control over the town's infrastructure. If that happened, the insurgents could ransom them back in return for civilians joining their force. The base couldn't risk the insurgents' numbers growing so drastically, even if they were inflated by unwilling hostages. She had her platoons of engineers and soldiers at the ready, just waiting on the order to ship out.

Ros, too, felt the weight of her decisions. She could feel Scarlett's presence in the room like a magnet, tugging incessantly at her thoughts. Her focus flickered, and her heart drummed in her chest each time she found herself glancing in the captain's direction. Each time their eyes met, a jolt of electricity surged between them. It was

becoming more of a strain to shove down those feelings that had been simmering within her since their last encounter.

Ros cleared her throat and continued, “Captain Bennett, your role is crucial. You’re to secure the main water treatment plant and the electrical substation. If the insurgents manage to sabotage either, it’ll cripple the town’s infrastructure and make it impossible for us to maintain a stable presence. Make sure nothing happens to those facilities.”

Scarlett nodded, her expression serious. “Understood, General. We’ll hold the line.”

Ros quickly moved on to the next part of the briefing, trying to steady her voice to keep it from betraying the turmoil within her. She knew that every soldier in that room depended on her calm, strategic mind. But her thoughts were fragmented, split between the mission and the growing, unbearable pull toward Scarlett.

Scarlett crouched low behind a crumbling stone wall, her heart thudding against her ribs. The town spread out before her in a chaotic maze of narrow alleyways, snow-covered buildings, and broken windows. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the faint cries of children mixed with the urgent shouts of soldiers moving into position. The air was thick with tension, frost swirling around her boots as she glanced over her shoulder at her team.

Her fingers tightened around the radio clipped to her vest. “All units, maintain your positions. Keep an eye on the northern approach; it’s where they’re most exposed. Watch for any sudden movement,” she ordered, her voice steady despite the chaos unfolding around her. Her eyes scanned the rooftops, the darkened windows, any place where insurgents might be hiding.

The water treatment plant loomed nearby, its massive tanks glinting under the pale sun. She knew how vital it was to keep this facility intact. Without it, the entire town

would be at the mercy of the insurgents, and any chance of winning over the locals would be lost. Scarlett wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead and glanced toward the plant's entrance where two of her engineers were busy fortifying the gate.

Just then, a loud crack split the air—a gunshot. Her breath caught in her throat, and she ducked instinctively, her eyes snapping toward the direction of the sound. Down the street, a figure darted between two buildings, carrying a rifle. A civilian or an insurgent? She couldn't tell, but she had to assume the worst.

“Contact! East side, moving toward the high street!” Scarlett barked into her radio, motioning for her team to take cover. “Keep your eyes open. No one shoots unless we're certain of the target.”

She felt a pang of anxiety twist in her gut. The insurgents had been trying to blend in with the locals, making it nearly impossible to distinguish between a potential threat and someone just trying to survive. Her eyes flickered to the water plant again. She had to make sure it stayed secure.

“Stephens, Jackson, cover the entrance. Don't let anyone through!” she called to two soldiers positioned by the gates. The two men nodded and raised their weapons, eyes scanning the street.

Scarlett moved quickly along the wall, heading for higher ground. She needed a better view of the eastern approach, a chance to spot any potential threats before they got too close. Her heart pounded in her ears, her boots crunching on the ice as she climbed a set of stairs up to a balcony overlooking the main road.

From this vantage point, she could see more clearly that a small group of insurgents was moving through the narrow alleyways, weaving between parked cars and overflowing trash cans. Her breath hitched. They were heading straight for the substation.

She pressed her radio. “General Carson, we’ve got insurgents moving toward the substation. Five, maybe six men. I’m repositioning my team to intercept.”

Ros's voice came through, sharp and immediate. “Negative, Captain Bennett. Reinforcements are on their way. Hold your position. Don’t engage directly.”

Scarlett gritted her teeth. She could hear the urgency in Ros's voice, the edge of concern. But she could see the insurgents closing in, moving with clear intent. They wouldn’t wait for reinforcements.

“I understand, General, but if they reach the substation, we’ll lose control of the entire grid,” Scarlett argued, her hand tightening around her rifle. “We need to move now.”

She could hear the shouts and see the glint of metal as the insurgents rounded the corner.

“We’re going in,” she muttered, gesturing for her team to follow.

She took a deep breath, feeling the weight of her rifle against her shoulder, the familiar comfort of the grip in her hand. She moved quickly, signaling her team to advance. They darted from cover to cover, pushing through the alleyways, their footsteps muffled against the dirt and debris. Her heart raced and adrenaline coursed through her veins as she approached the substation. The insurgents were closer now, their figures clearer. She could see their rifles and ski masks covering their faces. She raised her weapon.

“On my mark,” she whispered, her team fanning out beside her.

The insurgents were seconds away from the substation. She couldn’t afford to wait any longer.

“Now!” Scarlett shouted.

Her team opened fire, short, controlled bursts that echoed through the narrow streets. The insurgents scrambled for cover, some ducking behind market stalls, others diving into doorways. Scarlett kept moving, her focus razor-sharp, her every move calculated. She was in the zone, and nothing else mattered but the mission. The gunfire intensified, bullets whizzing past her head, striking the walls around her. Her team was holding their ground, covering the approaches, but the insurgents were relentless. Scarlett caught a glimpse of one, closer now, trying to flank them.

She pivoted and fired a shot; the insurgent crumpled to the ground.

Her breath was ragged, her muscles taut. She glanced toward the substation and relief washed over her as she saw her team still holding the entrance. “Keep them back! Don’t let them get any closer!” Another insurgent darted out from behind cover, spraying bullets toward them. Scarlett dropped to a knee, took aim, and fired, her shot finding its mark. The insurgent fell, and the street was suddenly quieter, the immediate threat neutralized. Scarlett exhaled a shaky breath, her eyes scanning the surroundings for any more signs of movement. Her heart was still pounding, the rush of adrenaline leaving her hands trembling slightly. She pressed her radio again.

“General, we’ve secured the substation,” she reported, a mixture of relief and exhaustion in her voice.

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Ros's voice came through, tight but relieved. "Good work, Captain. Hold your position until the reinforcements arrive. And, Bennett"—er voice softened, just for a moment—"be careful."

Scarlett felt a smile tug at her lips despite everything. "Always, General."

She lowered her weapon slightly, her eyes still scanning the street. She knew this wasn't over, but for now, they had won this round.

Monitors lining the room flickered with incoming information. Troop and enemy locations alike were indicated by colored dots moving across the map in a flashing game of cat and mouse.

Each time the dots would collide, Ros's heart would stop. Every crackle of gunfire that echoed across the radios had her head spiraling, conjuring image after image of Scarlett laid out on the frozen ground, her life blood seeping into the snow. Never to return. Never to be held in her arms or sleep in her bed again.

The chaos of the control room was nothing new to Ros; it was her life's work, after all. But today? Today, her mind would not focus. She usually had no fear for her soldiers. Concern, yes, but now fear gripped her heart in its iron-like vice. Her focus should have been razor sharp, as it always was during operations like this. She knew the stakes and had been trained to manage the weight of command under the most extreme conditions. But today, her mind was fractured, unable to push past the gnawing fear that had taken root deep inside her.

Scarlett was out there in the thick of it, countering the insurgents who had overrun the

nearby town. Ros had assigned her to the mission knowing full well the dangers. Scarlett had insisted, her resolve unshakable, and Ros, bound by duty and professionalism, had no grounds to refuse. Scarlett was one of the best, and Ros knew it.

Ros tried to push the thoughts away, tried to drown them in the chaos of the command center. But they kept resurfacing, stronger each time, pulling her deeper into a spiraling pit of dread. She couldn't allow this; she couldn't let her emotions compromise the mission. Lives depended on her clarity and decisions.

She forced herself to focus on the task at hand. Reports were coming in from the frontlines detailing the insurgents' movements. Ros moved to the map, studying the shifting patterns, the ebb and flow of the battle. She began issuing orders, directing reinforcements to where they were needed most, coordinating air support, and guiding troops through the maze of streets where the fighting was most intense.

But every time she gave an order, her mind circled back to Scarlett. Was she safe? Was she pinned down? Was she hurt? The questions battered at her relentlessly until they drowned out everything else.

"General Carson, we need your approval on the airstrike coordinates," one of the officers said, snapping Ros out of her thoughts. She blinked, trying to pull herself back to the present, to the here and now.

"Send them to me," Ros replied, her voice betraying none of the turmoil raging inside her.

She stared at the map, at the cluster of dots representing insurgents in the town square. She knew what she needed to do, knew the risks, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Scarlett. "General," the officer pressed, "we need those coordinates now."

Ros looked at the screen, the coordinates blurring as her mind split between duty and dread. She nodded, finally issuing the command, but her heart wasn't in it.

Then it happened. A sudden, jarring crackle over the radio—a voice calling out for backup, urgent and strained. Ros's heart seized. She recognized the voice. It was one of Scarlett's team members. The words were muddled, barely coherent over the noise of gunfire, but the desperation was clear.

“Carson!” the officer at her side shouted, trying to pull her attention back. “The airstrike! You're about to?—”

The warning came too late. Ros's hand hovered over the control panel, her mind still caught on the radio transmission. She had given the go-ahead for an airstrike that could hit friendly forces, including Scarlett.

She froze, panic surging through her, paralyzing her as the realization struck. If she didn't cancel the strike in the next few seconds, it would be too late. Her world narrowed down to a single point: the lives she was about to end because of her distraction, because of her fear for Scarlett.

“Abort the strike!” she shouted, slamming her hand on the radio. “Abort! Friendly forces in the vicinity! Abort!”

The room erupted into action as officers scrambled to relay the command to the pilots already en route. Seconds stretched into an eternity as Ros waited, breathless, for confirmation that the strike had been called off. She gripped the edge of the table, every muscle in her body tense, her heart hammering in her chest.

Finally, the confirmation came through.

The airstrike was aborted just in time, and the planes pulled back. Ros exhaled, and

the tension in her body slowly ebbed away. But the relief was short-lived and replaced by a cold, harsh realization: She had almost made a fatal mistake. And for what? For the fear that had clouded her judgment, for letting her emotions take control when she needed to be at her sharpest.

She straightened, forcing her thoughts back to the task at hand. The map still glowed on the screen, and the dots still danced in their deadly patterns. She let the cold, clinical part of her mind take over, the part she had relied on for years to make the hard calls, to keep her emotions at bay when lives were on the line.

“Status update,” Ros barked, her voice cutting through the noise of the control room.

One of the officers, a young lieutenant with worry etched on his face, stepped forward. “We’ve managed to hold the northern perimeter, but the insurgents are pushing hard on the east side. We’ve got reports of heavy casualties, and the comms are down in that sector.”

Ros's eyes flicked to the map, taking in the shifting dots on the eastern edge. The insurgents were concentrating their forces there, trying to break through the weaker defenses. She could see it clearly now, the pattern of their attack and the steps she needed to take to counter it. Her mind locked onto the solution, each move falling into place like pieces on a chessboard.

“Send reinforcements to the east. Pull two squads from the north and have them flank the insurgents from the south. And get those comms back online. I want to know what’s happening on the ground. Every second counts,” she ordered, her voice steady and commanding.

“Yes, ma’am,” the lieutenant responded, snapping off a salute before rushing to relay the orders.

Ros watched the screen, her focus sharpening as she saw the dots shift according to her commands. The chaos of the battle started to make sense again, the strategy forming in her mind like a blueprint. This was what she was trained for, what she excelled at: keeping her soldiers alive and making the tough decisions. She couldn't afford to lose sight of that, not even for a moment. But as the operation continued, a single thought kept intruding, no matter how hard she tried to push it away. She knew what she had to do when this was over. The near-disaster with the airstrike had shown her just how dangerous her distraction was. How dangerous it could be to both her and Scarlett. She couldn't let her feelings for Scarlett cloud her judgment again. She couldn't afford to make a mistake like that, not with lives on the line.

She took a deep breath, the decision settling like a stone in her chest. She would have to talk to Scarlett and end things before they went any further. It was the only way to protect them both and ensure that neither of them would be compromised by...this. Whatever this was between them.

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The thought tore at her, the idea of pushing Scarlett away when all she wanted was to hold her close. But she knew, deep down, that it was the right thing to do. She had to protect Scarlett, even if it meant breaking both of their hearts.

The battle raged on outside, the sounds of gunfire and explosions filtering faintly through the thick walls of the command center. But inside Ros, another battle was taking place—one between duty and desire, between the life she had built and the one she suddenly found herself wanting. And as much as it hurt, she knew which side had to win.

She turned back to the map, forcing herself to focus, to let the mission consume her. There would be time to deal with Scarlett later once this was over. Once the base was secure and her people were safe, then she would do what she had to do, no matter how much it hurt her.

After the mission ended, Ros waited in her office, her body tense and thoughts a storm of emotions. When Scarlett finally arrived, Ros's eyes locked onto hers, a mix of frustration, fear, and longing.

“We need to talk,” Ros began, her voice strained. She walked over to the door and shut it firmly behind Scarlett, the click echoing through the room.

Scarlett crossed her arms, her expression unreadable. “Is this about the mission, General? Because I think we handled it well, given the circumstances.”

Ros let out a sigh, rubbing her forehead. “Yes, we completed the mission, but...I was distracted, Scarlett. I was thinking about you. Worrying about you. And it nearly cost

us everything.”

Scarlett’s eyes softened slightly, but she kept her stance. “Ros, you can’t blame yourself for caring. It’s human.”

“That’s the problem, Scarlett. I can’t afford to be human right now. Not when everyone is counting on me to be perfect. We need to stop this...whatever this is before we both lose everything.”

For a moment, Scarlett seemed taken aback. Her face flashed with hurt, but then her jaw set with determination. “Stop pretending you can just turn off how you feel, Ros. You and I both know this isn’t going away.”

Ros stepped closer, her resolve wavering as she felt the pull between them again. “We have to try,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

But Scarlett took a step forward, closing the gap between them. “Tell me you don’t want this,” she murmured, her breath warm against Ros’s cheek.

Ros’s hand trembled as she reached up, cupping Scarlett’s face, her thumb brushing over her lips. “I can’t,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. And in that moment, all her resolve crumbled.

They collided with a desperate, fervent kiss, all the fear, frustration, and longing pouring out of them in a rush of passion. Ros pulled Scarlett closer, her hands threading through her hair as she gave in to the feelings she had fought so hard to suppress.

They stumbled back toward the bed, tearing at each other’s clothes, their breaths ragged and filled with need. The world outside their quarters faded away as they found solace in each other’s arms, their bodies moving together with a frantic,

desperate rhythm. Ros feverishly kissed any bare skin she could reach, as though making sure that each and every part of Scarlett had returned from action safely. Teeth clacked against teeth as they kissed harshly, biting, pulling, finding solace in the very real possibility that one of them might not have come home that day.

For Ros, it was a release she hadn't allowed herself in years. Every touch, every kiss felt like reclaiming a piece of herself she had long thought lost. She felt alive and her senses heightened, every nerve on fire with the intensity of their connection. It was reckless, it was dangerous, but in Scarlett's arms, it felt right.

They were both naked and their right hands reached between each others legs in perfect synchronisation.

Scarlett removed her hand and grabbed her and pushed her onto her front. This turned her on so very much.

She felt Scarlett's hands on her hips raising her ass into the air as her face was still in the pillow. She felt shivers running through the entirety of her body as Scarlett's hands held her hips firmly. She was open and exposed for her and never more excited than right here, in this moment.

"Please...uh.." she heard her own voice and it was shaky and desperate with need for her.

Scarlett wasted no time in feeding her desperate need with her fingers plunging inside her. They slid in easily, but then she was so wet, she wasn't surprised. She felt them curling downwards to reach her G spot and then Scarlett's rich lyrical voice that always tipped her right over the edge.

"I'm going to fuck you now, baby."

Scarlett's fingers began to move in and out and fucking her and Ros felt herself straight away flying towards the edge unnervingly quickly.

"Oh my god..." she gasped and Scarlett's fingers responded by stretching her further and beginning to move harder.

"That's it, baby. Stretch for me. Open up for me," she purred, her voice like smooth red wine.

Ros felt herself opening to Scarlett's hand in a way she never had before. She felt Scarlett stretching her further, adding more and pressing again to push inside of her.

Ros had completely lost track of what... how many...whatever Scarlett was doing to her felt magical and Ros felt transported to another realm.

She felt a firm pressure pushing into her again.

"It's my whole hand, baby. Just relax and take it. Relax for me, baby. Relax and your body will take it." Scarlett purred.

Ros tried to breathe slowly and do as commanded. She felt zoned out anyway from the pleasure. She felt the pressure increase before a pop as what must have been Scarlett's whole hand slid inside of her.

“Oh, fuck...”

“Breathe, baby. Breathe. You are ok. I’ve got you.”

Ros stayed calm and breathed through it and her body seemed to adjust to the intrusion.

She felt relaxed again and she felt something else. A feeling of deep fullness that was satisfying in a way she never imagined existed. A feeling of real stretch that offered pleasure upon pleasure rolling through her body.

“Oh, my god. This feels... this feels like nothing else in the world.”

“My whole hand is inside you. Right up to the wrist. You are going to come with all of me inside of you, Ros.” Scarlett was close now, whispering right in Ros’s ear. Ros could feel the brush of her nipples on Ros’s back and the touch of her hair.

Ros felt like her whole world was about to explode and nothing would be the same again. She felt an orgasm building deep within her. Closer and closer. Higher and higher.

She felt the fingers of Scarlett’s other hand slide against her clitoris suddenly as the fist rocked deep inside of her.

“Come for me, baby,” Scarlett growled and Ros felt herself fall over the edge there and then tumbling, spinning, falling over and over again, she was screaming, she was crying. She felt all the emotions she had ever buried within her coming flooding out

of her.

Scarlett's hand stayed deep within her as she rode out orgasm after orgasm and collapsed forward onto her belly on the bed. She lost track of where she ended and Scarlett began.

She felt Scarlett's slick wetness on the back of her thigh and she heard Scarlett's breath quickening. It was then she realized that Scarlett was straddling Ros's thigh and grinding out her own orgasm on the back of her thigh.

Ros had no energy left to speak or offer to join in, and aside from that, she was pinned down by Scarlett's body and also her fist still buried deep within her. But it didn't seem to matter to Scarlett whose moans were getting louder.

Ros listened as Scarlett came loudly and wetness gushed around the back of her thigh trickling down onto the bedsheets. Scarlett fell forwards and slowly and surely her hand slid out of Ros.

Oh my god.

As they lay tangled together in the aftermath, their breaths panting as their pulses slowed, Ros knew the consequences would come. But for now, she allowed herself this moment, this stolen time in the dimly lit room, the feel of Scarlett's skin against hers, the steady rhythm of their hearts.

7

SCARLETT

Scarlett sat at her workstation, the soft hum of servers around her providing a faint background noise that was usually soothing. Today, however, the noise seemed

grating, adding to the cacophony in her mind. The night she spent with Ros replayed over and over, a mix of elation and dread twisting her stomach into knots. She couldn't shake the feeling that eyes were on her. Every whisper, every glance seemed laden with meaning and suspicion. She knew the risks and what it would mean for both of them if they were found out. But no matter how many times she reminded herself of the danger, she couldn't bring herself to regret a single moment she had spent with Ros.

The console in front of her beeped, drawing her out of her thoughts. Scarlett's eyes snapped to the screen, where a red alert flashed ominously. A security breach.

Scarlett's fingers flew across the keyboard, her mind shifting gears. From what she could see, the breach was deep, targeting sensitive military data that could jeopardize not only their current operations but the safety of every soldier on the base. She quickly relayed the information to the cybersecurity team, who was already scrambling to assess the damage and trace the source.

"Captain Bennett, we need you on this," one of the lead cybersecurity officers said.

Scarlett nodded, steeling herself. The weight of responsibility settled on her shoulders, and for a moment, it drowned out the noise in her head. The only thing that mattered now was stopping the breach.

Scarlett's fingers danced across the keyboard with practiced precision, her mind fully engaged in the task before her.

She quickly assessed the situation, her eyes scanning the lines of code that streamed across the monitor. The attackers had embedded themselves deep within the network, bypassing security checks and firewalls completely. It was like trying to root out a parasite that had burrowed into the very core of the base's digital infrastructure.

Scarlett felt a surge of anxiety tightening in her chest, but she pushed it down. She didn't have the luxury of time to worry about what might happen if she failed. The only thing that mattered was finding the breach and neutralizing it.

"Focus, Scarlett. Focus," she muttered to herself, her voice barely audible over the low hum of the servers around her.

However hard she tried to keep her mind on the task, her thoughts kept drifting back to Ros, to the night they had shared and the secret they were desperately trying to keep. Every time she thought she'd gotten a grip on her emotions, a memory of Ros's touch or the way her lips felt against Scarlett's skin would surface, threatening to distract her. But Scarlett forced those thoughts aside, channeling all her energy into the task.

"Captain Bennett, we've got multiple intrusion points!" one of the cybersecurity team members called out, pulling Scarlett back into the moment.

"I see them," Scarlett replied, her voice tight with concentration. "They're using a distributed attack pattern, trying to overload the system by hitting multiple weak spots at once. We need to isolate each one and shut them down, or they'll bring the whole network down."

She brought up several diagnostic windows, her fingers moving faster than ever as she issued commands to the system. Scarlett traced the flow of data, following the digital trail left by the intruders. They were smart, using encryption protocols and routing their attack through multiple servers around the world to mask their origin.

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Scarlett's mind raced as she worked through the layers of the attack. She knew she had to outthink them and anticipate their next move before they could execute it. She began setting up traps within the system—digital honey pots designed to lure the attackers into revealing themselves. It was a risky strategy; if the attackers realized what she was doing, they could switch tactics, making it even harder to stop them.

“Come on, show me where you're hiding,” Scarlett whispered, her eyes narrowing as she watched the data streams.

One by one, the traps sprang. The attackers took the bait, sending packets of data into the decoy systems Scarlett had set up. For a moment, she felt a flicker of hope. Maybe she could contain this before it got worse.

But then, the main system alarm blared, and Scarlett's heart sank. The attackers had found a way to bypass one of her traps, breaking into a critical subsystem that controlled communications. If they gained control there, they could cut off the base's ability to coordinate its defenses, leaving everyone vulnerable.

“Damn it!” Scarlett hissed, her frustration mounting.

She quickly rerouted the communication channels, creating a temporary backup system to keep the base connected. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it bought her a little more time to track down the source of the breach. Scarlett could feel the pressure building, the weight of the entire base's safety resting on her shoulders. Every second mattered.

“Okay, okay, think.” Her brain worked overtime to find a solution. “They're fast, but

they're not infallible. There has to be something they've overlooked."

Scarlett's eyes scanned the code, looking for any anomalies, any pattern that didn't fit. And then she saw it: a small, seemingly insignificant piece of code that didn't belong. It was well-hidden, buried deep within the normal traffic, but Scarlett's trained eye caught it.

"There you are." She exhaled, her fingers flying over the keys.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she found the breach's point of origin: an unprotected access point buried deep within the system. Scarlett isolated the threat, cutting off the attackers and sealing the vulnerability. The relief that flooded through her was almost enough to bring tears to her eyes.

"We're secure," Scarlett announced, her voice strained from hours of tension.

Scarlett slumped back in her chair, the adrenaline slowly ebbing away, leaving her drained but triumphant.

"Status report!" Ros barked, her voice cutting through the controlled chaos of the command center. Officers and technicians scrambled to provide updates, their faces taut with concentration.

"Communications are stable, General Carson," one officer reported. "But the power grid is under heavy attack. We're diverting resources to reinforce it, but it's touch-and-go."

Ros clenched her jaw. The power grid was the lifeblood of the base; without it, they'd be plunged into darkness, both literally and figuratively. She knew Scarlett was down in the cybersecurity wing fighting tooth and nail to keep the grid stable. The thought of Scarlett alone and under pressure twisted Ros's stomach into knots.

She pushed the thought aside. She couldn't afford to be distracted—not now, not with everything on the line. Scarlett was one of the best engineers she had ever known. If anyone could pull them through this, it was her. Ros had to trust that Scarlett would do her job while she focused on hers.

“General, we’ve got reports of increased insurgent activity on the north perimeter,” another officer informed her, his voice tinged with urgency. “They’re testing our defenses, looking for a weak spot.”

Ros nodded sharply. “Send a reinforcement team to the north perimeter. Double up on the patrols and make sure the turrets are fully operational. We can’t let them breach the fence.”

The officer relayed her orders. Ros’s gaze flicked to the map on the central screen where red dots that indicated insurgent positions seemed to be multiplying by the second. They were everywhere, pressing the base from all sides. It was clear that the cyberattack was just one prong of a larger, more coordinated assault.

“General, there’s an issue with the south gate,” another voice called out. “The automated defense system is glitching, likely due to the malware. We’re trying to reroute.”

Ros felt a cold sweat break out along her spine. If the south gate failed, it would create a breach large enough for the insurgents to storm the base. She could almost see it in her mind—the flood of armed men pouring through the gate, overwhelming her soldiers and reaching the command center. Reaching Scarlett.

“Get a team down there now,” Ros ordered, her voice steely. “If the system can’t be fixed in time, they’re to defend the gate manually. We cannot let it fall.”

The officer nodded and moved to carry out her orders, but Ros couldn’t shake the

feeling of impending doom. The insurgents were too close, their tactics too precise. They knew exactly where to hit, and they were hitting hard.

“General Carson,” a technician called out, pulling her from her thoughts. “We’ve got an anomaly in the command center’s systems. Looks like the malware’s trying to breach our firewalls. It’s targeting our operational controls.”

Ros’s blood ran cold. If the insurgents gained control of the command center, they could cripple the base’s defenses from within. Everything would fall apart :communications, power, automated defenses, everything they relied on to keep Fort Independence secure.

“Divert all resources to protect the command center’s systems,” Ros commanded, her voice tight with urgency. “Lock down any non-essential functions and isolate the compromised sectors. We cannot lose control.”

As the team scrambled to follow her orders, Ros’s mind raced. The insurgents were relentlessly attacking on all fronts. She needed to stay one step ahead and anticipate their next move before they could execute it. This wasn’t just a physical assault; it was a calculated strike at the very core of the base’s operations. And it terrified her in a way that bullets and bombs never could.

The command center hummed with tense silence as the final lines of code flickered across the screens. Ros stood rigid, her hands gripping the edge of the console in front of her, knuckles white with strain. The entire base seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for the outcome that would determine their fate.

“Come on, Scarlett,” she whispered under her breath, her eyes fixed on the screen that tracked the progress of the cybersecurity team. They were close, so close, but the insurgents’ malware was insidious, slipping through their defenses like water through a sieve. Ros could only imagine the pressure Scarlett was under, the weight of the

entire base resting on her shoulders. The thought made Ros's heart ache in a way that was almost unbearable. For what felt like an eternity, nothing happened. The dots on the screen representing critical systems continued to flash red, teetering on the edge of collapse. Ros's mind flicked through the worst-case scenarios: power failures, loss of communication, the base's defenses falling like dominoes. She could almost see the insurgents closing in, their victory handed to them without a single shot fired.

Then, suddenly, the red dots began to turn green.

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One by one, the systems stabilized. The breach was closing, the malware being purged from their networks. Ros barely dared to breathe as she watched the progress bar creep toward completion, every second feeling like a lifetime.

“General Carson,” a voice broke through the tension, “the breach has been contained. All systems are back online.”

Ros's body sagged with the release of tension. She exhaled a long, shaky breath, the knot in her chest loosening as the reality of their victory set in.

They had done it. Scarlett had done it.

Scarlett walked the length of Fort Independence, her boots striking the ground with a steady rhythm, but something was off. Each step she took seemed to echo louder than usual, accompanied by the subtle yet unmistakable shift in the atmosphere as she entered various rooms across the base.

In the mess hall, she paused to grab a quick bite, her mind still buzzing from the intensity of the morning's events. She noticed a few glances in her direction. Nothing unusual at first—she was an officer, after all—but when the conversations around her started to fade into uncomfortable silence, she felt a prickle of unease. A couple soldiers at the far end of the room exchanged hurried whispers before turning their attention back to their trays, avoiding her gaze. Scarlett furrowed her brow but shrugged it off, assuming they were simply discussing the recent cyberattack.

Later, as she entered the communications center, the effect was more pronounced. The room, usually buzzing with activity, seemed to stutter to a halt the moment she

stepped inside. Technicians and junior officers stopped what they were doing, their eyes flicking toward her before quickly darting away. A few hastily turned their backs, pretending to be absorbed in their work. The uneasy quiet that followed her was almost tangible, like a dark cloud creeping in her wake. Scarlett's heart pounded. She forced herself to keep her expression neutral, but her mind raced with possibilities. The base was a close-knit environment, and while professionalism was paramount, rumors had a way of spreading like wildfire.

What was it now? Her performance during the breach? Doubts about her ability to handle the pressure? Her secret dalliance with the general?

Her answer came soon enough. As she exited the communications center, a young lieutenant—one of her junior officers—approached her, glancing around nervously before speaking in a low voice.

“Captain Bennett,” he began, his tone hesitant, “I think you should know...people are talking.”

Scarlett's stomach tightened. “Talking about what?”

The lieutenant shifted uncomfortably, clearly wishing he could be anywhere else. “It's...well, some of the soldiers, they've noticed that you've been leaving General Carson's quarters early in the morning. More than once.”

The air seemed to grow colder around Scarlett as the words hit her. She felt a chill run down her spine, her mouth going dry. Rumors. Of course. She tried to keep her expression calm, but inside, panic began to creep in.

How long had this been going on? How many people had noticed? And what were they saying?

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” she managed to reply, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside. “I appreciate the heads-up.”

The lieutenant nodded quickly, clearly relieved that she wasn’t angry, and walked off, leaving Scarlett standing alone in the corridor. She stared at the wall in front of her, her mind racing. This was bad—worse than she’d feared. Rumors like this could destroy careers. She couldn’t let this go on any longer. Scarlett knew she had to confront Ros to figure out what they were going to do. As much as she hated it, they needed to face this head-on.

That evening, Scarlett made her way to Ros’s office, her steps heavy with dread. The corridors were quieter now, the base settling into the evening routine, but the tension she felt earlier hadn’t dissipated. If anything, it was worse.

As she approached Ros’s office, Scarlett noticed two officers standing a short distance away, their conversation falling silent as she drew near. They didn’t bother hiding their curiosity; one of them even gave a pointed look toward Ros’s door before glancing back at Scarlett. They were watching her, waiting to see what she would do. It wasn’t just whispers anymore; they were openly tracking her movements, looking for confirmation of the rumors. She wasn’t surprised. After learning about the gossip, she’d known any time they spent together would be eagerly observed. Her even being alone with Ros was a risk for the both of them. It wasn’t just her own career on the line if they got caught. Ros had worked her whole life to get where she was now. Scarlett wasn’t going to let a rumor trash all that hard work. They would have to be discreet. No more being alone in the briefing room, no more lingering glances. She wasn’t going to let some petty gossip ruin this for the both of them. Scarlett clenched her fists, her resolve hardening. This couldn’t continue. She pushed open the door to Ros’s office without hesitation, closing it firmly behind her. The sight of Ros sitting behind her desk brought a brief moment of comfort, but it was quickly overshadowed by the reality of their situation.

Ros looked up, surprise flashing across her face before it was replaced by concern. She could tell immediately that something was wrong.

“Scarlett? What’s going on?”

Scarlett took a deep breath, her eyes meeting Ros's with a mixture of determination and fear. “We need to talk,” she said, her voice steady but laced with tension. “There are rumors going around—about us. They’re saying I’ve been seen leaving your quarters early in the morning.”

Ros's expression darkened, and she leaned back in her chair, her jaw tightening. The weight of the situation pressed down on both of them, the room suddenly feeling too small, too suffocating.

“I’ve noticed,” Ros said quietly, her voice carrying the same tension Scarlett felt. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but it seems we’re out of time. We always knew this was a risk.” Her voice was steady but laced with concern. “But we’ve got to face the facts. If people are already talking, it’s only a matter of time before someone takes this up the chain.”

Scarlett’s heart pounded, but she refused to back down. “Ros, I don’t want to lose this. I don’t want to lose you. We’ve faced worse threats than gossip, and we can handle this too.”

Ros studied Scarlett’s face, seeing the resolve in her eyes. There was a moment of silence as she weighed the options and risks. Ending their relationship would be the safe, logical choice. But the thought of losing Scarlett, of turning their connection into just another casualty of military life, was unbearable.

“Then we have to be careful,” Ros finally said, her voice firm but soft. “No more slipping out in the early hours. No more risky meetings. We have to keep this under

wraps, and that means we don't let anyone see us together outside of a professional setting."

Scarlett nodded, relief washing over her. The thought of ending things had terrified her more than any battle she'd ever faced. But hearing Ros suggest a way forward gave her hope.

"I can do that," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "Whatever it takes."

Ros reached out, taking Scarlett's hand in hers, the contact sending a warm, reassuring current through her. "We'll have to be smart about this. We can't give anyone a reason to suspect anything. But we'll find a way to make this work."

Scarlett squeezed Ros's hand, a small smile playing on her lips despite the gravity of the situation. "We always do."

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Ros let go of Scarlett's hand and stepped back, returning to her usual authoritative demeanor. "We'll need to be discreet, Scarlett. We'll make sure no one has any reason to question us. But for now, we have to act as if nothing's changed. We have to keep our focus."

8

ROS

Even Ros hadn't been prepared for the call that came through. A routine patrol helicopter was shot down in hostile territory, and the soldiers aboard were taken hostage. No one had predicted that the insurgents would become so bold so quickly.

They were becoming much more of an issue than Ros and her officers had ever expected.

"This is my call, Colonel. They are my soldiers. I didn't have the foresight to protect them, so I'm damn well going to protect them now."

"General, we need you to liaise from base."

"I give the orders, Hale. I'm going with them."

"But what if something happens while you're gone? What if something happens to you?"

"You managed admirably before I arrived here, Colonel. I'm sure you'll do so again."

With that, the matter was closed and Ros strode out of the briefing room.

The news that the general was accompanying the rescue mission in person had rippled through the base like an explosion. In most, it spiked amusement or awe; in Scarlett, it only produced panic. The responsibility of ensuring the equipment was prepared and ready only weighed more heavily on her. If something went wrong, not only would the mission go south, but Ros might also never come back to her.

Scarlett moved with purpose, her mind a whirlwind of calculations and checks. The noise around her—the clang of metal, hum of machinery, murmur of urgent voices—faded into the background as she focused on the task at hand. Each wire she soldered, each system she tested was a step closer to getting those soldiers home. The pressure was immense, but Scarlett thrived on it. She had to.

“Check that power relay again,” Scarlett ordered, her voice sharp and clear above the din. One of her junior engineers nodded, moving quickly to comply. They couldn’t afford any mistakes. If anything failed in the field, it wouldn’t just be a setback; it could mean the difference between life and death.

The minutes ticked by with agonizing speed. Scarlett wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, ignoring the dull ache in her muscles from hours of continuous work. There was no time to rest, no time to think about anything other than the mission. But even as she pushed herself to the limit, the weight of the rumors lingered at the back of her mind. She had noticed the way people looked at her lately—the quiet conversations that would halt the moment she entered a room, the sidelong glances. She didn’t need to ask what they were about.

But Scarlett shoved those thoughts aside, focusing on the immediate task. She couldn’t afford distractions, not now. Ros was out there leading the rescue operation, and the last thing Scarlett wanted was for her to have any doubts about the equipment they were sending with the team. Their relationship might be on shaky ground, but

Scarlett's commitment to her work—and to Ros—was unshakable.

“Scarlett,” one of her engineers called out, bringing her back to the moment, “the diagnostics are all clear. We're ready.”

Scarlett took a final look over the equipment. Everything was set. “Good. Let's get this to the team. They're counting on us.”

Mind set on the mission ahead of her, Ros climbed into the helicopter that would be taking her rescue platoon just outside the insurgents' territory. With one chopper shot down, they couldn't risk getting any closer.

The soldiers with her sat in an uncomfortable silence. They obviously didn't know how they were supposed to act in her company. Ros would bet that their senior officers had drilled into their heads that they were to act like consummate soldiers, at least during the ride there.

“Relax, soldiers. I'm not here to inspect you, am I? I'm here to do my job, same as you. To bring these soldiers home.”

Not one of them eased, and Ros rolled her eyes, turning back to watching the view from the open side of the craft. It had been so long since she'd felt wind on her face like this. God, she missed it.

The helicopter's rotors whipped the air into a frenzy as it descended, the dull roar growing louder until it dominated the senses. Ice, snow, and dirt swirled in the darkness, obscuring the figures huddled within the aircraft, their faces grim and focused. Ros sat at the front, and her eyes narrowed as she peered into the night. Every muscle in her body was tense, coiled tight like a spring ready to snap. The mission was clear, but the risks loomed large in her mind.

The moment the doors opened, she was on her feet, her rifle held close to her chest as she stepped out into the night. The cool air hit her face, sharp and biting, but she barely noticed. Her senses were on high alert, scanning the perimeter for any sign of the enemy. The insurgent encampment lay ahead, a collection of hastily constructed shelters and makeshift barriers shrouded in the darkness. The only light came from flickering campfires casting long, distorted shadows that danced across the ground. Ros gestured to her team, signaling for them to spread out and move forward. They moved like shadows, silent and swift, their training kicking in as they advanced toward the encampment.

Ros's heart pounded, each beat echoing in her ears as they closed the distance. The sound of her own breathing filled her head, steady but heavy with the weight of what was to come. The lives of her captured soldiers were at stake, and failure wasn't an option. She couldn't afford to think about anything else—not Scarlett, not the rumors, not the consequences of this mission. All that mattered was getting those soldiers out alive.

They reached the outer edge of the encampment and took cover behind a line of rocks. Ros knelt down, scanning the area with her night-vision goggles. She could see the enemy sentries, their figures outlined in green as they patrolled the perimeter. Ros raised her hand, signaling for the team to hold. They needed to take out the sentries quietly or the entire camp would be on them in seconds.

One of her men, Sergeant Daniels, moved into position, his silenced rifle at the ready. Ros watched as he took aim, her breath catching in her throat as he squeezed the trigger.

The sentry dropped without a sound, crumpling to the ground. One down.

Ros gave the signal to move forward. The team advanced, taking out the remaining sentries with surgical precision. The camp was eerily quiet, the insurgents oblivious

to the danger creeping ever closer. Ros could feel the tension in the air, thick and suffocating, as they reached the first of the shelters. The captured soldiers were somewhere inside, but so were the insurgents. They couldn't afford to make a mistake.

The silence shattered.

A burst of gunfire erupted from the darkness, the sharp crack of bullets cutting through the night. The insurgents had spotted them.

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“Take cover!” Ros yelled, diving behind a cluster of rocks as bullets whizzed past her head.

Her heart pounded as adrenaline surged through her veins. This was supposed to be a stealth operation, but now they were in the thick of it, surrounded and under fire.

Ros peeked out from behind the rocks, quickly assessing the situation. The insurgents were scattered around the encampment, using the terrain to their advantage. They had the high ground, and they weren’t about to let Ros and her team reach the hostages without a fight.

“Return fire!” Ros ordered, her voice cutting through the chaos.

Her team sprang into action, their rifles spitting fire as they engaged the enemy. The night lit up with muzzle flashes, and the sounds of battle filled the air.

Ros knew they didn’t have much time. The longer they were pinned down, the more likely the insurgents’ reinforcements would arrive. They had to get to the hostages, and they had to do it now. She grabbed her radio, barking out orders to her team.

“We’re moving in! Daniels, cover the left flank! Cruz, take the right! Everyone else, follow me!”

With a burst of energy, Ros pushed forward, weaving through the hail of bullets as she made her way toward the shelter where the hostages were being held. Her team followed closely, laying down suppressing fire as they advanced. The insurgents were relentless, but so were they. Ros could feel the heat of the battle, the weight of the

mission bearing down on her. There was no room for error.

As they reached the shelter, Ros kicked down the door, leading the charge inside. The room was dimly lit and filled with the stench of sweat and fear. The captured soldiers were there, bound and gagged, their eyes wide with terror. But before Ros could move to free them, more insurgents stormed in with their weapons raised. The room exploded into chaos. Ros fired her rifle, taking down the nearest insurgent as her team engaged the others. The sound of gunfire was deafening, and the air was thick with smoke and adrenaline. Ros moved with precision, her training guiding her every step. She fought her way to the hostages, her mind focused on one goal: getting them out alive.

“Untie them!” Ros shouted, her voice hoarse from the strain. Her team rushed to cut the soldiers’ bonds, pulling them to their feet.

The gunfire outside was intensifying as the insurgents closed in. They were running out of time.

“Let’s move!” Ros ordered, grabbing one of the soldiers and hauling him toward the door.

The ground was a blur of movement and sound as they emerged from the shelter, bullets ripping through the air around them. The insurgents were everywhere, firing from every direction. Ros’s heart raced, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps as she fired back, each shot precise and controlled.

They had to make it. They had no other option.

The helicopter was in sight, its rotors spinning furiously as the pilot prepared for takeoff. Ros could see the base of it, the open door like a beacon in the dark.

“Go! Go! Go!” she yelled, pushing the soldiers ahead of her.

Her team formed a protective barrier while they fired at the insurgents as they ran for the helicopter.

They reached the helicopter just as a new wave of gunfire erupted from the tree line. Ros spun around, her rifle booming as she took out the nearest insurgent. She could feel the sting of a bullet grazing her arm, but she ignored the pain, her focus entirely on getting her team aboard.

“Everyone in!” she shouted, shoving the last of the rescued soldiers into the helicopter.

She turned to provide cover for her team, her eyes darting around for any sign of movement. The insurgents were closing in, their shouts growing louder as they realized their target was slipping away.

Sergeant Daniels was hit as he climbed aboard, a bullet tearing through his leg. Ros was at his side in an instant, hauling him into the helicopter with a strength she didn’t know she had. She shoved him inside, slamming the door shut as the helicopter lifted in the air.

The enemy fire continued to pepper the helicopter as it ascended, but they were too late. The helicopter rose into the sky, leaving the insurgents behind, their angry shouts fading into the distance.

Ros leaned back against the cold metal wall, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. They had done it. The soldiers were safe. The mission was a success.

It had been so long since Ros had been out in the field. She’d missed this rush of adrenaline, the feeling that she was undefeatable and unkillable, after facing such

tough odds and still coming out victorious. She may not be as young as she once was, but she was still a damn good soldier.

After the chopper landed on the helipad, Ross jumped from the helicopter, the blades still whirring overhead, and her knees protested the impact. She immediately scanned her surroundings, seeking out Scarlett's beautiful reddish brown hair.

Instead, Colonel Hale's stern figure loomed in the doorway. Ros headed over to him to give him a debrief of the mission.

"Colonel, everything ran smoothly while I was gone, I assume?"

"Yes, General, all quiet. I wonder if I might have a word? Something of a concerning nature has come to my attention."

"Of course, Colonel. Let me change, and I'll meet you in my office in, say, fifteen minutes. Don't wait on ceremony outside. Make yourself comfortable."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Ros nodded and headed toward her quarters. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off, and she was in desperate need of a shower to remove the sweat and grime and wake her up.

Feeling refreshed, Ros smoothed her hands down her jacket, ready to face the colonel.

Opening her office door, Ros entered to find Hale sitting on a stiff wooden chair, his back as rigid as the seat's. He looked mightily uncomfortable.

"Relax, Colonel. Whatever it is will be fine, I'm sure."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that, ma'am."

"Go on then, spit it out. Best to get it out there rather than have you sitting there stiff as a board."

She waved him to continue as she poured herself a drink, she'd earned it today. The amber liquid trickled into the glass, filling the silence as the Colonel found his words.

"Very well. Certain rumors have been making their way around the base. Rumors about you, General."

Shit

Ros's heart sank. She'd known it was only a matter of time before the wrong person found out. She'd always known they'd never get away with sneaking around like

teenagers.

Hale continued, “And I don’t mean to accuse you, General. But, well, there’s no smoke without fire. And I’ve been keeping an eye on the pair of you since I heard the rumors. I didn’t want to believe it, didn’t think it could be true. The looks between the both of you, though. You are my superior, General, but Bennett is my soldier and it’s my duty to protect her.”

“Protect her from me?”

“Uh, no, no, that’s not what I meant,” he stammered, the color draining from his face as he realized the implications of his accusation.

“At ease, Colonel. My apologies, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s a tricky position you’re in. I am, as you say, your superior, after all.”

“I could take it over your head.”

“You could,” Ros agreed. “Will you though? Will you destroy the careers of both me and Captain Bennett, just because of who we are attracted to?”

“It’s not that, ma’am. I couldn’t care less about you both being women. I’d be doing the same if you were a man. But, as you know yourself, General, there are rules.”

“There are indeed, Colonel. I’ll deal with this. There’ll be no need to go over any heads. Consider the matter closed.”

A relieved sigh escaped him. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“One more thing, Hale.”

“Yes, General?”

“I’ll thank you for quashing those rumors. Make something up, anything. Bennett’s career shouldn’t be destroyed over a mistake I made.”

“I’ll see to it, General.”

The door clicked softly behind him, and Ros’s head fell into her hands. How was she going to deal with this? She couldn’t trust herself; she’d broken rule after rule, promise after promise. She’d have to make sure they didn’t backslide again. Having another general on base should help to keep her on the straight and narrow. The insurgents being as dangerous as they’d recently proven themselves would be enough of an excuse. She’d call in General Talbot in the morning.

First, there was a much harder conversation she needed to have.

After sending a runner to find Scarlett, Ros remained frozen at her desk, her hands wringing with anxiety. The glass beside her had been emptied, refilled, and emptied again. The courage that had flowed through her earlier that day had fled, leaving behind a husk that had no spine for the internal battle ahead of her.

Ros had tried to plan her words carefully. What would she even say to Scarlett? Each time she began, the words left her.

An abrupt knock at the door startled her. Scarlett let herself in with a gentle, tired smile. Her hair was still damp, leaving wet patches on her shoulders.

God, this was going to be impossible.

“Hey. Why didn’t you just text me?” Scarlett asked, confusion showing on her face.

“We need to talk.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound good.” She sat across the desk from her..

“Scarlett, I—” How could she even begin to say what she needed to? What she dreaded to?

“What’s wrong?” Scarlett reached over to take Ros’s hand in hers, hurt rippling across her face as Ros pulled her hand away, fiddling with her cuffs instead.

“We can’t. I can’t.” God, why couldn’t she get the words out? “It’s out, Scarlett. Everyone knows. Or at least suspects. We need to stop.”

“Is this about the rumors again? Ros, we talked about that. We can’t let gossip get between us. It’ll blow over. We just need to lie low until it does.”

“It’s not going to fade, Scarlett. It’s obvious to anyone who just looks at us that there’s something going on. I can’t do that to you. Your career is only just taking off, and I can’t jeopardize that.”

“I’m willing to risk it. I’d risk anything for you, Ros.”

“And that’s the other thing,” Ros said, cutting her off. “I can’t risk you. I can’t seem to do my job with you around. I’m putting everyone at risk because I can’t think straight. Every time you’re in danger, you fill my head. I can’t let anything happen to you.”

“We can work it out. We’ll find a way.”

“No, Scarlett. This needs to end. I’m not putting lives at risk for a fling. Or your career, or mine for that matter. I’ve worked my whole life for this, I’m not going to let it be taken from me.”

“A fling. Is that all this is to you?”

“That’s not what I?—”

“No, I get it. You’ve already decided that’s it. I get no say in the matter. That’s just typical.”

“It’s for the best, Scarlett.”

“I can’t believe you.”

“It was never going to work, all this sneaking around. The base has eyes and ears everywhere. Trust me, the last thing you want is to get court-martialed. They probably wouldn’t do anything to me; it’s a bad look for everyone for a general to go out in disgrace. But you? Being a rising star won’t protect you if this gets reported.”

“Trust you, huh?” Scarlett huffed drily.

Ros looked up at Scarlett, really looked for the first time. Her hazel eyes were filled with tears threatening to fall any second, but behind the tears was fury, rage, betrayal. It almost broke Ros to see it. To see what she had done to her. She had to remain firm, though. Her duty, her honor demanded it. This was the right thing to do.

“Scarlett—”

Scarlett shot up from her seat, storming over to the door.

“Maybe your reputation was right after all, General. You have no heart.”

Retribution arrived swiftly. The soldiers rescued from the encampment had barely been let out of med bay when the first explosion thundered through the base. The ground shook and groaned from the impact.

Alarms blared and red lights flashed on the walls as service personnel scrambled for gear and orders. The insurgents positioning themselves nearby had been cause for concern, but no one, not even Ros, had thought they could possibly be so brazen as to launch a direct attack on Fort Independence.

Usually, such an attack would have been an immediate death wish, but the base was so unprepared that they were left scrambling.

Ros felt not only her heart breaking in her chest, but her base crumbling around her.

Would there be any way through this? Would they even survive this?

She took a deep breath and prepared herself.

She was General Ros Bloody Carson. She had this.

### SCARLETT

Scarlett and her platoons desperately tried to fix the generators that had been taken out in one of the first hits. The whole base was in disarray, and without power, they wouldn't be able to coordinate any sort of resistance or call for aid.

After taking out the power, the insurgents had been able to breach the front gates and storm the complex. The base was vast, however, and the insurgents were massively outnumbered. Scarlett had no idea what their aim could possibly be. Packs of insurgents roamed the base, taking out equipment and unsuspecting soldiers wherever they could. Were they really convinced they could take the base? Or was this all just vengeance for their comrades killed by Ros and her rescue team? Scarlett had never thought it would escalate to this.

The sharp rattle of bullets firing caught her attention to the left. Raising her hand, she signaled the enemy presence to her officers. The sound came from behind a shed-like structure not far from them. Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the area where the gunshots originated. The insurgents were getting bolder, pushing deeper into the base and targeting critical infrastructure. She couldn't let them succeed. The generators were their lifeline. Without them, Fort Independence was sitting on a powder keg with a lit fuse.

"Stay sharp!" Scarlett ordered, her voice cutting through the chaos.

Her platoon, already on high alert, tightened their formation around the generator, their weapons raised and ready. The men and women under her command were some of the best, but even they seemed shaken by the brazenness of the attack.

Scarlett motioned for her second-in-command, Lieutenant West, to move closer.

“We need to secure that shed. If they’re planning to sabotage the generator from there, we’re screwed.”

West nodded, his expression grim. “I’ll take a team around the left flank. We’ll flush them out.”

“Go,” Scarlett replied. “But be careful. We can’t afford any more losses.”

As West and a small group of soldiers crept around the left, Scarlett took the rest of her team and moved to the right, her weapon held steady as they advanced. They approached the shed cautiously, the silence between the gunfire bursts unnerving. Scarlett signaled her team to spread out, covering all possible angles of attack.

Just as they reached the shed, a barrage of bullets erupted from the structure. Scarlett dove behind a stack of crates, the wood splintering around her as the enemy opened fire.

“Return fire!” she shouted over the din, her team quickly responding with a hail of bullets.

The air filled with the deafening roar of gunfire as both sides exchanged shots, each fighting desperately for control of the area.

Scarlett peeked around the crates and saw an insurgent as he reloaded behind a broken window. Without hesitation, she squeezed the trigger, her bullet finding its mark. The man dropped out of sight, and Scarlett felt a grim satisfaction—one less threat to worry about. But there were more, and they were determined.

“Lieutenant, now!” Scarlett called into her radio.

West's team burst out from the left flank, catching the insurgents by surprise. The attackers, suddenly outgunned, faltered. Scarlett saw her chance.

"Push forward! Don't let them regroup!"

Her platoon surged ahead, overwhelming the insurgents with sheer firepower. Within moments, the remaining enemies were either down or retreating. The gunfire died down, leaving an eerie silence in its wake. Scarlett didn't allow herself to relax yet, though. They'd won this skirmish, but the battle for the base was far from over.

"Clear!" Lieutenant West called out, confirming the area was secure.

Scarlett stood, brushing dust from her uniform as she surveyed the scene. The shed had taken heavy damage, but more importantly, the generator was still intact. They'd managed to hold the line—barely.

"Good work," Scarlett said, though her tone lacked the usual confidence. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were fighting a losing battle. "Get those generators back online now! We need power if we're going to stand a chance."

Her engineers immediately set to work, their hands moving with practiced efficiency. Scarlett stayed close, keeping watch as they worked, her senses on high alert for any sign of further threats. She could hear the distant sounds of gunfire and explosions echoing across the base, a reminder that the fight was far from over.

As the minutes ticked by, Scarlett's thoughts drifted to Ros. She knew the general would be in the thick of it directing the defense of the base. The memory of their last conversation—the painful breakup—still lingered, but now wasn't the time to dwell on it. They had to survive this attack first. Everything else could wait.

"Captain, we've got power!" one of the engineers shouted, pulling her out of her

thoughts.

The lights around them flickered back to life, the hum of the generators returning with a reassuring steadiness. Scarlett let out a breath, feeling more relieved. With power restored, the base's defenses would stand a better chance.

"Get word to command," Scarlett ordered. "Let them know the generators are secure and operational."

One of her soldiers relayed the message over the radio, and Scarlett took a moment to collect herself. They were holding on by a thread, but they were still in the fight.

"Let's move," she said, her voice steady. "We've got more ground to cover."

ROS

Ros stood in the control center, a place usually humming with routine operations, now transformed into the nerve center of a desperate battle for survival. Monitors lining the walls displayed real-time feeds from various parts of the base, each screen showing a different slice of the chaos unfolding outside. The room crackled with frantic energy as officers barked orders into radios, coordinating the defense and relaying crucial information.

Ros's eyes flicked between the screens and the tactical map spread out before her. Colored markers represented the insurgent forces moving with alarming speed and coordination. She could hear the distant thud of explosions, spray of gunfire, and shouts of soldiers echoing through the base.

Her mind raced, processing the flood of information pouring in. Reports of insurgents breaching the perimeter, taking out key infrastructure, and engaging in fierce firefights with her troops flashed across the screens. They had been taken by surprise, but Fort Independence had been through worse. She couldn't let fear cloud her judgment, not when so many lives depended on her decisions.

"Status on the north perimeter?" Ros demanded, her voice sharp, cutting through the noise in the room.

"North perimeter is holding, but barely, ma'am," an officer responded, his face pale under the harsh lights. "We've got a heavy concentration of enemy forces pushing that way. They're trying to flank us."

Ros's jaw tightened. "Reinforce the perimeter with the second battalion. We can't let them get around us. What's the status of the generators?"

Another officer checked his screen before answering. "Captain Bennett's team secured it, General. Power is restored and holding steady."

Relief flickered briefly in Ros's chest. Scarlett had come through—of course she had. But there was no time to dwell on that. She had to stay focused.

"Good. Make sure communications stay up. If we lose power again, we're sitting ducks." Ros's gaze shifted back to the map, assessing the situation. "Get me a line to Colonel Hale. We need artillery support on the southern ridge. I want those insurgents pinned down."

"Yes, ma'am," the officer responded, already relaying the order.

Ros continued to issue commands, her mind a well-oiled machine despite the chaos. But beneath the surface, a storm raged. The memory of Scarlett, from just hours ago, filled her thoughts—Scarlett in her quarters, Scarlett's voice as she tried to reason with her, the pain in her eyes when Ros ended things between them. It was all still too raw, too close to the surface.

She forced herself to push those thoughts aside, but it was like trying to dam a river with her hands. Every decision she made, every move she ordered, felt heavier because she knew Scarlett was out there somewhere on this base risking her life to protect what they had built. The very thought made Ros's heartache, but she couldn't afford to let her emotions take over. Not now.

"General," another officer called out, drawing her attention to a flashing red icon on the map. "We've got insurgents breaching the east wall. They're trying to reach the control center."

Ros's stomach dropped. The control center was their last line of defense. If the insurgents got inside, it would be over.

“Lock down all access points,” she ordered, her voice cold and controlled. “Divert the nearest platoon to intercept. We can’t let them reach us.”

The officers around her moved swiftly, their focus razor sharp. Ros felt a grim satisfaction in their efficiency, even as the tension in the room ratcheted up another notch. She stepped closer to the map, studying the situation with a practiced eye. There were too many variables, too many things that could go wrong. But she knew they had to hold out and fight until the last man.

“Ma’am, incoming transmission from Colonel Hale,” an officer reported.

“Put him through,” Ros replied, stepping to the communication console.

Hale’s voice crackled through the speakers. “General Carson, we’re ready to fire on your command. Coordinates locked.”

“Fire at will,” Ros said, her voice steady despite the turmoil churning inside her.

Seconds later, the distant thump of artillery fire echoed across the base, followed by a series of explosions on the southern ridge. Ros watched as the insurgents’ advance faltered, their positions rocked by the bombardment. But it wasn’t enough to turn the tide. Not yet.

“General, we’ve lost contact with Bravo squad,” another officer reported, his voice strained. “Last known position was near the east wall. They were under heavy fire.”

Ros's heart skipped a beat. Bravo squad had been tasked with securing the generators. If they were down, Scarlett could be in even greater danger. The thought made her

feel like she was walking a tightrope, one misstep away from disaster.

“Redirect Delta squad to the east wall,” she ordered, her voice betraying none of the fear gnawing at her. “We can’t lose that position.”

She couldn’t let herself think about what might have happened to Scarlett. Not now. There was too much at stake, too many lives on the line.

As the minutes dragged on, Ros fought to maintain control, her mind a battlefield of its own. Every decision felt like it could be the one that tipped the balance—either toward victory or disaster. But she knew one thing for sure: If they made it through this, she would have to confront the fallout of her decision to end things with Scarlett.

The base shook with another explosion, and Ros gripped the edge of the table, forcing herself to stay focused. She couldn’t afford to let her thoughts wander. Not when the battle was still raging.

“General, enemy forces are retreating!” an officer shouted, his voice tinged with disbelief.

Ros’s eyes snapped to the map where the insurgents’ positions were indeed falling back, their assault faltering in the face of the base’s defense. Relief washed over her like a wave, but she didn’t allow herself to relax just yet. The insurgents were cunning; they might just be regrouping for another attack.

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“Hold your positions,” she ordered. “Stay alert for any counterattacks. We’re not out of this yet.”

But as the minutes passed and the retreat continued, it became clear that the insurgents were pulling back for good. Ros let out a slow breath, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. They had held the line. Fort Independence was still standing.

The base was a mess, but they had won.

11

### SCARLETT

The sharp, acrid scent of smoke clung to the air, mixing with the dull hum of soldiers working to restore order. She moved on autopilot, her mind locked in a loop, replaying every decision, every moment of the fight—and every second she had spent thinking of Ros.

She found herself near a quieter section of the base where the chaos of recovery was less intense. Izzy was there perched on a crate, her face smudged with dirt and exhaustion, but her eyes were still bright with relief. When she saw Scarlett, her expression softened into a welcoming smile, but it quickly turned to concern as she noticed the weight hanging over her friend.

“Scar, you did an amazing job today,” Izzy began, trying to lift her spirits. “You kept this place running. We’d have been lost without you.”

Scarlett managed a faint nod but didn't meet Izzy's eyes. "Yeah, well, it wasn't just me. We all did our part."

Izzy, always perceptive, picked up on the hollowness in Scarlett's tone. She shifted, making room on the crate beside her. "Come on, sit down. Talk to me. There's more going on, isn't there?"

Scarlett hesitated, the words caught in her throat. For a moment, she thought about brushing it off, keeping the pain locked away like she had been doing since Ros broke things off. But the battle had stripped her defenses bare, leaving her too raw to hide anymore. She sat down heavily beside Izzy, staring at the ground as she finally spoke.

"Ros ended it after the rescue mission."

Izzy's eyes widened in surprise, but she stayed quiet, giving Scarlett the space to continue, but she didn't.

"Didn't even know you were together. Last we talked about it, you had a crush was all. You must have moved fast."

Izzy didn't sound impressed. Scarlett could tell from her tone that she now knew that Scarlett had been lying to her.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Iz. I shouldn't have kept it from you to you. We weren't together last we talked, but I'd stupidly kissed her in her office the night before. I was mortified, and Ros had told me to forget it. I was way too embarrassed to admit that to you."

"But why didn't you tell me after you got together, though?"

"It was so exciting and new. And I didn't want to risk anyone finding out and have everything come crashing down around me. I mean, I knew the risks with breaking

the rules, but I still didn't think it would end this way."

"Fine, I'll forgive you. Why did she end it, though?"

"She said it was too dangerous and that we were risking everything being together," Scarlett continued, her voice trembling. "And I know she's right. But it feels like my heart's been ripped out."

Izzy placed a hand on Scarlett's shoulder, her voice soft and understanding. "I'm sorry, Scar. I know how much she must have meant to you. Your face matched your name when you told me you had a crush on her!"

Scarlett shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. "During the attack, every time I heard an explosion, every gunshot, all I could think about was her. What if I never saw her again? What if this was it? It terrified me."

Izzy's expression grew more serious. "That fear is real, Scar. It's part of what makes relationships in a place like this so hard. But you can't let it paralyze you. You both survived today. You both made it through."

Scarlett's gaze drifted to the horizon where the setting sun was casting long shadows over the base. "But what about next time? What if next time we're not so lucky? Ros ended it because she's scared, and I get it. I'm scared too. But I don't want to live without her."

Izzy's grip on her shoulder tightened slightly, a mix of sympathy and firmness in her voice. "Love is always a risk, especially here. But you have to ask yourself, Scar, what's worse: losing her because of something out of your control or losing her because you were too afraid to fight for what you want?"

Scarlett felt a tear slip down her cheek, and she wiped it away quickly. "She said it

was the right thing to do, that we'd both be safer apart. But it doesn't feel right. It feels like I'm giving up on the best thing that ever happened to me."

Izzy nodded, understanding the conflict tearing at Scarlett's heart. "I won't lie to you, Scar. If you go to her, if you fight for this, there will be consequences. People are already talking. If they catch on to what's really going on, it could ruin both your careers."

Scarlett looked up at Izzy, the fear in her eyes stark against the determination brewing beneath. "But if I don't, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. I'll always wonder what could have been. I don't want to live like that. I can't."

Izzy smiled gently. "If this is what you want, if she's what you want, then fight for it. Screw the consequences. You're strong, Scar. You can handle whatever comes."

Scarlett's breath hitched as she considered the reality of Izzy's words. Going to Ros meant accepting the risks—the scrutiny, the possible repercussions, the danger of being caught in something that could destroy both their careers. But what was the alternative? Living with the empty ache that had settled in her chest since Ros walked away? Knowing that she let fear dictate her life?

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Scarlett stood up, a renewed sense of purpose solidifying within her. The battle had shown her what really mattered, what she couldn't live without. And that was Ros. She might lose everything by pursuing this, but she knew in her heart that she had to try. With a final look at her friend, Scarlett turned and headed toward Ros's quarters, her heart pounding with a mix of fear and determination. She knew the risks, the potential fallout, but for once in her life, she was ready to face it all head-on. She wasn't going to let fear dictate her choices any longer.

12

ROS

Pinkish-orange light spilled through the cracks of Ros's curtains as she sat on the bed with her head grasped in her hands. The sunset's calming hues could not pierce the void she felt within herself. Her crumpled bed sheets, so unlike her usual regimented self, still smelled ever so faintly of Scarlett, her sweet, spiced bergamot and amber. Ros hadn't been able to bring herself to wash her sheets, to remove the last vestige of what had been. Of her. Still, the scent had kept her up at night ever since their conversation only a few nights ago. When she had ended it. It was for the best, it was necessary, she kept telling herself over and over. A mantra, as though she was having to convince herself of its truth too.

But had it been for the best? That doubt, that longing was creeping in constantly. She missed Scarlett with a hunger and pain she had not felt before. Certainly, ending her previous flings had not filled her with this sense of loss. Those, though, had been different; she had always known they would end, that they were temporary while she was on leave. And she thought Scarlett had been the same, some quick-lived thrill, a

brief companion. Her heart had decided differently.

She'd thought by ending it that these feelings, this weakness, this fear would dissipate. That she could focus once more. But no. Her stomach was still clenched and her heart revolted knowing that Scarlett had been in danger. So had she, so had every other person on this base, and yet she had only cared about Scarlett.

Blocking the light from the room had been her last resort at finding peace, yet she had found none. Images of Scarlett's joy, her head thrown back in laughter, her teasing smile, the way her eyes sparkled in delight played like a slideshow behind Ros's eyelids. It was torture. God, how was she supposed to keep sending her into danger?

Who knew love could hurt so, so much?

A sharp knock filled the silence. Who could need something more from her after such a harrowing day?

"Unless the world is ending, it can wait till tomorrow. And the world had better really be ending."

Blessed silence was the reply, thank fuck. She really had no energy left. Let her wallow.

She was preparing to slouch back into her covers to allow self pity swallow her entirely when a soft click caught her attention.

Had someone just let themselves into her quarters? Who the fuck was senseless to do that? Shit, she'd have to deal with them now. Eyes ablaze, she heaved herself up and threw open the door, ready to unleash all her pent-up frustration at the unfortunate soul on the other side.

Scarlett's dulled hazel eyes met her gaze, and the fight abandoned her immediately. With her messy auburn hair hanging limp and unkempt, Scarlett looked broken. She imagined she didn't look any better herself, but she'd studiously avoided looking in the mirror since their breakup and couldn't bear to look herself in the eyes, as if she could live with what she'd done.

"God, Scarlett."

She wanted to rush over, to take the younger woman into her arms, to hold her, to fix it, to fix everything. After their last talk, Ros didn't think it would be welcomed.

"We need to talk, Ros."

"Yes, yes, we do."

"I deserve a proper explanation, Ros. Not you pushing me away, hiding things from me. Maybe you really don't want me or this. But you owe me the truth at least. Not that bullshit about duty and honor."

"You're right. I should be honest with you."

She wished she had been prepared for this conversation and had been able to practice her words, but perhaps it was better that it wasn't rehearsed. It would be more genuine that way.

"The truth. The truth is that I had to. No, seriously, wait. I'll explain." She rushed as Scarlett began to turn away, "I did want this. I do want this. Scarlett, what we had was the most real thing I've felt in my whole life. How could I not want that? Hale figured it out, and I'm not faulting him. He did his job, and he brought it to me rather than reporting us as he really ought to have. He gave me the choice: end it or he'd go over my head."

“Hale, really? I never thought he’d be one to snitch.”

“Ah, it’s not like that, Scarlett. My rank is so much higher than yours. Think about how it looks. I could destroy you if we’d ended badly. Or I could have forced you into things. I get where Hale’s coming from; I had the same worries when we were just dancing around each other. I was so worried I’d abuse my power. I’ve seen it happen before. No, I can’t blame Hale for following the rules. I’d have likely done the same.” She took a second, catching her breath before continuing. “I couldn’t put you in that position. Like I said, I couldn’t destroy your career for my selfishness. So yes, I pushed you away. I thought if you hated me or regretted me, it would make it easier for you to move on.”

“You’re an idiot, Rosalind. You couldn’t make me hate you. You hurt me, yes. Deeply. But I needed you with me. I’d never regret what we have.”

“Well, looks like it didn’t work after all. You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Couldn’t let it end like that, Ros. You never left my mind. You’re all I could think about.”

“Seems like a common affliction. I haven’t been able to shake you from my head either. It’s just filled with memory after memory of you, of us.”

“Fuck, Ros. What are we going to do?” Scarlett asked with a weak, watery chuckle.

“Damned if we do, damned if we don’t. I want you Scarlett. I want us. I’ve never felt like this before. No one’s made me feel like you do. It’s like my soul is a void without you there. My arms, my bed feel empty without you in them.”

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“Well, let me back in then. I want that too, Ros. What makes you think I don’t?”

“But I can’t. I’m scared, Scarlett. I’ve been so scared since I found you. Scared of losing you. Scared of you not coming back from action. Scared of losing you to another. Scared of you being transferred somewhere I can’t follow.”

“I was scared, too, Ros. Fuck, I was terrified you wouldn’t come back as I watched your chopper grow as small as a speck on the horizon. But bravery isn’t not being scared; it’s being terrified but still charging ahead. You don’t need to be scared alone. I’m here with you.”

Ros closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of Scarlett’s touch, the sincerity in her words. The love she felt was like a wave crashing over her, threatening to sweep her away. She had been so determined to do the right thing, to follow the rules, but now? Now she wasn’t sure what the right thing even was.

Ros opened her eyes, meeting Scarlett’s gaze. “You’re right,” she said softly, her voice trembling with emotion. “I’ve been so scared of losing control and breaking the rules that I almost lost sight of what truly matters. You.”

Scarlett’s breath hitched, her eyes searching Ros’s face. “Then don’t let me go,” she pleaded. “Not because of fear or duty or anything else. Hold on to me, and let’s find a way through this together.”

Ros felt tears sting her eyes, a mix of fear, love, and hope swelling within her. She took a step closer, cupping Scarlett’s face with her hands, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath her fingertips. “I don’t want to lose you,” she confessed, her voice raw.

“But I don’t know how to do this without...”

Scarlett leaned in, her forehead resting against Ros’s. “We figure it out,” she whispered. “One step at a time. We take the risk, and we fight for what we have.”

Ros let out a shaky breath, feeling the weight of her decision pressing down on her. She knew this wasn’t an easy path; it was the hardest choice she’d ever have to make. But as she looked into Scarlett’s wide warm hazel eyes, she felt a flicker of something she hadn’t felt in so long: hope.

Ros stepped forward, gently picking up Scarlett’s hand, which had been hanging limply at her side, her nails biting into the flesh of her palms. She raised it slowly, bringing Scarlett to her side. Ever so gently, she tilted her chin up to meet her gaze.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and before Scarlett could begin to form a reply captured her soft lips with her own. For the first time, Ros had been brave, brave enough to choose Scarlett, their kiss, their love.

Scarlett’s lips were still salty from tears, her face still flushed with anger, her hair matted. And yet, she was the most beautiful Ros had ever seen her.

A spark of hope danced across Scarlett’s hazel eyes, filling them with the light of life that had left them when Ros had ended their relationship. Scarlett eased into the kiss, relaxing into Ros’s embrace.

Though Ros was glad Scarlett seemed to have forgiven her, she knew she needed to re-earn the trust that had been shattered. She could see that Scarlett hadn’t been taking care of herself over the last several days, and while Scarlett had been the courageous one to confront her and reignite the spark between them, it was time for Ros to care for Scarlett.

She pulled back from the embrace and leaned down, planting a final reassuring kiss on her forehead. With a soft, gentle smile on her face, she pulled Scarlett toward the bedroom.

“You look like death warmed over, love. Let’s get you some rest.”

Scarlett allowed herself to be tugged along.

Leaving Scarlett next to the bed, Ros slipped into the bathroom, flicking on the shower before returning.

“That’ll take some time to heat up.”

“What?”

“Shh, it’s okay. You need to look after yourself, which you obviously haven’t been doing. So, I’m going to help you. And then you’re going to sleep. You need it.”

Softly, delicately, she began to peel away the layers of Scarlett’s uniform. Jacket, shirt, pants, underwear. Each was folded neatly and piled against the wall.

Once Scarlett was undressed, she shrugged off her own clothes and led Scarlett into the now steaming shower. The air was heavy with moisture, and the mirror and glass shower panes fogged.

The scalding water felt cleansing against her skin as Ros stepped under the spray of water, pulling Scarlett in behind her. Soaped wash cloth in hand, she rubbed sudsy circles along the muscled planes of Scarlett’s back, laying kisses along her skin where the water had washed away the bubbles.

Across her shoulders, down each arm, and down each leg. Along her toned stomach,

her perfect breasts, every circle tender and caring.

And then washing her lovely hair, dark from the water, lathering it tenderly with shampoo, then rinsing the shampoo off.

Once clean, Ros pulled Scarlett down to sit on the floor of the shower with her. She propped herself up against the wall and drew Scarlett to sit between her splayed legs with her back pressed against her own breasts. Scarlett's hair, now sopping wet, was soft against her skin. She massaged the thick conditioner into the red locks, fingers kneading Scarlett's scalp and running down to the strands' ends. Taking care not to snag or tug, Ros brushed each tangle, kissing along her neck and whispering calming words into her ears. By the time she was done, she could see that Scarlett was fighting sleep.

Dry and wrapped in a fluffy towel, Ros led Scarlett over to the bed then lifted her reverently and placed her on the mattress. "Ros, what?" She mumbled as sleep slowly overtook her.

"You seem tense, love. Just lie there. I'll help you relax." She laid a kiss atop Scarlett's forehead before making her way around the bed frame to her nightstand.

Warming the slick massage oil between her hands, Ros returned to Scarlett's side.

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“Roll over. I’ll start with your back. You always hunch your shoulders when you’re stressed.”

Once Scarlett had flipped over, her toned back and round ass now before Ros’s hands and eyes, she laid her palms on Scarlett’s tight shoulders. The heel of her palm dug in tight circles, working out the knots that had formed—the knots that Ros had likely put there after pushing her away. It was only right, Ros thought, for her then to be the one who removed them.

Round her shoulders, up her neck, down her spine. Ros’s hands roamed, kneading out the tension. Every so often, Scarlett let out a soft moan as Ros’s hands found a particularly tender spot.

As Ros's hands worked their way down Scarlett’s back, the tension began to melt away and her muscles softened under the rhythmic pressure. The room was filled with the soft sounds of Scarlett’s breathing and the occasional murmur of pleasure as Ros's skilled fingers found another knot to ease. The intimacy of the moment was palpable, each touch a silent apology, a wordless promise to care for her in ways beyond words.

Ros moved lower, her hands sliding over Scarlett’s lower back, tracing the curve of her waist before settling on her hips. She could feel Scarlett’s body responding, not just relaxing but yielding, her breathing deepening as she surrendered to the gentle care Ros was lavishing on her. The trust between them grew, and it sent a warmth spreading through Ros's chest.

She poured more oil into her hands, warming it before pressing her palms against

Scarlett's lower back and massaging deeply with the heels of her hands, moving in slow, deliberate circles. She felt Scarlett shift beneath her touch, her body arching slightly as Ros applied more pressure, working out the tension that had been building since the moment they had reunited under such stressful circumstances.

"You're incredible at this," Scarlett murmured, her words slurring with relaxation.

Ros chuckled softly, leaning down to press a kiss between Scarlett's shoulder blades. "You deserve it. After everything you've been through—we've been through—this is the least I can do."

Scarlett let out a contented sigh, her eyes fluttering closed as Ros's hands continued their soothing work. "I've missed this," Scarlett whispered, her words so soft they were almost lost in the quiet of the room.

Ros paused for a moment, her hands resting gently on Scarlett's sides. "I have too," she admitted, her voice laced with the vulnerability she rarely allowed herself to show. "I've missed you."

"Won't get rid of me so easily next time."

"There won't be a next time, love. You look far too at home in my bed to make you leave."

Ros returned to her mission, working her way down Scarlett's legs. As her fingers massaged Scarlett's thighs, Scarlett let out needy whines as her fingers slipped closer to her core.

"Patience."

She ignored her lover's whines, sliding down each leg in turn, squeezing each calf

before taking a foot between her hands. As her thumbs pressed into the sole, a guttural groan came from Scarlett. Ros chuckled at the intensity of the reaction. Scarlett's feet must have been killing her. She worked diligently, her hands squeezing, fingers kneading. First the heel, then sole, then ball, finally each toe in turn.

In all the relationships Ros had had before, she had never done this, given like this. It was special. The service deepened her love for Scarlett with every stroke of her hand.

"On your back."

Scarlett's eyes sparkled as she settled comfortably, and Ros couldn't help but to kiss her. Those eyes. They captivated her every time she saw them. Scarlett arched up to meet her, her lips open with desire.

"I said you'd have to be patient, love." Ros pulled back, teasing.

Her joy was tinged with relief. Even after everything she'd done to Scarlett, she still wanted her, still needed her. Ros hadn't even realized she was scared of that.

She began at the top again, neck and shoulders. She moved down to Scarlett's chest, running her hands around her breasts and ghosting over her pert nipples, taking pleasure in seeing Scarlett's face flush and eyes close with pleasure.

Once more abandoning her quarry, she turned to the arms, so muscled, so strong. She worked her way down each one, finishing with the fingertips, kissing each one in turn.

Returning to her legs, Ros began with the feet this time, now working up and up the shins then thighs, drawing closer and closer to the heat between Scarlett's legs. Her thighs were splayed, pulling Ros closer. As her fingers massaged the tight muscles,

she slipped her finger across Scarlett's folds before pulling away again.

A tight, frustrated moan emanated from Scarlett.

"Fine, I guess you've been patient enough."

Ros leaned forward, licking Scarlett's hot, needy vulva, diving her tongue between the slick folds and circling Scarlett's pulsing clit.

Scarlett let out a moan, her want and desire all spilling out of her as she arched up into Ros's mouth.

Hands on her hips, Ros pushed Scarlett back down into the bed.

"It's meant to be relaxing. Can't have you getting too excited; it'll wake you up."

She returned once more to her prize, sucking and licking softly, slowly. Her fingers moved up to play with Scarlett's sensitive nipples. Flicking and stroking in time with each lick.

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After such anticipation, Scarlett's release came quickly, shuddering as Ros continued to circle her clit.

Breathing heavily, she collapsed back into the covers. Ros joined her only a few seconds later, encircling her arms around Scarlett as she pulled her into her embrace.

“What about you?”

“Sleep, beautiful Scarlett. There'll be plenty of opportunities for you to repay the favor. For now, you need to rest. And so do I.”

She tugged the comforter over the pair of them, nestling into Scarlett's soft auburn hair. Holding her love tight, Ros drifted into the deepest sleep she'd had in a very long while.

13

ROS

The light was only just starting to sneak its way around the edges of the curtain when Ros awoke bleary-eyed. Scarlett was snuggled into her side, her face so peaceful in sleep. Ros's arm, trapped beneath Scarlett's torso, had lost feeling at some point during the night. She gingerly pulled it out, trying not to disturb her. Tingling flooded through her fingers, followed almost immediately by fiery pain. She squeezed her hand tight, trapping the curses that so desperately wanted to fly from her mouth. But she couldn't wake Scarlett, not when she was snoozing so soundly, obviously in dire need of the rest.

Each muffled sound, as she fumbled around in the darkness for her clothes, made her wince and check nervously. It was almost funny how difficult it had proven for her to just dress herself in the dim light. If it had been a test, she'd certainly have failed it.

Wiping away sleep from her bleary eyes, she stumbled her way through to the kitchenette, desperately pawing at the coffee machine to start brewing. It gurgled to life, and buoyed by the promised drink, she headed to the bathroom, intent on corralling her short silver hair into order. She hadn't thought about it still being wet when her head had sunk into the pillow last night as she was too focused on Scarlett, but she was paying for it now. Gel and brush at the ready, she began to tame her bedhead.

Ros, now freshly groomed, walked back into the kitchenette just as the smell of coffee hit her. She smiled, feeling the warmth of the familiar routine. She poured herself a steaming mug and carried it into the living area. The old couch creaked as she flopped down and rested her head against the cushions. She let out a deep sigh.

Her mind immediately drifted to the conversation with Colonel Hale only a few days ago. They could no longer hide their relationship—not after what they had been through, and certainly not after she had fought so hard to get Scarlett back. Hiding felt like betrayal, not just of Scarlett but of herself, of the life they were building together.

She sipped her coffee and smiled bitterly. It wasn't like the military had ever made space for personal feelings, not in the way Ros had needed. But now with Scarlett back in her arms, she couldn't imagine life without her. It was like Scarlett had filled a hole Ros never knew existed. She wouldn't—couldn't—give that up.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the soft padding of feet across the floor. Scarlett, sleepy but smiling, stepped into the living room. Ros raised her coffee mug in greeting.

“Coffee’s ready,” she said softly. “Help yourself to breakfast if you want.”

Scarlett gave her a sleepy grin and shuffled into the kitchenette, emerging a few minutes later with her own mug. Ros patted the seat next to her, and Scarlett curled up beside her, resting her head on Ros’s shoulder. For a moment, they just sat there in the quiet, savoring the peace that came with being together.

Mug half empty, Ros finally felt just about awake enough to face the conversation they urgently needed to have.

“I’ve been thinking this morning while you were asleep,” she began.

“Hmm, what about?” Scarlett’s voice was still husky from sleep.

“Us. What we should do. Next steps. All that sort of stuff.”

“Ugh, guess I’d better finish this coffee. I need to be at least half awake for this.” She drained the remnants of her drink in one swig. “Go on then. I shouldn’t fall asleep on you now.”

“Well, first things first, I’m not letting you go again. I’ve only just got you back. It nearly broke both of us last time I tried, so there won’t be a repeat of that.”

“You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried. I’m like a limpet.”

“But we can’t go back to trying to hide it. We weren’t any good at it anyway. I, for one, couldn’t keep my eyes off you.”

“Quite right too. I’m hot stuff.”

“You are. Shush.” She silenced her with a kiss before continuing. “And besides that, I

don't want you to be a secret. I want to shout about you to the skies. You're mine, and I want everyone to know."

"God, I love you. But with Hale on our case, how can we do that?"

Ros nodded slowly. "That's why I've been thinking. We talk to General Talbot today. Lay it all out. I'll take responsibility for it."

"You? But...Ros, this isn't just on you. I'm part of this too."

Ros smiled softly. "I know. But I'm the one in charge here. I've been asking myself if this career is worth losing you. And it's not."

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“But you’ve given everything for it. Worked your whole life to get where you are now. Surely you can’t just throw that all away.”

“It won’t be throwing it away. Besides, we’ve no idea what Talbot will say.”

“Are you sure about this? There might be other options.”

“Honestly, no, I’m not sure. I know Talbot, and he is fair. I think he’ll hear me out. But I can never be sure. I do think this is our best chance, though. He’s far more likely to be lenient if he hears it from us rather than Hale.”

“Fine, if you think so.”

“You’d best get dressed, though. Somehow I don’t think it will help us make a good impression if you turn up dressed in my PJs.” Ros laughed, kissing Scarlett’s cheek, now tinged with pink at the thought.

14

### SCARLETT

The walk to General Talbot’s temporary office felt like the longest hike Scarlett had ever done, each corridor never ending. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her breath felt tight. She trusted Ros—she really did—but why did this feel like she was walking to her doom? Unlike Ros, she wasn’t worried about her career. If this was the end of the line for her in the military, she at least had her engineering work to fall back on. But Ros? Ros had known nothing but the army her whole life. What would she do if

her entire life was upended? Ros had said that she would give up everything to stay with her. One part of her believed it, But the other whispered doubts. If it came to it, would Ros really choose her?

The door loomed large in the corridor. It was no different from the doors on either side of it. And yet at the sight of their destination, Scarlett felt an overwhelming urge to turn tail and run. Maybe she was scared.

Her heart stopped as Ros stepped forward and knocked on the door. Each pound felt like a nail in her coffin.

Her mind went blank as the call to enter came, and she shuffled in behind Ros as she opened the door. A dead woman walking.

Having only arrived a couple days ago, General Talbot had made himself very much at home. Ornate curtains hung over the windows, and commemorations and pictures lined the walls. A sturdy wooden desk stood in the center of the room. Behind it sat the general himself. He looked a few years older than Ros—late fifties, maybe early sixties. Clean-shaven with dark-gray hair at his temples, though the rest of his head was balding. Scarlett saw his slight smile as Ros entered, but it was quickly replaced by confusion as Scarlett trailed after her.

“Ros, I hope you’re recovering well from all these recent ordeals. Who’d have known you’d be having this much excitement so soon in your new assignment?”

“Ha, indeed, Marcus. It’s been an interesting few weeks.”

“How can I help you? And your shadow.”

“General Talbot, meet Captain Scarlett Bennett. Scarlett, meet General Marcus Talbot.”

Scarlett snapped to a salute, which was promptly returned by the general.

“Good to meet you, Captain.” He turned back to Ros. “Now then, on to business, I presume.”

“Yes. Business. I’ve found myself in a tricky situation, Marcus. We’ve worked together for many years, so you know my reputation, I’m sure. Hard line, rule abiding, by the book. Well, I’ve found myself in a circumstance where I can’t do that any longer. Captain Bennett and I have started a relationship.”

“That’s certainly not what I was expecting to hear from you, Carson.”

“Please, Marcus. I’ll explain best I can, but please listen. Obviously, I know such things are prohibited. And we did our best to stay apart. That didn’t work, and being distracted meant I could not fulfill my role to the best of my ability. So, we’re at an impasse. I take full responsibility for it, of course, and as the senior rank, I should have put a stop to it, but I didn’t, so now we’re here.”

“I think it’s safe to say I’m not impressed. As a general, you should know better. You have responsibilities to uphold. An example to set for younger officers. You, too, Captain. You’re stubborn, Carson. I know once you’ve got it set in your head, there’s nothing I or anyone else can say that will shift you. So I won’t bother. Nothing I can say will convince you that this is a terrible idea.”

“I believe your assessment is accurate there, Talbot.”

“The way I see it, the pair of you have three options. Option one, I wouldn’t recommend, is that you continue on as you have, and I will have to conduct a formal investigation. It’s not something I’d enjoy having to do, and you certainly wouldn’t like it either. Almost definitely at least one of you would be facing dishonorable discharge.” His face was stoic, checking their expressions to ensure they understood.

“Option two: Captain Bennett here is reassigned. Probably somewhere fairly far away. It would keep the two of you apart, and while you could communicate and visit during leave, it would keep your relationship from interfering with your work. Finally, option three. Ros, you could take retirement. You’re at the age for it anyway. I won’t sway your choices for you. It’s for the pair of you to decide. I’ll step out and leave you to talk it through. Just knock when you’re ready to give me your answer.”

With that, he stood, giving them a terse nod as he left the room.

A stream of breath left Scarlett as she deflated, her nerves slowly leaving now that the general had gone. A hand gripped hers and she looked up to see Ros staring at her intently.

“Are you okay?” Ros asked.

“I should be the one asking you that, I think. You were the one who had to face him. I just stood there.”

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“Marcus doesn’t scare me. I’ve known him too long for that.”

“What do you think, then, of our options?”

“Well, Marcus is right about one thing, for certain. I have no wish to go through a formal investigation. I’ve seen them being conducted before. Hellish. And depending on who conducts it, they could be out for blood.”

“Agreed. There have been enough rumors flying around without our lives being put under the microscope.”

“I’d rather not see you reassigned. Who knows where you could be stationed?”

“But would you really want to retire? You’ve worked so hard for this. You don’t have to give it up. Being apart would be hard, but we could make it work.”

“No, I think retirement might be a good plan. I think I’ve given enough.”

Scarlett’s breath caught in her throat, and she looked at Ros with wide eyes.

“You’d...give up everything? For me?”

“I’ve given everything to the army my whole life,” Ros said, her voice steady.

“Maybe it’s time for me to choose something else. Something that makes me whole. That’s you, Scarlett. And besides,” she added with a wry smile, “my knee still hasn’t healed from that last mission. I’m not getting any younger.”

Scarlett blinked, stunned. “Ros...”

“We’ll figure it out,” Ros assured her. “I don’t want you to be reassigned to some far-off base. If I retire, you can apply for base housing. We can be together, and I won’t have to send you into danger anymore. I’ll still worry, but I won’t be the one giving the orders.”

“But what will you do? The army is your life.”

“I don’t know yet. I’ve never thought about life after the army. Some part of me knew it would end, of course, but I’ve never thought about it. I’ll find something to do, don’t worry. I’ll need to do something with myself to stay sane. Maybe I’ll find something I love even more than I’ve loved being an officer. Whatever it is, I’ll love it even more with you by my side. Should we call Talbot back in? He’s been standing awkwardly outside his own office door for long enough, I think.” The intense warmth Scarlett had been feeling faded, though it was not replaced by the nerves that had wracked her before, for which she was grateful. Still, when the general returned, she felt as though her bones had become lead, freezing her in place.

“So then, what decision have the pair of you come to?” he asked, reclaiming his seat behind the desk.

“I’ve decided to take early retirement,” Ros said.

“We’ll be sad to see you go, General Carson.”

“It’s time. There are adventures out there for me yet. Time to move on and seek them out.”

“Well, I’ll see to it that your resignation goes smoothly and discreetly.”

“If you need an easy excuse, my impulsivity has finally caught up to me. My knee really did take a hit the other day. I don’t think it’s going to forgive me anytime soon.

If the army needs a more palatable excuse for me to fade into obscurity, use that by all means.”

“Very well. As for you, Captain Bennett, while I allowed you the use of my office, I sought out Colonel Hale to find out what he had to say on this matter. I learned from him that there have been rumors about your relationship flying around the base for a couple weeks now.”

Scarlett winced. Surely they weren’t about to dismiss her.

“While I do not approve of your actions,” he continued, “your service record is exemplary. I’d rather that not be tainted by you having to remain at a base that is filled with gossip about you. It may well affect your soldiers’ ability or willingness to follow your orders. I will have you transferred over to Fort Kirk. It’s near enough that you and Carson will not be separated by too great a distance while we finalize her retirement. And that base needs all the personnel it can get after that avalanche. I think you will do well there, Captain.”

Scarlett nodded. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“If that’s all the surprises you were planning on bringing to my door at this early hour, I’d like to finish the rest of my morning free of further shocks. The both of you are dismissed. Ros, I’ll see you in a day or two to work out the logistics.”

“Thank you, Marcus.”

Ros and Scarlett sat together on the edge of the bed, their hands intertwined as they soaked in the quiet after what had felt like a whirlwind of decisions.

General Talbot had been firm but fair, and the two of them had avoided the worst of what could have happened. No investigation, no public reprimand. Early retirement

for Ros and a nearby reassignment for Scarlett meant they were only facing a temporary separation. It could've been so much worse, and both of them knew it.

Ros broke the silence first, squeezing Scarlett's hand as she looked over with a small smile. "You know, this is probably the best outcome we could've hoped for. No formal charges, no dishonorable discharges. Just a few months apart, and then we get to start fresh. Together."

Scarlett gave a soft laugh, leaning her head on Ros's shoulder. "I know. I'm just being selfish, I guess. I don't want to leave without you, even if it's just for a little while. I was looking forward to waking up next to you every morning, not saying goodbye at the base gate."

Ros chuckled, nudging her gently. "We'll get there, I promise. You'll be at Fort Kirk setting up our new life, and I'll be right behind you, probably complaining about how bored I am not having anything to do."

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Scarlett smiled at the thought, imagining Ros trying to settle into civilian life without the structure of the military. “You’ll be insufferable, won’t you? Complaining about retirement the whole time until I drag you out for a hike or something.”

“Oh, absolutely. I’ll be unbearable,” Ros agreed, grinning as she imagined herself tagging along behind Scarlett every outing. “But I’ll also be making us coffee every morning, walking the dog, and waiting to steal you away from your workday whenever you get the chance.”

Scarlett’s smile widened, the image of that future softening the edges of her lingering sadness. She straightened up, looking at Ros with a newfound determination. “It’ll be worth it, won’t it? A few months apart, and then all of this behind us.”

Ros nodded, her thumb brushing over the back of Scarlett’s hand. “It will. We’ve been through worse, haven’t we? This is just a bump in the road. No sneaking around anymore, no rumors hanging over us. Just us.”

Scarlett tilted her head, her expression softening. “I never thought it would work out like this. I mean, I knew the risks, but I was always afraid we’d lose each other or worse.”

Ros leaned in, kissing her gently on the temple. “You’re not losing me. We’re getting through this, and when I’m finally with you at Fort Kirk, we’ll have something we never had before: freedom. To be together, to live how we want.”

Scarlett nodded, the weight on her heart feeling lighter with every word. “No hiding. No pretending we’re just colleagues. That’s worth waiting for.”

“It is,” Ros agreed. “And, hey, the military’s even footing the bill for our new start. You’ll be there a little early to scope out the best spots for coffee and hiking, and I’ll be following you like a lovesick puppy.”

Scarlett laughed, feeling the tension in her chest ease. “I can’t wait for that. You know I’ll make sure we live near all the best coffee shops.”

“Perfect,” Ros teased, brushing a lock of hair behind Scarlett’s ear. “I’ll be ready. Just don’t forget to save me the best blanket.”

“I won’t,” Scarlett promised, her heart swelling with the reassurance that everything was going to be okay. More than okay, actually. They had a future together to look forward to, and the worst was already behind them.

Ros pulled Scarlett closer, their foreheads touching gently. “We’ve got this, love. A few months apart is nothing compared to what we’ve been through. And once we’re together again, it’s going to be worth every second of this wait.”

Scarlett leaned against her, closing her eyes as a peaceful warmth spread through her chest. “I know. I can already see it—our place, our life. No more goodbyes.”

“No more goodbyes,” Ros whispered, her lips brushing against Scarlett’s.

And with that, they stayed wrapped in each other’s arms, holding on to the promise of their new beginning, knowing that this was only the start of everything they had dreamed of together.

## EPILOGUE

### 5 YEARS LATER

The warm Hawaiian breeze swept through the open windows, carrying with it the scent of saltwater and the faint rustle of palm leaves. Sunlight filtered through the gauzy curtains, casting a golden glow across the living room where Ros sat flipping lazily through a magazine. It had been five years since she'd left her military career behind, and though the transition hadn't been seamless, she'd finally settled into this new chapter of life. A chapter filled with peace, love, and Scarlett's steady presence.

"Morning, love." Scarlett's voice floated in from the kitchen, the sound of her bare feet padding across the tiled floor following close behind. She appeared in the doorway a moment later holding two mugs of coffee, still dressed in her sleep shorts and one of Ros's old t-shirts. Her hair was a wild mess of curls, slightly damp from the shower she'd just taken, and Ros couldn't help but smile at the sight of her.

"You spoil me," Ros teased, reaching out to take the mug Scarlett offered, her fingers brushing lightly against hers.

"Someone's got to," Scarlett replied with a playful grin, sinking down onto the couch beside Ros. She tucked her legs beneath her, nestling into Ros's side as they both took their first sips of the rich, dark coffee. The mornings were always their time—the peaceful, unhurried moments before Scarlett headed off to the base and Ros set about her day. It was a ritual they had fallen into since moving to Hawaii, one that felt as comforting as the steady rhythm of the ocean just beyond their doorstep.

"Any plans for today?" Ros asked, setting her mug down on the coffee table and wrapping an arm around Scarlett's shoulders, pulling her closer. She could feel the warmth of her skin, the familiar weight of her body against hers, and it made her heart swell with contentment.

Scarlett shook her head. "Just the usual. Base operations are running smoothly, so nothing too crazy on my plate today. What about you?"

“Thought I’d head into town and pick up a few things for dinner. Maybe swing by the beach afterward.” Ros's tone was casual, but there was a hint of mischief in her eyes, as if she was already planning some small surprise for later.

Scarlett chuckled, catching the look. “You’ve been cooking a lot more lately. Should I be worried?”

Ros laughed, giving her a light nudge. “I’m just trying to keep you on your toes. Besides, someone has to take care of you now that you’re getting closer to retirement.”

At the mention of retirement, Scarlett’s smile softened, and she leaned her head against Ros’s shoulder, staring out the window at the brilliant blue sky. It was still strange to think about a future where she wouldn’t be reporting for duty, where her days would be free to spend however she wanted. The thought excited her, but it also came with a pang of uncertainty.

“You think I’ll go stir-crazy without the routine?” Scarlett mused, her voice quieter now, more thoughtful.

Ros gave a knowing smile. “I think you’ll adjust just fine. It took me a while, but once I stopped worrying about not having orders or a mission, I realized how much freedom I had. You’ll find your way, and we’ll have plenty to keep us busy.”

Scarlett lifted her head, meeting Ros’s eyes. “Like what? What’s your plan for me, General Carson?” She used Ros's old rank with a smirk, knowing it would get a reaction.

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Ros rolled her eyes but grinned nonetheless. “Well, we did talk about all the places we wanted to travel to, didn’t we? Europe, New Zealand, maybe even a road trip. We could take our time, see the sights, and just enjoy life.”

Scarlett’s smile widened at the thought. “I’d like that. It feels like we’ve been waiting so long for that kind of freedom. First, we were sneaking around, and then we were navigating all the military red tape. And now, finally, we’re just us.”

Ros brushed a stray curl from Scarlett’s forehead, her touch gentle and full of affection. “That’s what I’ve been looking forward to most, just being with you. No distractions, no obligations. Just us.”

They sat like that for a while, the quiet between them filled with the soft hum of the world outside. The sound of the ocean waves rolling in the distance, the occasional call of a bird from the trees. It was moments like this that reminded them both of how far they’d come, how much they’d fought for this life together, and how much it was worth.

“I was thinking,” Scarlett said after a pause, her fingers absently tracing patterns on Ros’s arm. “Once I retire, maybe we could look into buying a little place of our own. Something near the water with a big porch where we can watch the sunsets.”

Ros tilted her head, considering the idea. “A house by the water, huh? Sounds perfect. We’ll need space for all the souvenirs we’ll be bringing back from our travels too.”

Scarlett laughed softly. “I’ll try not to go overboard with the souvenir shopping.”

“You? Overboard?” Ros teased, her voice laced with mock disbelief. “Never.”

They shared a quiet chuckle before falling into a comfortable silence again. Scarlett’s eyes drifted back to the window where the sunlight was beginning to shift, casting long shadows across the room. There was a deep sense of peace in her heart—a certainty that no matter what came next, they would face it together.

The years leading up to this moment had been hard, but they had also been full of growth and of learning to navigate their love amidst the constraints of their careers. And now, with retirement on the horizon for Scarlett, they had a whole new chapter ahead of them. A chapter filled with possibilities, adventures, and the kind of freedom they had once only dreamed of.

Ros pressed a kiss to the top of Scarlett’s head, her voice soft. “Whatever we do, wherever we go, I’m just glad it’ll be with you.”

Scarlett smiled, closing her eyes and sinking deeper into the warmth of Ros's embrace. “Me too.”

The sun was beginning its slow descent, the golden-hour light spilling across the yard in dappled beams. The sky over the ocean transformed from a blazing orange to a deep, fiery red, reflecting off the water like molten glass. The warm breeze that had drifted in from the shoreline earlier had softened, now carrying the faint scent of sea salt and hibiscus flowers. Scarlett and Ros sat side by side on the porch, the simple wooden chairs they occupied creaking gently beneath them.

Ros stretched her legs out in front of her, crossing her ankles as she leaned back into her chair. “You know,” she began with a lazy smile, her hand resting comfortably on Scarlett’s knee, “I always wondered if I’d ever get tired of sunsets like these. But every night, they’re just...different. Stunning.”

Scarlett turned to her, her lips curling into a soft smile. “That’s why we moved here, right? For moments like this?” She gave Ros's hand a gentle squeeze, and though her voice held a playful note, there was a weight beneath it—a gratitude for this life they’d built together.

“That, and to get you out of the cold climates,” Ros teased, her grin broadening. She reached for her glass of wine on the small table between them, taking a sip. “Not that I ever minded those mornings when you came back inside with your cheeks all pink from the cold.”

Scarlett chuckled, leaning into Ros’s touch. “Yeah, you always had a way of warming me up.” She took her own sip of wine, the cool liquid a contrast to the warm air. Her eyes wandered to the horizon where the sky was deepening into purples and blues. “It feels surreal sometimes. Like we fought so hard to get here, and now we have it. This life.”

Ros nodded, her gaze following Scarlett’s. “It’s strange, isn’t it? For so long, everything was about the next mission, the next hurdle. And now, we’ve got nothing but time.” Her voice grew quieter, more thoughtful. “We earned this.”

Scarlett turned toward Ros, studying her for a moment. “You sound like you’re still trying to convince yourself of that.”

Ros glanced sideways, meeting Scarlett’s eyes. She could never hide her emotions from her; Scarlett always saw right through her. “Maybe I am, just a little. I was so used to the structure and demands. It took me a while to stop feeling guilty for not doing something. But now”—she paused, her fingers lightly tracing circles on Scarlett’s knee “now, I think I’ve finally let myself relax.”—

Scarlett smiled, a deep, genuine smile that reached her eyes. “I’ve noticed. You’ve changed, Ros. In a good way.”

Ros chuckled. “Not too soft, I hope.”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow, her smirk teasing. “Soft? You? Never. You’re still the toughest woman I know.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, watching as the last remnants of the sun dipped below the horizon, leaving the sky awash in purples and pinks. The sound of waves crashing softly in the distance mixed with the gentle hum of the tropical evening, the cicadas beginning their nightly chorus. It was peaceful, idyllic.

Scarlett sighed contentedly. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what comes next.”

Ros shifted in her chair, turning her attention fully to Scarlett. “Oh yeah? What’s on your mind?”

Scarlett glanced down at the glass in her hand, swirling the wine as if gathering her thoughts. “Retirement’s not far off for me now. It’s hard to believe that soon, I won’t be reporting to base every morning. That I’ll have days where I’m not needed there.”

Ros nodded, understanding the sentiment all too well. She remembered how strange it felt when she’d first stepped away, how the loss of routine had been jarring at first. “It’s an adjustment, for sure. But you’re going to love it. I promise.”

“I know,” Scarlett said, her voice soft. “And I am excited. I mean, we’ve talked about all the things we want to do: traveling, seeing the world, having the freedom to just go wherever we want. It’s exciting. But...” “But?” Ros prompted gently.

Scarlett met her gaze, her brow furrowed slightly. “I guess I’m worried I won’t know what to do with myself. I’ve always been so focused on the job, the next task, the next goal. What if I don’t know how to be still?”

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Ros's smile was tender and full of understanding. She reached over, placing her hand on Scarlett's. "You're not going to be still, love. We're going to be busier than ever, just in a different way. We'll have the time to do all the things we've always talked about. Visiting new places, learning new things, maybe even picking up some hobbies we've never had time for."

Scarlett's lips twitched into a small smile. "Hobbies, huh? You mean like knitting?"

Ros laughed, shaking her head. "No, not knitting. I was thinking more like hiking, maybe some photography. Hell, we could even take cooking classes together and learn how to make something other than pasta."

Scarlett snorted. "I'm not that bad at cooking, am I?"

Ros gave her a playful look. "Let's just say you're better at fixing helicopters than you are at making lasagna."

Scarlett laughed, the sound light and full of warmth. "Okay, fair. But seriously, Ros," she said, her tone growing softer again. "What if it's weird? Not having the routine, the orders. I'm just used to it."

Ros leaned forward, cupping Scarlett's cheek with one hand, her thumb brushing gently against her skin. "You're going to figure it out, just like I did. And you won't be alone. We're in this together. And trust me, we'll have plenty of adventures to keep us busy."

Scarlett leaned into her touch, her eyes softening. "I can't wait for that. To just live.

With you.”

Ros smiled, leaning in to press a soft kiss to Scarlett’s lips. “We’ve got our whole future ahead of us, Scarlett. And it’s going to be amazing.”

Scarlett pulled back slightly, her eyes shimmering in the fading light. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“I do,” Ros said, her voice firm and full of certainty. “We’ve been through hell and back, and we’ve come out stronger. We deserve this. We’ve earned it.”

Scarlett let out a slow breath, her shoulders relaxing as she smiled. “Yeah. We really have, haven’t we?”

They fell into a comfortable silence once more, watching as the sky deepened into night, the stars beginning to twinkle overhead. The world around them seemed to settle into stillness, the peaceful hum of the evening wrapping around them like a blanket.

After a few minutes, Scarlett broke the silence. “So, what’s the first place we’re going to visit once I’m officially retired?”

Ros smiled, her mind already racing with possibilities. “Well, we did say we wanted to do a road trip across the States, didn’t we? See all the national parks, the little towns, maybe stop by some of those diners you love so much.”

Scarlett grinned. “That sounds perfect. And after that?”

“Europe,” Ros said with a glint in her eye. “We’ll rent a car, drive through the countryside, stop wherever we feel like. Maybe spend a few weeks in Italy sipping wine and eating pasta by the sea.”

Scarlett's smile widened. "That sounds like heaven."

Ros chuckled. "It will be. And after that? Who knows. We've got the whole world to explore."

Scarlett leaned back in her chair, her eyes drifting back to the stars. "I can't wait, Ros. I really can't."

Ros squeezed her hand, her heart full. "Me neither, love. Me neither."

As the night settled in around them, they sat together in peaceful silence, the weight of the past lifting from their shoulders. The future stretched out before them—wide, open, and full of possibilities. And for the first time in a long time, they weren't worried about what lay ahead.

They had each other, and that was all they needed.