

Tales of the Valkyries



Hana – Part One

by Shadar

Revision Tuesday, February 15, 2005

(Note: One picture in this file is not 'work safe')

Chapter 1

November 25, 2013: US Army Camp Butler, Okinawa, Japan

Sergeant Rob York wiped his greasy hands on a rag as he leaned against the workbench, proudly admiring his handiwork. Two retired M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles (BIFV) were parked inside his rented Quonset hut, their fresh paint gleaming in the overhead halogen lights. The BIFV, usually simply called a Bradley, was protected by steel, aluminum and composite armor, and fitted with a rapid-fire cannon on top. When the US Army had decided to retire these first-generation M2's from the active inventory, Rob had bought two units from the base surplus in Okinawa, and then rented this old garage on the edge of the base to house them. After nineteen years of fighting in and then maintaining these Bradley's as part of his job in the US Army, he'd developed a love for the tough machines that had saved his life in battle.

He'd painted his pride and joys with a desert camouflage scheme as opposed to the usual Asian jungle pattern. Rob liked the softer grays and browns. He'd also overhauled both diesels, and now he and his buddies were going through the drive train and tracks, making them as good as new. If not for the barrels that had been removed from the 25mm chain guns as part of the demilitarization, along with the 7.62mm machine guns and TOW rocket launcher, they could go back to war at a moment's notice.

Weighing twenty-five tons each, the Bradley was designed to both protect its occupants on the way into battle, and to fight its way out, bringing soldiers safely home. Its armor could shrug off direct hits from heavy machine guns and medium anti-armor weapons. Unfortunately, the lethality of the main armament on enemy tanks and helicopter gunships had recently advanced to the point where the original models of the Bradley had become too vulnerable to remain in the active US Army inventory.

The jangle of the wall phone interrupted Rob. "Sergeant York here," he answered.

"Hey, Sarge," a softly feminine voice replied. "O.K. for me to come over and work tonight?"

Rob's words had started crisp and clipped in the usual military style, but they softened as he heard the voice on the other end. "Hey, you bet, Hana. I'd love to get *Eagle* up and running by this weekend." *Eagle* was the second of his Bradleys. Hana Nielsen worked for him, stripping the grunge from twenty years of Army service away before refurbishing the interiors.

Hana was also the daughter of Captain Bjork Nielsen, one of the Apache pilots based at Camp Butler, and she was a senior at base high school. Rob had served with Captain Nielsen in Iraq several years ago, and when the Captain had been ordered back to Iraq six months ago, he'd sought out Rob to ask a favor. He needed someone he trusted to keep an eye on his daughter. He described how Hana's mother traveled a lot with her job and how Hana had fallen in with a group of rebellious and socially withdrawn Goth kids. He wanted her to maintain contact with at least one decent person.

Once he met Hana, Rob understood why her father was worried. She dressed in chains, black leather and denim, black and silver being the only two colors she seemed to think existed. She had a filthy mouth on her and a bad attitude to match. She acted as if adults were stupid beyond redemption and that other kids, the non-Goths anyway, were clueless about the way the world was going straight to hell. As she put it succinctly when he first met her, "Why bother trying to enjoy the view when you're a maggot riding a turd down the flush cycle."

Rob didn't buy it. Not the attitude, and not the lifestyle. Hana had too much going for her. But she got away with the attitude to some degree because of her looks and her native intelligence. She was tall, nearly six feet, her skin tanned, so unlike the pasty white Goths she hung out with. She carried herself like an athlete, her posture perfect, and her body moving with tightly controlled precision.

Not that she'd ever lower herself enough to actually play a sport. Instead, she wore black jeans or long skirts, along with black and silver tops, her outfits topped off by dark wool hats most of the time. Her black hair was streaked with purple dye and almost always jammed up under her hat. She also lived behind a pair of sunglasses. Yet anyone could see that her face was broad and strong in Nordic fashion, and that her skin was glowingly healthy, her complexion perfect. She often tried to compensate for that by wearing layers of whitening makeup.

Rob and her father had come to know each other years before when they fought their way out of an ambush in Iraq, and Rob thought the Captain was a decent type, for a pilot anyway. Bjork Nielsen had once said he felt guilty that he was away more than he was home, which given the never-ending war in the Middle East was all too rare. Rob hadn't met Hana's mother, but he knew her by reputation.

It was said that Bryn Nielsen was haughty, distant, and rarely seen in public. She was six feet one inch tall, with eyes the color of the arctic sky and had ash blonde hair that hung to her waist. She was lean and looked incredibly fit, at least based on the one picture Rob had of her, published in the base newspaper. Supposedly she was a 'management consultant', whatever that meant.

Rob knew that if Hana was going to look anything like her mother when she grew up, she would become an exceptionally beautiful woman.

Unfortunately, Bryn had a reputation for disappearing frequently, especially when her husband was off to war. Some of the wives presumed she was running around with other men, as her so-called consulting business was poorly defined at best. What was clear enough from the O-club scuttlebutt was that she mesmerized men whenever Bryn walked into a room, which was enough all by itself to ensure that the other wives hated her.

The only thing Rob knew for sure was that Hana's parents had left her alone in Okinawa to finish out her senior year. Friends of the family were supposedly taking care of her, but as far as Rob could see, they didn't have any. Hana was pretty much raising herself.

Even worse, the wives' dislike of Bryn Nielsen seemed to carry over to her daughter, and none of their husbands dared incur their wife's wrath by getting involved in helping Hana or anyone else in the Nielsen family.

Except for Rob. His wife had left him some time ago, so he didn't care what the wives were saying. He had a small apartment off base, and he didn't spend much time gossiping in the clubs anymore.

Even more importantly, Hana's father trusted him.

Rob had been part of a team that trained Apache pilots like Bjork Nielsen to exploit the weaknesses of Russian armor. After the Captain's chopper had been shot up by anti-aircraft fire and crash-landed near Rob's armored maintenance group in eastern Iraq, they had to work together to punch through the Iranian forces that were attempting to surround them. By the time they'd fought their way back to Baghdad, they'd saved each other's lives at least twice.

They weren't close friends, for the Captain was a hotshot pilot and Rob was just a maintenance grunt, but they respected each other. Which was why, after all the Captain's other plans for Hana fell through, he'd resorted to asking the one man he could trust to keep an eye on his daughter. To become a surrogate father, if you will.

Hana didn't make that task an easy one for Rob. Once a month she disappeared for a couple of days. When she came back, she refused to talk about where she'd been or why. A buddy's wife told him that she was the subject of gossip now, the rumors connecting her with a couple of young officers. If you could believe the buzz, Hana was destined to grow up to be just as bad as her mother. Mothers devoted their efforts to keeping their sons away from Hana, while the other kids at school thought she was a freak. A Wicca, a Goth, nobody knew for sure.

Rob didn't buy the gossip about Hana and the officers. From what he knew of Hana, such an affair as the last thing she'd fall into. He redoubled his efforts to forge a supportive relationship with her, and to help integrate her into the community on base. He remembered how unhappy his teenage years had been, mostly spent as a misfit and a loner like Hana until he joined the Army.

He started his campaign by trying to get Hana into sports. Given her ramrod straight posture and athletic build, especially her height, he was convinced she could be a star on the girl's basketball team. So he asked Sergeant Frank Nesbitt, who coached the high school basketball teams, to approach her.

Nesbitt gave it his best try, only to have Hana walk out onto his basketball court in bare feet, the head-to-toe black of her Goth attire and silver chains contrasting wildly with the white shorts and t-shirts of the other players. Without saying a word, she casually swished a basket from the opposite end of the court. Then did it a second time, one-handed. While everyone's eyes bugged out of their heads, she acted disinterested, pretending it was a trivial feat.

Instead of being impressed, her impossible shots only confirmed her reputation among the athletes as some kind of witch.

Hana poured gas on that fire by loudly recounting every incident or misbehavior of the high school's team members for the last two years, from drunken parties to rumors of date rapes. She made school athletics sound like the work of hormone-driven teenage lunatics and irresponsible parents and teachers who supported criminal misbehavior by these elite student-athletes. Even worse, she started recounting the time and place of every hushed incident that was buried in the dark closets of the Athletics Department of Okinawa High School.

Nesbitt hustled Hana out of his gym before she started to get him into real trouble, and he actually seemed afraid of her when Rob caught up with him later, insisting that she didn't have the right skills or attitude for his team. Nesbitt didn't comment on Hana's obvious athletic talents, despite being a tenacious recruiter of talent. That puzzled Rob, for he'd heard all about Hana's phenomenal basketball demonstration. Nesbitt seemingly wanted nothing to do with Hana Nielsen.

Rob gave up on that path, only to try a new approach after he found that Hana needed money for a new gaming computer. He offered her a job as one of his team of Bradley restorers. She would do the interior restoration.

Hana agreed, but the trouble started again as soon as he showed up for work. She started mouthing off to his buddies, which pissed everyone else off.

Rob pulled his buddies off the side and explained the deal with Hana, absent parents and all that, and then met with Hana to insist that she keep her opinions to herself. She mellowed a bit, and the men graciously gave her the benefit of the doubt.

It appeared to be working, at least until a couple of the younger soldiers foolishly tried to hit on her, at which point she let them know exactly what she thought of people who'd decided to make their living standing in line, saluting and marching in step.

She didn't draw a pretty picture of Army life, but they were soldiers, and they'd seen their share of attitude before. They tossed it back at her with interest, making Goths sound like some kind of subterranean scum.

Hana brightened up as they played her game, and dug deeper yet, enjoying the verbal sparring. Her verbal shots were lethal, for she seemed to instinctively know where each man's weakness was. The conversations in the shop turned spirited to say the least, but Hana was at least focusing on something other than herself, and they were making progress on restoring the Bradleys. In the end, those were the things that really mattered.

Still, Rob tried to understand what was going on in Hana's head, for he knew what it was like not to fit in. He'd started hanging out with a bunch of losers back when he was in high school, and that had led to a brush with the law. The judge had given him a choice: join the Army or do some time in the county slammer. He chose the Army. Looking back, it was the best decision of his life. Most of his old friends eventually wound up in prison or shot dead.

He didn't want Hana to repeat his mistakes. If she could keep her nose clean, he suspected she'd go off to college in the US and grow past this ugly phase. As he saw it, she was a young filly who wanted to run free for as long as she could before the saddle went on.

So, acting like the father he'd never been, he tried to turn that independent streak into advantage. He started by encouraging her to work on his Bradleys at her own pace. He let her come and go as she wished, and even gave her a key to the shop. Often as not, she'd come in late at night and work alone until it was time for school, putting in far longer hours than his buddies. She seemed friendly enough to him, perhaps because of the freedom he gave her, or perhaps because he handed out the paychecks. She even found out about the deal with her father, but she didn't seem to hold it against him.

Things began to improve with his buddies as well after they saw Hana lugging heavy equipment around the shop on her own. She was strong for a girl and wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty. She earned

even more respect when they saw the quality of her work. The interior of the first Bradley was starting to look better than a new unit. Encouragingly, she reciprocated, even going so far as to smile at a few of the men's bawdy Army jokes. A very un-Goth-like thing.

Rob grew ever more hopeful as the weeks passed. It was obvious to him now that Hana wasn't really like the other Goths who slumped and slouched around; their skin pasty white and teeth yellow from smoking cigarettes and God knew what else. They hung around outside the school fence smoking their cigarettes and handing out attitude to anyone who strayed their way, which only ensured their total isolation from the other students. Their only shared activity, other than being depressed and cynical, seemed to be on-line video gaming.

Asking around about that, Rob discovered that Hana had a hell of a reputation as a gamer. Apparently she had wickedly fast reflexes and a natural instinct for combat. Which made sense, given that her father was an Apache pilot. Apache drivers were ballsy gunfighters, living on adrenaline, fast on the draw and always eager to shoot it out with the Iraqi insurgents or anyone else who crossed their paths.

So as is the case with most men who reach out and try to help a troubled kid, Rob found he was getting as much out of the deal as Hana was. He was gratified by the changes he saw in her, proudly knowing he was helping make those happen.

It also didn't hurt that he was also getting some cheap help. Restoring these old Bradleys was his only form of recreation, and he was always strapped for cash.

He and his wife had divorced five years ago; she'd hated Army life. A big chunk of his paycheck had recently started going to alimony after she found a sympathetic judge back in their home state of California. He'd responded to his wife's desertion and his near impoverishment by crawling inside his loneliness to focus on his hobby. He and his wife had never had children, despite his fervent desire to do so, which only made his desire to help Hana that much more acute.

Chapter 2

Rob pushed the depressing thoughts of his ex-wife and his finances away as he downed the last of his Budweiser, the fourth one since he'd gotten off work. He rose and started to drag a heavy hydraulic jack across the floor, the steel wheels chattering and scraping across the ancient concrete. It was a portable field hoist, designed to operate with a long handle instead of the usual compressed air pump, but it still weighed three hundred pounds. All the equipment designed to handle military armor had to be heavy duty.

Tonight's plan was to replace the shock absorbers on the left track of *Hawkeye*, his first Bradley. Normally a two-man job, he figured he could do it alone today. He'd replaced hundreds of these shocks during his career.

Ten sweaty minutes later, he had the Bradley jacked high enough to unload the track. He raised it another eighteen inches in the air to give himself space to work. He then looked around for the safety stands, only to realize that two of his three surplus jack stands were already supporting the back of the other Bradley. Shrugging, he said to hell with it. He'd go with just one stand as a safety. It would hold long enough to get out from under if something happened to the main jack, and the job wasn't going to take long.

A voice in the back of his head warned him that he was spouting dangerous rationalizations, but what the hell. The Safety people weren't snooping around his garage. Nineteen years of experience had to be good for something.

He shoved the heavy safety stand under the work area; it was made from a hundred and fifty pounds of reinforced steel, and then crawled under *Hawkeye* to go to work.

He was nearly done with the first shock when he heard the metal door of the Quonset hut creak open and then bang closed, the particular way it creaked open on its spring and then banged twice when it closed being Hana's signature. He peered out from under the gloom to see bare feet trudging across the concrete floor, the frayed cuffs of a pair of black jeans trailing behind. "Evening, Hana. Glad you could come by tonight."

"Hi, Sarge. Where the fuck is everybody else?"

Rob smiled as he paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead, enjoying the sound of her voice. She talked like a grunt, except that her voice was rich and sibilant, also a bit husky, almost like a jazz singer's. It made her sound older than she was. "Over at the club," he called out. "Monday night game on ESPN and all."

"Oh, right," Hana smirked. "I forgot the true avocation of every soldier: falling into a drunken stupor while encouraging controlled mayhem." She paused before slipping one of her postscripts in. "But I guess that's a step up from uncontrolled mayhem. Like Iraq."

Rob didn't dignify that with as much as a grunt. He wasn't a football fan, but he wasn't going to argue with her about the way soldiers blew off a little steam, usually by loudly watching sports and drinking beer. Both were solid American traditions in his book. Or Iraq, which was a political hot potato back home.

She changed the subject after it was clear he wasn't going to rise to her bait. "Anyway, nice to have the place to ourselves, Sarge. I'm gonna work on replacing the engine gauges in number two if that's cool with you."

"Great." Then after a moment. "Hey, just remembered something; I managed to score some armored glass for the instrument faces the other day. I'll be out from under here in a jiffy and get it for you. How 'bout you order us a pizza in the meantime?"

"You paying, boss?"

"My request, my buy."

"Cool. I'll call it in."

Hana's feet disappeared around the end of the Bradley, heading for the phone in the break area.

Rob found he was really looking forward to sharing that pizza with Hana, so he hurried the last of his work. With any luck, given that it was just the two of them tonight, she would sit and eat with him, unlike her usual habit of grabbing her part of the pizza and crawling off into one of the Bradleys to eat alone. It wasn't much, eating and sharing some small talk, but maybe he could find out more about what was going on in her life.

His thoughts were focused more on Hana than his work as he wiggled closer to the front of the Bradley. He tugged the hose of the pneumatic wrench to get some slack, and it caught on the side of his hydraulic jack. He pulled harder; growing impatient when he found it was still snagged. He gave it a couple of very hard jerks and it came free.

Quickly replacing the second shock, his oversized impact wrench was clattering deafeningly when a squirt of hot oil splattered against his face. Startled, he lowered the air wrench to wipe it away. Looking around to find the source, he was horrified to see a stream of jack oil coming from the drain fitting by the pump handle. The earlier jerk of the air hose had apparently loosened it.

He quickly started to worm his way out from under the Bradley, only to see the massive machine starting to settle as the hydraulic jack transferred a portion of its weight to the safety stand. That stand was still located where he'd first put it: fifteen feet behind him. His heart pounded in his chest as he heard the safety stand creak as the massive weight shifted to it. Fortunately, it held, and the Bradley stabilized. Rob

resumed wiggling his way the shortest way toward daylight.

He was halfway to safety when he heard the metal door of the Quonset bang closed again, and he saw Hana's feet heading his way. She was halfway across the shop when the safety jack gave off a loud SPRANG and the track dropped two more inches, pinning Rob to the floor.

"I got us a large Hawaiian, Sarge," she started to say. "Borrowed the money from the cup on the office desk..."

"Get away from the unit," Rob screamed as he frantically struggled to get out from under the Bradley. Terrifyingly, the jack stand gave off a second SPRANG, and the track began to slowly descend, painfully flattening his chest against the concrete floor. "Jack's failing," he screamed as the horrible pressure built fast, bending his ribs inward.

His last thought as the black spots filled his eyes was that Hana was going to watch him die!

Chapter 3

The blackness burst back into light, and the next thing Rob knew, his lungs were filling with sweet air, the rush of fresh oxygen dispelling the blackness as fast as it had come over him. Panicking, his body obeyed his last conscious command to send him frantically squirming out from under the track. His mind didn't register the fact at first that he now had plenty of room to move. He came to a stop when he heard and felt the crunch of a pair of sunglasses under his back. Blinking, he saw the pizza box lying upside down on the floor.

"Are you fucking O.K, Sarge?" Hana asked in a strained voice.

Rob opened his mouth and then closed it, not sure how to answer such a simple question. He could still feel the horrible weight building as the Bradley descended, along with the pain, the hopelessness, the sense of his life snuffing out in a moment of stupidity and carelessness.

He was dead.

But if so, what was Hana doing talking to him? Was this his mind's last fantasy, a desperate attempt to deny his own mortality? That final dream of salvation he'd read about?

Or was this his afterlife picking up where his real life had ended?

Taking stock of his body, he found that his ribs hurt like hell (a good sign, he hoped). Braving the pain, he turned his eyes back toward the treacherous hydraulic jack. It was fully retracted. Looking further back along the armored vehicle, he saw his mangled safety stand lying on its side, crushed and useless. Neither one had saved him. He scanned beneath the Bradley from front to stern, astonished to find that nothing else was touching it from below, yet the track was hovering two feet off the ground.

How was that possible?

Turning his head to the left, he saw that Hana's toes seemed to be digging into the scored concrete, with hard tendons standing out like fine, steel cables across her feet and ankles. Startled by that unexpected image of raw strength, he traced his eyes upward along her black jeans, noticing the way the formerly loose fabric was now clinging to long, shapely thighs. His gaze rose further to see that her top was riding up, revealing a sliver of bared abs. They had a chiseled six-pack look.

He felt like he was caught in a slow-motion dream as he looked further upward, finding her arms were lifted high, her broad shoulders looking very strong, especially as the thick tendons of her neck disappeared under the black fabric of her top. He discovered eyes that were disconcertingly large and blue as they looked out from the black holes of thick eye shadow. He'd never seen her without her sunglasses.

His vision seemed to narrow further as he traced his eyes up her arms, shaped now by an array of powerful muscles that ended in steel tendons which in turn crossed her wrists to shape the back of her hands. Hands that were gripping the lip of the Bradley's augmented armor.

Rob closed his eyes for a long moment, his mind rebelling at the obvious conclusion that his eyes had just carried to his brain. Facts that said Hana was standing over him, holding one side of his Bradley off the floor.

A ridiculous thought.

Rob tried to sit up, only to be stopped as sharp pains stabbed through his chest. It hurt like hell to move, and he was strangely lightheaded. If he was dead, why the hell did he hurt so much?

"The ants will find the pizza if we don't pick it up," Hana said softly, acting as if nothing unusual was going on.

Rob stared up at her again, seeing her hanging her head between her raised arms as she looked down at him. Her body was rigid, and she was clearly straining. Despite that, he found he was transfixed by the depth and beauty of her eyes. Her irises were crystal clear and glittering like faceted diamonds. Her pupils were so big and black that they seemed bottomless.

"What... what the hell are you doing, Hana?"

She gritted her teeth now, a bead of sweat running down her forehead. "Trying to save your ass," she said breathlessly. Her chest was heaving as she struggled for air.

"That's... impossible."

"What's impossible... is expecting me to hold this fucking Bradley much longer."

Rob glanced at her muscular arms again, this time noticing the way her breasts were uplifted, pressing against her top, her chest muscles flexing powerfully beneath them. Her arms were starting to shake. Still, he felt as if he was in a dream, his voice filled with a mixture of disbelief and awe.

"You're really holding my Bradley off the floor?"

"Not... for... long!" she gasped.

His rational mind tried to push through the haze as he shook off the briefly dream-like unreality that followed his brief unconsciousness. The pounding of his heart, not to mention the clenching of his stomach and the ache of his bruised ribs told him he was very much alive.

"The fucking jacks, Sarge?" Hana cried out, youthful impatience clear in her voice.

He looked under the lethal track that had almost taken his life, seeing the treacherous hoist and safety stand. Instead of putting his life back in jeopardy by reaching under to pull them clear, he scrambled to his feet and backed away from the Bradley in terror.

Hana cursed as she started to lose control of the Bradley. Dropping her hands to her chest first, the huge vehicle wobbled back and forth. She started to lower her hands further, only to be pulled against the side of the massive vehicle as her feet slipped backward. The Bradley free fell the last foot, crashing down on the already mangled safety stand, flattening it against the floor, then bouncing on its tracks, springs creaking, the new shocks hissing.

Hana lost her balance and fell backward to sit down hard on the greasy floor. Seemingly embarrassed but unhurt, she quickly leaped to her feet and grabbed the pizza box to stalk off toward the break room. Her ripped jeans were now stretched skintight over her lean legs to reveal a marvelously tight behind, her hips swaying gently as she walked with the UNO's pizza balanced in one hand.

Rob gasped and fell to his own knees as a wild sense of relief washed over him, his heart racing as a

latent surge of adrenaline filled his veins. He suddenly felt as if he should be giving a prayer of thanks, but for the first time in his life, he wasn't sure whom to.

To God?

Or to this teenage girl with a bad attitude?

A Goth for Christ's sake?

Chapter 4

Rob swallowed hard as he saw Hana sit down at the break table, her back to him. She popped open her Pepsi can and opened the pizza box to start munching a piece, acting like a normal teenage girl.

A misplaced flush of anger drove him to his feet as he saw her slipping back into her usual attitude. She seemed angry. At him or at herself, he couldn't tell. All he knew was that he was tired of her games. She was going to have to talk to him now. No more hiding behind those sunglasses and her Gothic ridicule of anyone who didn't act like her.

Fortunately, his anger faded as fast as it came, replaced by a strange sense of dread -- that vague fear of the unknown that lives in every man. Whatever Hana was: an alien, a mutant, a robot, she clearly wasn't human.

That thought suddenly scared him as much as his near death experience. Was this the kind of fabled First Contact with a member of an alien civilization that he'd read about in various science fiction books?

Rob's hands were shaking as he started to walk toward the break room, his eyes locked on Hana. She looked as alien as any Goth could be as she slouched insolently in her chair, calmly munching a piece of pizza. Rob entered the break room and walked around the stained Formica table, staring at her with eyes wide. That's when he noticed the lettering on her school bag:

You didn't think I was going to give it up to you?

It struck him that she might have just given up her most vital secret. To him.

That realization left him strangely disquieted as conflicting waves of gratitude, fascination, and awe washed over him. Not only those feelings, but also an undeniable growing sense of misplaced desire as well. Desire that had no place when it came to a young woman her age.

He swallowed hard and sat down in an opposing chair, unable to tear his eyes from the shimmering blue depths of hers. They reflected the blue of an arctic winter, and perhaps because of the black eye shadow and her purple-black bangs, seemed to give off more light than they took in.

Hana pushed the pizza box across the battered table towards him. "Saved a few pieces for you, Sarge. Hope you like Hawaiian. I've had a craving for it lately."

Rob sat stiffly in his seat, every sense tingling now. "What in the fucking hell just happened back there, Hana?"

"What do you think happened?" she asked, her mouth full.

"I... I think you lifted that Bradley off me. Saved my life."

Hana swallowed and took a long gulp of Pepsi before answering. "Do you know how crazy that sounds, Sarge? They'd lock you up in the loony bin if you walked around spouting junk like that. I'm just a girl."

Rob sagged back in his chair now, unable to resist laughing, in relief as much as anything else. His hands were shaking but his head suddenly felt clear, his thoughts crisp. "That doesn't change what just

happened.”

Hana chewed another mouthful of pizza for a long moment, then swallowed and asked him, “So, you gonna make a big deal out of this?”

“What? Tell everyone that my teenage helper, a high school senior, my painter for Christ’s sake, is Supergirl?”

She frowned. “Those comic book characters are all bullshit, Sarge. Super this, super that. Dogs, cats and all kinds of monsters. I don’t appreciate being compared to those freaks.”

“O.K, Hana. Then you tell me what to think. How'd you lift half the weight of a goddamned Bradley? That had to be twelve, maybe thirteen tons.”

She shrugged and took another bite of her pizza. “Good breeding?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that a few special traits run in my mother’s side of the family.”

Rob shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

She looked up to meet his eyes. “You’re not supposed to.”

He took a leap of faith. “Where are you really from, Hana? What distant star? What galaxy beyond the pale?”

She smirked. “Well, if you insist, I guess I have to tell you.” She looked directly at him again, her face serious now. “The Faroe Islands.”

“The Faroe who?”

She took a long drink of her Pepsi, and then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “You ever studied any Norse mythology, Sarge?”

“Sure. That stuff about Odin. A lot about Thor and his hammer. Mostly comic book stuff. You know, back when I was a kid.”

“So, you ever heard of Valkyries?”

Rob laughed. “Every soldier has. I mean, they’re supposed to be these beautiful blondes dressed in armor who swoop the dead up from the battlefield, rewarding their heroics by flying them to Valhalla and serving them forever. An old Viking myth.”

“Myth, huh? You’re chalking up my holding your Bradley off the floor as just another myth?”

Rob’s smile faded, replaced by a look of confusion. “Yes. I mean no. Hell, I’m not sure of anything at the moment. Are you a witch?” He remembered how the kids at school thought she was Wiccan. “You sure as hell aren’t blonde.”

“Trust me, it was just muscles and tendons that saved you. Nothing magical about that.”

Rob blinked. “What are you trying to say? That you’re really a Valkyrie?”

“You got a better fucking explanation?”

“An alien visitor?” Rob asked doubtfully. He found he was prepared for Hana to be an alien, even a mutant, but not a living Norse goddess.

“In a way yes, in a way no.”

“And you live on the Faroe Islands? Which are exactly where? Next door to Wonder Woman’s Paradise Island?”

“Paradise Island is in the Bahamas. Look it up. And yes, there are some pretty wondrous looking women there. Unfortunately, they’re called tourists.”

“I don’t understand,” Rob said, really confused now.

“The [Faroe Islands](#) are real enough, Sarge. They’re part of Denmark. To find them, you draw a triangle on the map with the ends in Iceland, Norway and the Shetland Islands, and the Faroes are right in the middle.”

“A land of populated by ancient Norse gods?”

“No, just a handful of us Valkyrie, and a few other immortals, all of us living with the descendents of the Vikings who settled there.”

“Oh, just a **few** goddesses and immortals,” Rob quipped. “That makes me feel a lot better.”

“I thought it might,” she answered in a matter-of-fact way.

Rob stared at her for a long moment, waiting for the punch line, before realizing there wasn't one. “But... why there? It’s like, in the Arctic.”

“Isolation,” she shrugged. “The Faroese claim that the smart Vikings got off their longboats when they saw the beauty of the islands. The less imaginative ones went on the Iceland, and the really dumb ones when all the way to North America.”

“And when was this again?” Rob asked, his head spinning again.

“850AD more or less. Of course, the Icelanders tell another story. They claim they dumped the seasick sailors and other complainers off at the Faroes.”

“And they took... some ancient goddesses with them? On their migration?” Rob tried to keep a serious face. He’d studied up on Norse mythology after he’d read Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings*. It was said that most of Tolkein’s Middle Earth myths came from the Norse.

Hana smiled tolerantly. “And live on those awful longboats for weeks at a time? No way.”

“So you... flew there?” He remembered that Valkyries were supposed to be able to fly.

“You know a better way?”

“That is crazy, Hana.”

“It gets weirder. According to my mom, Odin’s people, who really were aliens from another star, so you got that part right, refused to take us with them when they left Earth. We Valkyries, or Valkyrior in the Norse, were half human and half alien, created to be servants of Odin’s crew, so we were impure. When they left us here, and the worship of Odin started collapsing as it was replaced by Christianity, we had to go somewhere.”

“So you moved to some god-forsaken frozen islands? I would have thought you guys would have gone to the tropics and danced in your bikinis on the warm sand.”

“It was an option that was considered, or so my mother tells me. But in the end, everyone knew that the Faroes were perfect for keeping our secrets. I mean, nobody in their right mind would ever move there, especially in the early days, not with a bunch of bloodthirsty Vikings stranded there. Even in this day and age, they only get a handful of visitors each year.”

“So for a thousand plus years, you Valkyries have been living on some remote rocks?”

Hana nodded.

Rob glanced at her outfit. “Obviously some of you live elsewhere part of the time and aren't blonde. Although why Okinawa and why the US Army?”

“Valkyries have an affinity for living among soldiers. These days, that usually means military pilots. We both share a love for combat flying.”

Rob shook his head. “And you grew up knowing all these...” He was going to say myths, but thought better of it, “stories?”

“Since I was born. I grew up listening to fairy tales that really weren’t.”

“And you’ve been... strong all your life?”

“My mom said I was stronger than my dad when I was still in my crib. I could do some pretty amazing stuff by the time I was ten. Change a tire on the family car without jack or tools. Stuff like that. But after my first period, which wasn’t all that long ago, the really freaky stuff started. Like these muscles.”

“You’re hardly a freak, Hana. You just saved my life.”

“So why are looking at me like I’m some kind of mutant from outer space?”

“O.K, your strength does shock me. I’m also impressed as hell with your eyes, which have always been behind sunglasses. They’re incredibly beautiful.”

Hana glanced down at the pizza box, clearly embarrassed by his compliment. A coy smile tilted her lips after a moment. “You probably say that to all the goddesses who save your ass.”

“Yeah, I guess I might be tempted to,” Rob nodded, unable to resist smiling. “Except this is the first time I’ve had the pleasure of meeting one.”

He saw a real smile starting to form on her lips, but she caught herself and wiped it away.

“Whatever is going to happen next, I just want to thank you for my life,” Rob said sincerely.

Hana shrugged again, still looking away, acting as if it was nothing. “Well, as I said, I didn't have time to think. Sorry.” She paused, then, “I guess saving a soldier’s ass comes with the fucking genes.”

“You’re sorry? For saving my life?”

“For getting you involved in my freak show.”

“Trust me, involved is no problem.”

“So, you want any of this pizza? I get hungry after I work out.”

Rob focused his eyes on the pizza box, his hand still shaking as he picked up a slice. He pushed the box back toward her. “So who else knows about this immortal goddess stuff?”

“Here? Just you and my dad. And obviously my mom.”

“So your mother is...” Rob started to ask, his voice trailing off as he remembered the stories he’d heard from the O-club staff. Her mother’s striking blonde looks and arrogant attitude suddenly made sense, as well as her frequent absences. “And she and your dad left you here? Alone. Weren’t they afraid you’d get in trouble?”

“Trouble like this?” She motioned back toward the Bradley.

“Well, maybe the more traditional kind.”

“Sex? Drugs? Rock and Roll?”

“You’re only seventeen.”

Hana shook her head. “My mom wasn’t really worried. She gave me the whole lecture about not showing off, also the thing about mortal men not understanding strong women like us. That only a

warrior, on the verge of giving his life for his fellow men, can appreciate who and what we are.”

“I wasn’t dying in combat, Hana. Just a stupid bit of carelessness.”

She shrugged again. “Chalk it up to bad reflexes. Won’t happen again.”

Rob considered that for a long moment, and then shook his head, finding it hard to accept her simple explanation, or the consequences. How could a race of immortal beings live among humans, with powers and abilities beyond ordinary men, and nobody had ever heard about them? Outside of the mythological legends and some graphic novels that is. “So you Valkyries go around, hiding beyond those big sunglasses and under all that makeup and pretend to be ghouls?”

“No, that’s just my thing. The other Valkyries are like my mom: hiding in plain sight. Wives of military officers usually, although one of the sisters flies A10 Warthogs for the Air Force.”

“Wait a minute,” Rob said, finding the first flaw in her story. “I thought you said you were immortals? How could any of you be young if you’ve been living forever?”

“I should have said that we used to be immortal. But modern weapons are far more powerful than swords and spears. Nuclear weapons for instance. I was born after a Valkyrie died during an aborted terrorist nuclear attack twenty years ago.”

“Before that detonation in Iraq in 2005? Never heard anything about an earlier nuke.”

“Which is exactly the point, Sarge. Nobody is supposed to know about what we do.”

“Where was it? The detonation?”

“In Uzbekistan. A stolen Russian briefcase nuke went off as she was trying to retrieve it. She was underground in a cave big enough to contain most of the blast.”

“So that’s why you’re here. You’re her replacement.”

Hana nodded. “My mom is the only fertile Valkyrie left.”

“And your mom is really on some mission to save the world?”

“Mom’s always on some mission, although none so grandiose as that. My mom’s still mad at me because I don’t want to participate in her games.” She slumped lower in her chair. “I’m just trying to keep anybody from figuring out how freaky I am.”

“How ‘bout we drop the word freaky, and work on wonderful, Hana.”

“How about slime-sucking alien mutant super chick,” Hana said with a grimace. “You haven’t seen the other weird shit I can do.”

Rob just stared at her, not sure what to say to that. She didn’t seem to appreciate her gifts, whatever they were.

Hana finally spoke after an awkward silence. “I’m not sure how much to tell you, Sarge, other than to state the obvious again. That my genetics didn’t all come from Earth.”

His heart raced faster and faster, barely believing he was having this amazing conversation. “But how did this alien stuff get all tied up in Norse mythology?”

Hana straightened up slightly in her chair, smiling softly, seemingly pleased to finally be able to talk about herself. “The captain of a starship that crashed on Earth was named Odin. Ring any bells?”

“You’re shitting me?”

She slowly shook her head, her eyes meeting his. “They stayed here for a few millennia before they figured out how to fix their ship. They favored the north as the rest of the planet was too hot for their

physiology, and that brought them into contact with the Norse culture.”

“Where were they from?”

“I told you, a distant star.”

“And you were putting down comic books a few minutes ago?” Rob laughed, finding he was starting to feel like himself again. “So let me guess, most of what’s written about Norse mythology is true?”

“No, a lot of it is pure bullshit. But the stuff about some demigods called *Disir* or Fairie in English, all of us female, and a warrior subgroup called Valkyries, contains some truth. The male consorts of the *Disir* were called *Alfar*, or Elves in English.”

Rob shook his head. “Elves and Fairie? That sounds like Tolkein’s stuff.”

Hana smiled tolerantly. “My mom tells me that Tolkein created his characters by drawing on Anglo-Saxon and Norse legends, which are really stories of Odin’s crew and the demigods they created.”

“Like you?”

Hana smirked. “Don’t I look like a Fairie?”

Rob smiled. She certainly didn’t look like the images of fairies he’d formed in his head after reading *Peter Pan* when he was a kid. Or was that pixies?

“Whatever,” Hana said with a wave of her hand. “All I know is that Tolkein didn’t stay faithful to the legends. For instance, his female elves should really have been called Fairie. And Arwen, despite her description as an elven warrior, should have been a Valkyrie and have had blonde hair like mine.”

“You mean you’re a blonde beneath all that purple and black die?”

“Duh.”

“Never would have guessed. So, are we talking about parallel evolution? Odin’s crew was human?”

“Not even close. But they could appear in any form they wished.”

“Good, because I don’t buy those parallel evolution theories. I hardly buy into it happening the first time as Darwin claims. I was raised in Tennessee and my parents were Creationists.”

She nodded, wisely not offering her own thoughts on that subject.

“But I totally buy that we either both came from somewhere else, or you guys came from here.” He paused as his thoughts raced freely. “Or us from out there.”

“Uh huh,” Hana said as she crossed her legs, giving him a funny smile. “Glad you clarified that.”

Rob waved his hands. “You know what I mean. That we humans were created by a god-like being who used the primitive apes of this world as his clay.”

“It’s a lot less grandiose than that, Sarge. And, as I said, some of us aren’t even mortal.”

“I gave up religion a long time ago, Hana. I’m not ready to start believing in immortality again.”

“Well, if I was mortal, could I do something like this?” She uncrossed her long legs and rose to walk back into the work bay.

Rob followed behind after a moment, watching as she picked up the plasma torch he used to cut through heavy armor. She turned the power on and a perfect blue-white arc appeared. Hotter than the surface of the sun, the arc crackled and sizzled as it ionized the very air around it.

He gasped, too shocked to even react as she started playing the arc over her hand. Within seconds,

the heat spread up her arm, leaving her skin glowing cherry-red to above her elbow, and blinding blue-white where the plasma arc was concentrating. The heat was so intense that it forced Rob to back further away.

She turned the arc off when the sleeve of her blouse caught on fire, and quickly dunked her arm into a bucket that Rob used to collect rainwater from the leaking roof. The water squealed and sizzled like it was dousing blacksmith's steel.

Hana turned back to face him as she shook the water from her steaming hand, wearing a strangely pouting expression as she dared him to disbelieve her now. Other than being wet and her sleeve fringed, her hand looked normal.

"So how's that for being merely mortal? Or fucking human for that matter."

Rob swallowed hard as a dream-like sensation came over him again. He'd now seen Hana perform two superhuman feats. Still, he wasn't ready to leap all the way to her being an immortal. An enhanced human for sure, with inserted alien DNA, maybe. Given what physicians were already doing with GenTech, it was easy to believe that an advanced alien race might have gone much further. "So... your mother, she has the same abilities?"

"She's nearly two thousand years old and she's stronger than me. You've probably seen her around the base. Does she look old to you?"

Rob shook his head, clearly remembering seeing her picture in the Newcomers section of the base newspaper when her husband was first assigned to Okinawa. She looked late thirties at the most.

Hana turned to walk back into the break room, sagging into her same chair. She started mopping the water from her steaming arm with some pizza napkins.

Rob followed her, sitting across the table again. "So she's off doing the family honors thing right now? Rescuing fallen heroes and taking them to heaven?"

Hana smirked. "That particular concept was way exaggerated. But the Vikings were really into it."

"So you tell me, given what I just saw, what should I believe?"

"Definitely not the early legends. You know, the ones where they thought we were corpse maidens. We were supposed to eat the dead or something equally yucky."

"Yeah, I remember. Something about ravens feasting on the dead and then turning into swans."

Hana nodded. "The raven is the symbol that Freyja gave to the Valkyries. The swan is the Norse ideal of beauty."

"Freyja?"

"Actually, she was the ship's physician. Part of Odin's crew. The Vikings turned her into the goddess of fertility and sexuality."

"Cool," Rob said, raising one eyebrow as he winked at Hana. "Everyone needs a goddess of sexuality."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't get any funny ideas. Viking sexuality was as ambitious and athletic as their longboat raiding. Everything was connected to sex eventually."

"Freyja's doing?"

"Hardly. What she did instead was to create a group of female demigods, part human and part alien, called the Disir. The idea was to tame the wild Nordics." She paused before adding, "We Valkyries are Disir."

“But you’re really humans who were futzed?”

Hana looked at him blankly.

“You know, inserted DNA, genetic engineering, some cross-species gene transfers. Futzed.”

“Now I know you’ve read too much science fiction,” she laughed.

“It’s a better term than demigod.”

She shrugged. “I’d just never heard the term futzed, but it’s accurate, I guess. On the other hand, none of the Disir living today have first-hand knowledge of how that was done, and the Norse didn’t have a written language back in 800BC.”

“So you turned to the ancient legends to understand your history, just like everyone else?”

“Yeah. But as the Norse culture evolved, so did we. It was around the third century AD when the thing about us taking fallen heroes to Valhalla came into fashion. Which is obviously bullshit as Valhalla is the name of the planet that Odin and his crew came from. Reality was that we started settling people on the Faroe Islands near the end of the first millennium.”

“So you’re saying that god really is an alien,” Rob whispered, shaking his head as the significance of it all caught up to him.

“The Norse gods were. Can’t speak for others. We still have many of the artifacts of that time, and trust me; nothing in Earthly science now or in the foreseeable future could create such technology.”

“They’re in a museum?” he asked in surprise.

Hana nodded. “A very private one in Iceland.”

“And the myth... I mean, the story, ends there?”

“No. Valkyrie legends keep changing, even now, and the legends created after the eighth century started to become more accurate than the early ones. They describe how we sometimes wore pure white gowns with the symbol of the raven. Also how we arrived during a battle wearing gleaming armor to decide the outcome. Which really meant supporting one hero or the other.”

“But you wear black.”

“Like I said, the story keeps changing.”

Rob couldn’t help but wonder how much of this she’d made up to explain her unique abilities. He decided to continue playing along. “So you were created to be warriors, fighting for Odin’s heroes?”

“Not at first. We were just Odin’s servants, but that sometimes involved grabbing a particular hero from the battlefield and bringing him to Odin for his amusement. It was only after Odin’s ship left that we got a bit more involved in mortal affairs. Mostly we started tweaking the odds by allowing a group of warriors to win a fight they would otherwise lose.”

“No wonder the Vikings fought so hard and were so fearless. They had you guys on their side.”

“We weren’t always on their side,” Hana replied with a shake of her black and purple-streaked hair. “If there was a particularly fearless and inspiring hero on the other side, or we favored the other cause, thinking it was better for humanity, we might protect their foes instead of the Vikings.”

“You’ve been trying to nurture humanity?” That idea was even more disturbing. And intimidating, sounding too much like god stuff.

“It’s not as high and mighty as that, and way fucking more complex too. There are really three diverging schools of thought regarding what our role should be now.”

Rob waved his hand in surrender, finding himself too overwhelmed to explore further right now. “O.K, let’s see if I have this right so far: you were created, futzed, by Freyja, the ship’s physical from an advanced alien race. The Norse considered her the goddess of fertility and sexuality, and you Valkyrie became the personal protectors in battle for selected heroes? And more recently, like during the last thousand years, you selected causes you wanted to support in order to change or guide humanity.”

Hana nodded. “Yeah, I guess that would be the Cliff’s Notes version.”

“So if you didn’t take fallen heroes to Valhalla, where did that myth come from? It’s the most pervasive one.”

“As I mentioned, we sometimes would take an injured hero from the field of battle, first for Odin’s amusement and later to heal them, but never to return them to the ranks of mortals for obvious reasons. The Vikings were a boastful bunch, especially when drinking mead and other kinds of booze. They couldn’t keep a secret for shit.”

“Healing?”

“A gift we Disir received from Freyja, but that’s another story.”

“So people saw you take the injured hero away and assumed he’d died and that you’d taken him to Valhalla because they never saw him again.” Rob reflected on that before looking up at her. “But the reality is that you took them to the Faroe Islands and healed them?”

“Exactly,” she nodded vigorously. “Sometimes Iceland too. Valhalla was a far better explanation than saying we hauled them off to an isolated, frozen chunk of rock in the North Atlantic to drop them into an attractive heaven they could never leave.”

“So the Faroe Islands and Iceland became the Viking’s heaven.” His thoughts raced faster. “That means that the people living there today are the offspring of fallen heroes.”

Hana shook her head. “Not everyone, but some of them, yes. Especially in Iceland. It’s not exactly heaven living up there in the Faroes. Except for a couple of months in the summer, it truly is a frozen chunk of rock. A place where the locals thumb their nose at the rest of the world and continue to slaughter whales. Vikings to the core.”

Now Rob remembered where he’d heard about the Faroes. They’d been mentioned in a very [uncomplimentary article](#) as the only country which ignored the international whaling ban. A place where blubber was still a specialty on their menus. He made a mental note to search the Net for more info. Until then, he decided to focus his curiosity closer to Hana’s personal story. “So, tell me, was holding the weight of my Bradley hard?”

Hana slowly crushed the empty Pepsi can in her grip. “Not at first. Adrenaline and all that, I guess.”

“Jesus Christ,” Rob breathed. His thoughts raced from one end of reality to the other, trying to imagine what Freyja could have done to human genetics to make the Valkyrie that strong.

Not that he was surprised by the futzing itself. He’d always had a private theory that outside forces had shaped humanity. *God was an Alien* was one of his favorite books.

“So Odin’s people weren’t human, but could appear as human. What was their true form like?”

“If you can believe the very oldest legends, the ones we only talk about among ourselves, Odin’s people looked like four-foot tall spiders. Which made their shape changing talents useful. It would have been pretty hard for humans to worship giant spiders.”

“And they created demigods. Part mortal, part immortal,” Rob mused. “Enhanced humans, created to be their agents. Can you change shape too?”

“Of course. It’s a Valkyrior skill.”

Rob's thoughts began to spin again. "Healing, strength, invulnerability and now shape changing. The legends said you could fly as well."

"Not yet in my case. That comes with the uniform, which I get when I'm eighteen. I'm really looking forward to that."

"Right," Rob breathed, remembering seeing paintings of Valkyries wearing gleaming silver body armor. He paused for a long moment before adding, "As fantastic as it sounds, it all makes a strange kind of sense to me. But I never would have believed a word of it unless I'd seen what I saw today."

"Which is why we don't show off in public. If you don't have first-hand knowledge, it sounds like so much mythological bullshit. Pure fantasy. And even if one man observes us, whose going to believe this kind of crazy story?"

"So how many of you got left behind?"

"Sixteen Valkyries and four male immortals. But despite attempting to increase the population, there are only nine of us Valkyrie now, along with a half dozen *Reginleif* who have gone to the dark side, so to speak."

"Bad Valkyries?"

"Some of them are trying to manipulate human history more directly, thinking that you guys are going to wipe yourselves out. Good intentions, but bad methods, or so my mom says. That's what she works on: stopping the ones who are operating outside the Code."

"Code?"

"Fótyjavn's Code. Means something like *Code of the Gods*. As I read it, it basically says to keep your head down and allow lots of room for deniability. To not act like gods. The easiest way to do that has always been to allow mortals to turn encounters with us into legends and myths."

"Like my encounter?"

She nodded. "Even though you know the whole truth, now, good luck in convincing anyone else that what you've seen or heard today is real. They'd put you in a padded cell."

"Pretty cool system," Rob mused, although he could see some flaws in it. A genetic test on Hana would be interesting, although he had no idea how to force such a thing to occur without her and her parent's consent. He decided to change the subject. "So they really considered you goddesses? The Norse I mean."

"Don't you?"

"Isn't that kind of arrogant to even ask?"

"After what you just saw me do? I think it's a fair question."

"A black-eyed Gothic goddess from Scandinavia by way of Ventura, California who's a senior in a backwater Army high school in Okinawa? A teenage girl who works minimum wage for me?" He shook his head. "No thank you. My head hurts enough as it is."

She smiled as she pulled on the bottom of her black blouse. "This Goth stuff is just a stupid disguise. But the rest... yeah."

Rob realized she was expecting a serious answer. "I guess in today's culture, most people would consider you a mutant. Too many X-men movies."

Hana smiled patiently. "I was asking about your thoughts, Sarge."

Rob considered his response for a moment before speaking. "I see a race of futzed human women

who live so long that people think they're immortal. However, the mere fact that your population is declining, and you're here, a girl still in her teens, says that's a myth too."

"Damn, I kind of liked the idea of being a goddess," she quipped, giving him a barely perceptible smile.

"You can be anything you want to be, Hana. You saved my life."

"Cool. Then I'm a goddess." She winked sexily at him. "Your goddess at least."

"So what about Christian theology?" Rob continued, refusing to rise to that bait. "You could be my guardian angel. You don't have any wings tucked under your top do you?"

Hana started to laugh, enjoying being open with another person for the first time in her life. "Oh no, I'm not going there," she shook her head.

"Let me guess; the stories of angels are really stories about Valkyries, but in another cultural context?"

"I'm definitely taking the fifth on that one. The Norse religion, Asatru, is more or less a dead religion to most people. But Islam and Christianity, not to mention Hinduism and Buddhism are still the basis of the belief structure of most of this planet."

As fascinated as he was by the theological implications she was hinting at, Rob decided to dig into that later. Still, he was left wondering how much of Earth's diverse mythology and religion could be explained by Odin's crew. Or other aliens. The concept was both scary and tantalizing at the same time.

He reluctantly brought the discussion back to Okinawa and to Hana. "So, you slink around the base here, pretending to be a Goth, with dyed hair and thick makeup, keeping your big secret. Doesn't your mother have to let you out someday?"

"Actually, I wear a wig. And yeah, she does. During my Aerie. But until then, I don't want someone to turn me into a lab rat or anything. Can you imagine what those GenTech people would do with me?" She shook her head vigorously. "I'm not giving my secret up to anyone."

Rob glanced down at the lettering on her bag again. "Except to me."

Hana looked up at him sharply, both of them knowing that the lettering on her bag had nothing to do with her abilities, but rather her virginity. "So back to the reason we're talking here, Sarge. You gonna tell anyone?"

"No way. I know all too well what the brass and Intelligence folks would do with both of us."

"Good. Then I don't have to kill you."

Rob looked up as her words hit home, and saw the serious look on her face.

She held the same expression long enough to scare him, and then, just as his heart started to race, she winked. "I'd never hurt you. I saved you. I'm responsible for you now."

Rob slowly released his breath, but his voice was a bit shaky when he spoke. "You had me going for a moment. And what's 'responsible' mean."

"It means my mother would probably kill you if she finds out. So she won't."

Rob swallowed hard. "I owe you my life, Hana. Soldiers don't forget things like that." He paused, and then asked, "You ever done anything like this before?"

"Saved anyone? Or killed anyone?"

Rob nodded to both questions.

“Nope. Neither. You’re my cherry.”

Rob felt another flush of misplaced arousal at her words. “Then I guess I’m the luckiest guy on the planet.”

Hana frowned as she stared down at the table again. “I should have though. Helped someone before. I was in this car wreck with some kids from school. Car was all crumpled up, doors jammed. I could have got them out, but instead, I panicked and ran.”

“Was that the wreck over in Indsul a few months ago?” Rob asked, trying to recall the incident. “One of the passengers was a high school girl, and she was burned badly. Word had it that she wasn’t going to make it and then she made a miraculous recovery.”

Hana nodded as she looked down at her toes, but said nothing.

“Well, maybe you didn’t know you could do this stuff then.”

She looked up at him, eyes flashing angrily. “I’ll make up my own fucking excuses, if you don’t mind.” Her anger faded quickly as she sagged back in her chair, closing her eyes tightly as she took a deep breath. “I was more worried at first about some government types leering over me. MIB guys poking at this or that, ruining my life. I was more worried about that than helping Myra.”

Rob opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it. Clearly, Hana was holding herself responsible for her friend’s burns. “But she’s O.K now?”

“After two days of excruciating pain, burns over 80% of her body, I fixed Myra. But not before she suffered a lot.”

“The healing thing you mentioned?”

Hana rose to fold the pizza box up and stuff it into the waste bin. She turned back to look thoughtfully at Rob. “But I guess if I was going to screw up and save someone before they got hurt, this was as good a time as any. Your squashed bod would have ruined your buddies’ football game. Not to mention my pizza.”

Rob smiled; hearing the familiar self-deprecating bravado of a soldier who’d saved his buddies. “Trust me, saving a life isn’t something any soldier takes lightly, Hana. I’m forever in your debt.”

Her frown returned. “You don’t owe me shit, Sarge. You’d have done the same for me.” She turned and stalked through the doorway. The Quonset hut door squeaked open and banged closed a few seconds later.

Rob sagged in his chair, staring at the door of the hut, his thoughts racing. What the hell was he involved in now? Living goddesses who were trying to save the world, or maybe destroy it during their misguided actions? A link to the past that nobody else knew about?

Was Hana part of a mutant super race that was destined to become extinct? Wasn’t there a way to salvage their alien heritage and insert it into the mainstream?

He caught himself in that thought, realizing that was exactly what a GenTecher would think.

He drank his final Bud for the day as he closed his shop up, and then went home to bed. Turning out the lights, he saw only Hana's face before him as he fell asleep. In his mind’s eye, her eye shadow disappeared to reveal a lovely, blonde girl on the verge of maturing into a true goddess.

A girl he was supposed to be helping raise.

Chapter 5

Two weeks passed without Hana returning to work. He called her house a few times, but there wasn't an answer. A check with a buddy's kid revealed that she'd missed a lot of school, supposedly sick. Rob figured she needed time to sort things out. He didn't want to intrude on her space until she was ready to let him back in.

Still, he took a chance one day and showed up at her school, but Hana wasn't there. He asked around and got the name of a video game shop off base. Driving into town in his military Hummer, he found a group of her friends hanging out in an alley behind the video game shop, smoking pot. He approached them to ask about her, but all he got for his effort was a bunch of attitude and some paranoia about the pot. Once they figured out that he wasn't a narc, the girls talked shit to him, asking what he was doing stalking a high school girl, making him out to be some kind of leech.

Rob was walking back to his borrowed Army Hummer, discouraged, when something caught his eye. He looked up to see a tall girl with black and purple streaked hair and oversized sunglasses at the front door of the shop. By the time he lifted his hand to wave, she'd disappeared back into the darkness.

He felt better as he climbed into the Hummer. Hana hadn't run away. He wasn't sure what he'd have said to Hana's father if she had. Maybe she just needed time to come to grips with the fact that her secret was now shared.

He tried to put himself in her position: a teenage girl who'd been born to an ancient legacy, but trying to grow up normally. A girl with talents that would make her the subject of every researcher, of every government, of unimaginably intrusive medical examinations, you name it. Then it would get worse. The GenTech people would want to sequence her DNA to try to pass on those traits. The military would lay claim to her; she was a minor and a military dependent after all. They'd turn her into a weapon, a secret agent, something awful.

He looked back at the small group of Goths as they hung out in the alley, deciding they were the real aliens. They looked into human society from the outside. Hana wasn't like that. She'd saved his life on instinct alone, which meant she was destined for greater things. She had a heart.

He started the noisy diesel in his Hummer, shoving aside the pile of books on Norse mythology that he'd borrowed from the base library, and started to drive off. The cloud of loneliness that he'd fought for so long now had a ray of sunshine shining through. Sunshine that came from this girl he hardly knew.

Chapter 6

Rob kept on doing his job, just the way every other soldier did when things got tough. His long days fixing Bradleys for the Army and then working on his privately owned ones ended only when he was too weary to lift another wrench or to make another stroke with a paintbrush. The long days slowly became weeks, during which he took over working on the interior of the Bradleys. Despairingly, the quality of his work wasn't half as good as Hana's had been.

All the while, he kept a distant eye on her, mostly through his buddy's kids.

Then, a bit over a month after their last meeting, as one of the tropical thunderstorms thundered outside, the Quonset hut leaking in a dozen places, he heard the door open and slam closed, the timing so familiar. He stuck his head out from under the Bradley just in time to see a very tall blonde girl wearing a white top standing dripping in his doorway. "Hana?" he called out, not even sure if it was her.

She glanced at one of his buddies who was getting a drink in the break room, his Pepsi freezing halfway to his mouth as he saw her, and quickly turned to walk back out into the rain. By the time Rob squeezed out from under the Bradley and dashed out the door, she'd disappeared. He began to run down the long row of WWII Quonset huts, finding that the rain was letting up as he ran, the storm leaving as

fast as it came. He was breathing hard as he walked around to the shadowed side of the last Quonset. A young woman was standing there, half illuminated by a shaft of late afternoon sunlight.

If not for her stature, he wouldn't have recognized Hana. Her usual black eye shadow was completely gone, along with the purple and black hair wig and the head-to-toe black outfit. She was dressed instead in a blue swimsuit bottom and a sheer white top that was soaked and clinging provocatively to a figure that looked incredible for a girl of seventeen, her wet hair clinging tightly to her scalp. She looked like the Nordic goddess she was.

He just stared at her for a long moment, stunned by the incredible transformation



“Hana?” Rob asked her, too stunned by her inexplicable transformation to say anything else.

Her pale blue eyes fastened on him with an intensity that startled Rob. He sensed that there was something terribly wrong by the way her hands nervously teased bottom of her wet top.

“They... they've captured my dad, Sarge,” she stated quietly.

Rob was thunderstruck by the news.

“Captured?” he echoed.

He stepped toward Hana, but she raised her hands and quickly backed away. Rob respected her desire for distance.

“When,” he asked her urgently. “Who?”

“The Iraqi insurgents,” Hana answered, her voice strangely disjointed and hesitant. “Syrians they think, although they could be Iranians, nobody knows for sure. His chopper was shot down.”

“They’ll get him back; we’ve got a lot of...”

“Bullshit!” she declared, cutting him off. “He went down near the fucking Iranian border,” she reported, her voice firm and steady now, “in an area controlled by the insurgents. Al Jazeera has already aired some bloody video of them decapitating the most senior officer on his chopper. They say they’ll keep killing the hostages until we release some prisoners we’re holding near Baghdad.”

“When was all this?” Rob asked her. “The first killing?” He wasn’t going to say beheading.

Hana shrugged as she looked away into the distance. “I don’t know, a few hours ago maybe. I saw it on CNN. My dad was right there on the Al Jazeera video, looking pissed and scared at the same time. A severed head was stuck on a stake beside him, dripping blood.”

He saw her shiver. “What’s the Army got to say? And where’s your mother?”

“Some asshole in the Pentagon issued a statement that they were investigating the claims – the usual bullshit. I don’t know how to contact my mom.”

Rob’s experienced mind groped wildly for options. The force of what Hana had just told him had hit him like a train.

“I’ve got some friends over in Command, Hana,” he offered. “Let me make some inquiries...”

“We don’t have time for the fucking Army to tell us what we already know, Sarge!” she cried, cutting him off again.

In an instant, she was in front of Rob, her nose a hair’s breadth from his.

“They won’t negotiate. They won’t release any prisoners. They won’t bargain with terrorists.”

She backed away, granting him some space, although her look was unrelenting.

“We both know what happens to the people those Arab assholes capture.”

Rob heard her choke out the words in a contemptuous snarl brimming with emotion. He knew she was right about the government’s ‘official’ response, and he didn’t know what else to say that could reassure her. Beheadings had been standard operating procedure for Iraqi insurgents for the past nine years, starting even before the bloodshed of civil war that followed the 2005 election. They deliberately timed the executions, one by one, for maximum media impact until their existing supply of victims was exhausted. It was the way the vast majority of hostages died.

At a total loss, Rob nodded toward her outfit.

“Why are you dressed like that now? I mean, where are the usual your black clothes... your makeup... that wig?”

“I can’t be like that now,” she announced with stoic resolve. “I have to get my dad. He needs me.”

Unwilling, yet not, she suddenly turned away, and guffawed a cruel, mirthless laugh. “Now there’s a switch for you,” she spat bitterly. “He hasn’t needed me in years... and now...”

She couldn’t go on. She just stood there, and cried.

Her suffering tore at Rob like nothing else ever had. For some reason, watching her cry was even more painful than the shrapnel wound he remembered from Iraq. What else could he do, except to go to her?

He raised his hands to firmly cup her shoulders in hopes of offering some comfort; only to have Hana vehemently shrugged her shoulders to remove herself from his tentative embrace. He staggered

backward, thrown off-balance by the violence of her simple movement.

"Fucking goddess!" she seethed. "Fucking Valkyrie!"

She turned back to the mortal she'd sought out - turned on him - confused, angry, torn.

"I could throw both your fucking Bradley's to kingdom come," she declared, and then I could... I could..."

Her shoulders sagged and then she withered before his eyes, leaning against the wall as the anger flowed out of her, replaced by a childish despair. "I don't know what to do," she wailed. "I don't even know how I'm going to get to fucking Iraq."

Rob made a sudden decision as he dared approach her again.

"You're going to get to Iraq," he told her quietly, "because I'm going to get you there."

She looked up at him, daring to hope.

"I don't know how just yet," he stipulated, "but I'm going to get you there."

"What do you need me to do?" she asked, brightening visibly.

"Obviously we can't wait for visas and the like," he offered as his mind began churning. "No way to get a civilian like you into that area anyway, let alone a minor, and impossible for me as well without orders. So a commercial flight is out. We'll have to hitch a ride on a military transport, and that means..."

He paused to snap his fingers, suddenly remembering a set of transport orders he'd seen at work. Something about some M1 Abrams tanks being transferred from Okinawa to Iraq.

He led the way back to his Quonset hut and picked up the phone to call a buddy who worked in ATC, closing the door of his tiny office behind them as he saw the way the men were staring at Hana as she stood dripping on floor. His buddy confirmed what Rob had remembered: an Abrams was due to ship out on a military C17 that night.

The Iraq quagmire was still as sticky as ever, and it continued to draw troops and equipment from the US reserves. The entire theater had turned into quicksand after the post-election Sunni/Shiite civil war and then the horrific terrorist nuclear attack on US forces that had killed ten thousand troops and a half million Iraqi's. Mostly radiation casualties from the crude, homemade bomb.

Rob made some notes before hanging up the phone. "O.K, maybe there is a way after all, Hana. A big maybe. An M1A4, that's a new variant of the old Abrams tank, is shipping out tonight to Iraq."

She threw her arms around him and hugged him so tightly that his ribs creaked. "Thank you, thank you."

"The big question is whether we can get inside it and hitch a ride."

She slumped into his old swivel chair and crossed her long legs as she swiveled nervously back and forth. "There's a lot of security around the flight line, Sarge. My friends can't get anywhere near it."

"What do they want with the flight line?"

She shrugged. "Those old hangars are good hangouts. Drugs, sex, rock and roll, you know the drill."

Rob did indeed. "Well, the high security might actually help us if we can find a way to use your abilities. Military security is always blind to threats that are outside the limits of a soldier's training."

"Like me," she said, blue eyes sparkling.

"The Vikings were the last people on Earth who thought you guys even existed. I don't think the US Army has been training MP's to engage Valkyries."

She laughed and rose to hug him again. “They wouldn’t stand a chance against me even if they did.”

Rob laughed with her, only to see her smile fade as she leaned her head back to look levelly into his eyes.

“Hey, I know this is going to be a big deal, Sarge. When it’s done, I’m going to owe you big time.”

Her blue eyes sparkled as she brushed a wet strand of blonde hair from her face, and then leaned forward to gently kiss his cheek, whispering in his ear seductively. “We Valkyrie can be very generous when I comes to paying off our debts.”

Chapter 7

Mustafa Al-Sa’ud endured the mid-day heat, swatting away the thick cloud of flies that circled lazily about his long beard and unwashed hair. It had been two days since he and his brothers had captured the American soldiers, and washing was a luxury he couldn’t afford. His hands were stained with the blood from the three severed heads already resting on stakes outside the building, two American and one Iraqi, the last beheading in retribution for cooperating with the invaders. Naturally, he’d allowed the villagers to bury the beheaded bodies before sundown in the Islamic tradition.

The heads were his to use to send a message to the rest of the world. He could only imagine the impact they’d have on the Americans and the soldier’s families when their horrible visages grinned back at their loved ones from the TV screen. Given the decade long American intervention in Iraq, he’d found he had to keep raising the shock value of his actions to attract world attention.

He studied the rest of the enemy soldiers and the reporter who’d been traveling with them. They were chained along the far wall of the compound so the sun would shine on them, its heat slowly baking the moisture from their bodies. Not that it mattered. They’d either be moved to a prison in Iran or he’d kill them, in either case before they succumbed to dehydration.

One of them was going to die faster than the others. He stared at the blonde American woman, a CNN journalist. She didn’t cover her arms and legs, much less her head; she even left a swatch of her stomach bare. It was a crime the way the infidels sent their women bareheaded and half-naked into the midst of them. Beheading was a cruel punishment for showing one’s body, but the Americans needed to be taught a lesson about sending their women to war.

The woman stared back at him boldly, confidently, her pale eyes daring him to act out his darkest wishes. She’d promised to get his story onto her network, and she was clearly used to getting her way. Mustafa saw it as an obvious ploy to save her own life, for he had more than enough access to the world through the Arab networks. He’d seen enough western women on TV to know that this one was considered extremely attractive, even if he personally found her colors washed out, her lips too fat and her eyes far too pale and large to please his tastes.

Her bright eyes remained focused on his, eventually forcing Mustafa to look away. If only she knew what his heart truly held, her eyes would not have been so bold. Part of him raged at her insolence, plotting a life of rape and servitude that would be a fitting punishment. But Allah did not allow such diversions, even in war. Instead, he vowed to ask Allah for forgiveness for the act he was about to commit after the afternoon prayers. For it was his turn again to wield the *Parang* again, and it would soon be time to send a fourth warning to the Americans: “Release the prisoners or they would all die.”

Mustafa responded to the Imam’s call to evening prayers. Once inside the crude, village mosque, he pleaded with Allah to assuage his heart. Despite the deepening war, he regretted the lives he was forced to take. Allah answered in his heart, telling him his cause was just. He felt calm and confident by the time he left the mosque.

He walked back to the compound, walking down the line of frightened and defiant captives, his eyes boring back into the fearful looks he saw in theirs. They were the enemy, and he knew he must kill them. Yet instead of seeing them through a predator's eyes, he felt compassion for their families. Dying in a war so far from home was not an ending that any family hoped for their sons and daughters. If only he and his brothers could make enough impact, perhaps the infidels would see the truth and return home.

He slowed to pause in front of the CNN reporter. He had heard the men call her Sarah, a Hebrew name. That alone would have condemned her. She gasped softly as he reached down and unfastened her handcuffs from the chain that held the others.

"It is your time. You may pray if that is your custom."

Instead of falling to her knees in the way of Allah's faithful, she stood straighter, her blue eyes looking down slightly into his. Yet despite her attempt at being brave, her lips were trembling when she said, "Just get it over with."

Several of the men called out to him as he led the woman across the room, offering themselves instead of her. He smiled, knowing he'd chosen well. The death of a beautiful woman would strike a special kind of fear in their hearts.

The woman was trembling now, but she still had enough strength of character not to waste their time pleading for her life. Mustafa was determined to make her suffering brief for that reason alone. He pushed her down to her knees, fastening her handcuffs to the rungs on the floor. Her yellow hair spilled over the bloody stones as she turned her head, tossing the strands from her eyes to look up at him in silent appeal. He closed his heart and gathered the yellow hair that covered her back, finding it to be finer and softer than the women he'd known. If not for the desperate war they fought, he would have wanted to explore that further.

Instead, he pulled it forward to bare the back of her slender neck. He was expert enough to know that a single blow would suffice. Turning back to the other hostages as he picked up his *Parang*, he saw the looks of horror and terror on their faces. He was about to take the life of a truly remarkable woman, and these infidels still didn't understand the hopelessness of their cause. They sent such people into his clutches to give up their lives... and for what? The Americans didn't even know why they were fighting. Beauty was dying, but for what?

He hardened his heart further as he raised the *Parang*. The woman began to whisper, her words soft and hurried. A prayer. A prayer not to Allah, but to the god of the Jews! The sudden anger of her blasphemy gave strength to his arm, and the *Parang* descended with a swish that ended in a wet, singing tone as it sliced through bone and cartilage. A cloud of yellow hair tumbled forward as her headless body arched backward, hot blood spurting like a fountain into the air to cover the front of his robe before the decapitated body collapsed to twitch on stone floor. He cursed as he stepped over the pool of blood and grasped the head, dangling it by its long hair, the muscles of her formally beautiful face still spasming, the woman's eyes wide with the horror of her own death.

He walked outside and jammed the head on a fourth stake, arranging the pale hair so as not to hide the expression of horror. The videographer from Al Sahara moved closer to film the scene.

Let her CNN associates broadcast this picture to the world!

Chapter 8

It was midnight when Rob and Hana emerged from the trees at a remote corner of the airfield. They were both dressed in black Special Forces coveralls. Ahead of them was the triple-layered electrified security fence that surrounded the base. A light-duty outer and inner fence protected the central electrified core from casual contact. Its posts and mesh were anchored deeply into insulators that sank into a

concrete base which Rob knew was connected to motion and vibration sensors. The outer and inner fences rose ten feet high, while the central electrified fence towered at twenty feet, all three topped with rolls of concertina wire. The three fences spanned a space of fifty feet. Huge signs were attached every few meters on the inner and outer fences that said:

LETHAL DANGER
Electrified Fence
10,000 Volts

“I can jump over them,” Hana offered. “Even carrying your weight.”

Rob shook his head. “Anti-personal radar watches the top of the wire. We gotta stay low. Besides, that would be a damn hard landing on the far side.”

“Can we go under it?”

Rob shook his head. “They’ve got detectors that can pick up the sound of tunneling.”

“So we go through them?” She glanced nervously up at the sign depicting lethal voltage.

“The center fence is the only one charged with high voltage. It’s modulated at a frequency that will freeze a person’s muscles. Grab it and you can’t let go. Death is guaranteed.”

“For a mortal maybe.”

“For anyone with a less robust constitution than a Kryptonian chick.”

“Well, I don’t wear red and blue tights or a cape,” Hana shrugged as she tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder to look back at him, “but that said, if there was such a thing as Kryptonians, I could probably pass for one. I mean, if the heat from that plasma torch didn’t hurt me, I don’t suppose electricity can either.”

“You’re amazing.”

“Tell that to my teachers if we get back. They think I’m a brat, always challenging everything they say.”

“When we get back,” he corrected her. “And yeah, I can see you driving your teachers crazy.”

“So, now that we’ve established my credentials, more or less, how do I use this superbod to get us onto the airfield?”

Rob looked at the central fence, measuring the distance to an oak tree behind him. “Can you topple that tree onto the fence?”

She glanced nervously at the meter thick trunk, and then looked doubtfully back at him. “Hey, I was only kidding about that Kryptonian thing.”

“We gotta make this look like a natural event of some sort.”

Hana crawled closer to the tree, poking her finger into the bark. “It’s a big, healthy tree, Sarge. And oak’s a very hard wood.”

Rob crawled next to her, trying to think of a way. “You can’t push it down, and there’s no way to uproot it. Nothing to brace your feet against even if you are strong enough. You think you could maybe chop it down with your hands?”

“That would be messy and noisy, but yeah, I suppose.”

“Don’t see any other way, unless...”

Hana interrupted him with a startlingly loud snap her fingers. “Hey, I’ve got it. I once saw this video about how they cut trees down in the rain forest. They had this fucking big machine with hydraulic jaws that could pinch the trunks off at the ground.”

“So...?” Rob asked slowly, unsure where she was going.

She slapped her thighs. “My legs, dummy.”

Before he could answer, she scooted forward to hug the tree, wrapping her long legs part way around the thick base of the trunk.

“You’re shitting me?”

“Like I said, Sarge, you gotta think out of the box.”

Rob noticed the way her blacks were clinging to her skin like leotards, noting not for the first time how lean her legs were. She had to have the cutest legs he’d ever seen, not to mention the longest. He swallowed hard and tried to keep his head about him.

Hana took a deep breath, and pressed her knees inward. The bark gave off a loud crunch and collapsed a few inches, but that was it. She gritted her teeth and struggled to wrap herself further around it, and then leaned her head back and gritted her teeth as she squeezed her legs even harder. This time the bark exploded outward as the wet wood gave off a deafening cacophony of cracking and popping sounds.

She paused to adjust her legs again, the partially crushed trunk narrow enough now that she could just barely cross her ankles behind it, amplifying her strength. She took another deep breath, and put her indomitable birthright to work. The long muscles of her thighs stood out strongly, and this time, chunks of wood the size of Rob’s head began exploding outward from the trunk. The sound of splintering hardwood filled the air with sharp cracks and pops.

Slowly, inexorably, her legs closed until the tree gave off a deeper CRACK and began to wobble. Hana dug her fingers deeply into the bark as she hugged the tree tightly to her chest, pulling her legs free as she tried to stand again. She began to wrestle with the tree, lucking out when it started to tilt ponderously toward the fence. She quickly scrambled out of the way, only to trip over her own feet. Rob grabbed for her arm to steady her, feeling the swelling steel of her muscles beneath his fingers as they both stared up at the tree.

It began to twist as it fell.

“Shit! It’s going the wrong way,” Hana cursed.

She leaped forward to grab the trunk again, but it was too late to influence the tree’s fall now. The upper branches fell onto the outer fence at an angle, crushing it, but the top leaves barely brushed the electrified fence, setting off a sizzling shower of sparks. The outer fence collapsed under the weight as it rolled the tree far enough to the side that it fell parallel to the middle fence.

“Well that didn’t work worth a damn,” Rob muttered as he brushed away the leaves that had showered on him. A few branches were still smoking where they’d touched the fence, but otherwise nothing had happened.

Hana looked crestfallen as she shook the leaves from her hair as well. “Sorry about that, Sarge.”

Rob said nothing as he looked down at her legs. The long, lean muscles of her thighs made her stretch pants look as if they were painted on now, her legs looking astoundingly sexy. He had a brief, provocative vision of Hana wrapping those long legs around a lover as she writhed in orgasmic ecstasy, and a shiver of both excitement and fear traced up his back. He quickly blinked that misplaced image away. Hana was only seventeen and he was supposed to be watching over her, not leching over her.

Hana was unconscious of his gaze as she bent down to brush her blacks off, revealing a series of small rips along her inner thighs. “What the fuck do we do now?”

It took an effort of will for Rob to push away his awe enough to put his head back into the mission. Hana was just a very strong girl, he told himself, refusing to consciously think of her as a goddess.

Even as part of him knew she truly was.

He knelt on the moist layer of leaves that covered the ground and undid his pack to dig out a long copper stake. “I brought this in case all else failed. The ground is moist here, so bury this as deeply as you can.” He pointed toward the inner fence. “And make sure it’s less than two arms’ length from the electrified wire.”

Hana looked at the two-inch wide stake for a long moment before walking through the gash in the outer fence to bend down and jam it into the ground. She leaned her full weight on it, but it penetrated only a fraction of an inch into the rocky soil. She resorted to hammering it with her palm, flattening the top as she managed to drive it slowly deeper.

Rob followed to crouch next to her, nodding at her hand. “Try using your fist instead. It’ll probably work like a small sledge.”

Hana made a tight fist as she gripped the stake between her knees and hammered it again. This time it gave off a soft ring of metal against metal and sank a full inch into the ground.

The sound of the blow shocked Rob. “Your fist is that hard?”

Hana glanced up at him, her pale hair covering her face as she opened her sinewy hand, and then made a tight fist again. “All my muscles are when I really tighten them.” Frowning, she added, “I told you earlier, I’m a total freak case.”

Rob said nothing as he crawled a few feet further away from the dangerous middle fence.

Hana continued to hammer on the stake, leaning down to cascade her hair over the stake to muffle the sound with her body.

“Shorting this thing out is going to get dramatic, Hana. Hope you don’t mind if I hang back a bit.”

“Dramatic?” she smiled nervously as she gave the stake a final pound, burying all but the last three inches of it. She tossed her head again to clear the hair from her face. “Is that a euphemism for electrocuting the fucking shit out of me?”

“Depends on how tough you really are. All I know is that you have to short out the power supply, and that means wetting your hands to lower the contact resistance as much as possible and routing most of the current through your body.”

He paused as he saw her worried look growing.

“The rub is that it might take a while to overload the system. These fences don’t have any safeties or fuses in the circuits, so we’re going to have to overheat the capacitor banks or the power supply transformer and hope something blows.”

Hana nodded as she bit her lower lip, her stomach turning into a cold pit. “Let’s hope I’m not the fuse that blows.”

Rob prayed for the same thing, reassuring himself by thinking back to her little demo with the torch. The only thing hotter than that torch was a nuclear fireball. “Just grab the stake with one hand, and the fence with the other and we’ll both pray to God you’re tough enough.”

Hana took a deep breath as she crawled close to the heavy fence. “I’m a goddess already, remember?”

“Whatever,” Rob answered, his heart racing. “I’m sure you can do it.”

She looked back at him doubtfully. “And this is the only way?”

“No, just the best way. They’ll figure the tree shorted it out, at least at first. Happens from time to time.”

“I was talking about shorting all the current through my body?”

“You can handle heat, that’s for sure, but we don’t know what electricity is going to do to you. Hell, I don’t know anything beyond what you’ve shown me so far, Hana. The Norse legends didn’t talk about electricity for obvious reasons, but they made you guys sound as if you were damn near indestructible. So until you show me otherwise, I’m sticking with Kryptonian norms.”

She rolled her eyes again. “You’re seriously depending on comic book science to determine what I can or can’t do?”

“As I said, Norse legends didn’t talk about high voltage. And that trick with the tree was impressive as hell.”

“Damn, I wish my mom was here,” Hana said worriedly. “She’d know what to do.”

“You ever mess around with electricity before?”

Hana nodded as she took a deep breath. “Got shocked with some 220 volt current once, back when I was eight. I just held on for a long time because it made me feel funny. Good and bad at the same time. My mom got really mad at me when she came in the room and found me, my dress all on fire, hair sticking straight out. I thought that part was pretty funny, but she was worried about someone seeing me.”

She glanced again at the warning sign. “But this isn’t 220 volts.”

“You’re not eight anymore either.”

“You noticed, huh?”

She spit on her hands and rubbed them together before taking another deep breath, steeling herself as she prepared to live up to the fearless reputation of a Viking goddess.

Rob reached out to touch the back of her hand. “You have to make the call, Hana.”

“I’m here to get my dad out,” she nodded determinedly. “Nothing else fucking matters.”

“O.K, then it’s time for some of that goddess shit.” He crawled back ten feet.

Hana watched him as he retreated, and then tossed her head to clear the long strands of hair from a face again, and then boldly grabbed the stake. She slowly extended her fingers toward the fence mess, pausing six inches from it as she took a deep breath. She was still holding that breath a half minute later when she thrust her fingers the rest of the way forward.

A blinding flash exploded from the fence, and a ball of sparks traveled up her arm until it enveloped her upper body, a thousand tiny lightning bolts flashing from her blonde hair as it stood on end. She began to shake wildly, her fingers constricting to tear a larger hole in the fence, her other hand crushing the copper stake.

She opened her eyes and mouth wide as she gave off a gargling sound that came from deep in her throat. By all appearances, she was in terrible pain as her body heated up internally, wisps of steam escaping her nose and mouth. Her eyes flashed as brightly as blue lasers.

Five seconds passed, then ten. A thick cloud of smoke and steam began to rise from her body now, and bright flames began to lick their way up her arms and across her chest, following the path of current

through her body. Every muscle in her body was tensing from the current, forming a fantastic array of hard curves that shaped her blacks from head to toe, her slenderness replaced again by hard muscularity.

Rob grew frantic with worry as the long seconds passed, fearful that the power supply was capable enough to handle the resistive load of her body. He watched in horror as a particularly hot band of bluish-white skin began to glow across her chest, her breasts glowing nakedly as the fabric burned away. She was shaking so violently that her body was bouncing off the ground, her skin lit by an ever-changing firework of jagged sparks.

He desperately looked around for something to leverage her away from the stake or the fence, but knew he wasn't going to be able to pry her grip free no matter what he did. Then, just as his worries started to turn to despair, fearing that she was going to be trapped here until the guards came, a faint flash over on the far side of the base signaled the demise of the fence power supply.

Hana collapsed, the remnants of her Delta Force blacks burning down across her stomach. Rob threw himself forward without thinking, and started to pat the flames out with his hands. Hana's body was frozen into a single spasm as she lay rigidly on the ground, her muscles so tight that her body felt as if it truly was carved from steel. A glance into her eyes showed that her pupils were fixed and dilated, her eyes staring straight ahead.

She wasn't breathing.

Rob slammed his fist into her chest with all his strength, nearly breaking his hand against her tight muscles. He did it again with both fists, and then leaned his full weight on the base of her sternum, ignoring her scalding hot skin as he started to perform CPR. Her chest didn't yield noticeably, but he kept trying until she finally coughed and began to breathe again.

"Jesus! Are you O.K. Hana?" he cried out, barely conscious of his charred hands.

She blinked, and then twisted her head slowly from one side to the other, her eyelids fluttering. Her pupils were trying to focus and her eyes were slightly crossed as she tried to look up at him.

"Ou... Ouch." She tried to sit up.

"Just lay there... catch your breath," Rob gasped as he kneeled beside her. He was shocked by the way her suddenly bared breasts rose and fell as she breathed deeply, mesmerized by the way her skin glowed in a dozen different shades of red as it cooled, tentacles of smoke rising from what was left of her blacks. Her hair was still splayed around her like a patch of sunflowers.

He waited until her skin stopped glowing and she was breathing normally again, and then he slipped his arm around her waist to help her to her feet. Her skin still very hot and desert dry, yet her hair fell straight and soft again, its charge dispelled. "We gotta move fast. Security detail will be scrambling to find whatever shorted the fence. I need you to tear us a bigger opening behind the tree so we can get through it."

Hana leaned heavily against him, her body starting to shake again. She tried to walk, only to collapse to her knees. Rob wrapped her arms around her from the back, trying to avoid her breasts, as he used all his strength to help her back to her feet. She was heavy. "Sh... shiiit... feel so... shaky now."

"You gotta tear that hole bigger, Hana."

He lifted her limp hands, struggling through the beginnings of his own pain to lace her fingers into the thick mesh of the middle fence. Her arms fell to her sides again. He tried again, knowing he had only minutes before the pain from his burned hands would be fully upon him. He had to get her into the Abrams before that happened.

Hana gritted her teeth, her jaw shaking as she tried, and this time she got a grip. Rob closed his blackened hands over hers and whispered in her ear, "Pull it outward. Come on."

She bit her lip and pulled, but Rob found he was pulling harder than she was.

“Again,” He urged. This time he felt her body stiffen slightly, revealing a hint of her strength. “Come on... do it again.” The tendons of her hands suddenly stood up like steel cables and her body turned briefly to steel, and if by magic, the heavy mesh gave off a tearing, ripping sound. The links tore apart, one after the other.

Rob dove through the opening, searching for motion sensors between it and the inner fence. There were none in sight. Hana crawled up next to him, and this time it took her only a couple of tries to get her arms to cooperate so she could tear the inner fence mesh open. Rob again crawled through the opening first, rolling down an embankment and into a concrete drainage ditch that ended just inside the fence.

The laser spotter in his hand detected an invisible beam running the length of the ditch. A quick glance around revealed that their luck was holding: the sensor was on his end of the ditch. He pulled a second device from his pack, something a buddy in Delta Force had given him that detected the frequency of a laser beam and sent a locally generated equivalent into the sensor, fooling it into thinking the original beam was unbroken.

He felt the blisters starting to form along the edges of his hands by the time he attached the device.

Second degree burns, he told himself, finding he was feeling a bit detached from his body. It was the first sign of going into shock. He looked at his blackened palms as if they were someone else’s hands, and saw several spots with third degree burns. That galvanized him back into action. He had only minutes before he was going to become too shocky to guide Hana.

He turned back to see Hana knitting the fence mesh together to hide the holes. It wouldn’t fool the guards if they did a careful search, but the tree was likely to be their focus.

She finally turned and half walked, half stumbled his way, trying to run as she crossed her arms back and forth across her chest to loosen them up. Very aware of her nudity, Rob pulled a thin windbreaker from his pack and handed it to her.

“Gee, didn’t know you were a gentleman too,” she said, her teeth chattering as she slipped the jacket on, her shaky hands struggling with the zipper.

“You O.K to run?” he whispered loudly over his shoulder as he led the way down the concrete ditch. The bottom was fortunately dry this time of year so it was easy going.

“No fucking way. It feels like I hit my funny bone, but all over my body. I’m lucky to be moving at all.”

“Walk it off, Hana. But fast. We gotta keep moving.” There was no trace of sympathy in his voice. He knew he had to push her. He was running out of time.

He paused a couple of hundred meters later to crawl through a culvert that ran under a taxiway, and then into another ditch. Hana followed his lead, staying low, darting from one shadow to the next.

He prayed that no one was using night vision goggles to survey the airfield. Given the lack of tension on Okinawa these last years, he felt it was unlikely.

They were closing on the Abrams tank when he saw headlights traveling along the fence line they’d just left. The lights paused to illuminate the fallen tree.

Rob briefly wondered what the guards would think when they figured out that the tree trunk had been pinched in two. Would they begin to search the woods for tree harvesting equipment?

Instead of worrying about that, he focused on what was in front of him. He crawled out of the ditch to slither across the grass toward the hanger, favoring his hands as best he could. Twenty yards further on, he was able to rise and run across an unlighted portion of the paved revetment. He made a quick dash

between the shadows as he approached the tanks, eventually stopping in the greater darkness between the tank and the hangar wall.

His breathing was fast and labored as he watched Hana follow him across the hardstand like a ghost, only her blonde hair visible as she flitted from shadow to shadow. Her breathing was normal when she joined him, although her hands were still shaking slightly. She bent over to stretch her back.

“Feeling any better?” he asked.

“Yeah, a little,” she said as she stood back up. “But let’s not do that again. That fucking current damn near stopped my heart.”

Rob grinned at her despite the growing pain in his hands, his teeth gleaming white in the pale moonlight. “Almost?”

He couldn’t help but notice the way her slender figure was outlined against the brightly lit wall of a building on the other side of the flight line. She’d zipped his jacket up to provide some modesty, but her height and figure made her look older than her age.

“I’ve seen eight-hundred pound elk in North Dakota after they touched that kind of fence, Hana. Fried like beef too long on the barbeque grill. Just bone and gristle left.”

He hid his own hands as he said that.

“Good thing you didn’t paint that picture before I got fried, else I might have been worried.”

Rob said nothing. He’d seen the fear in her eyes when she reached out to touch the fence, but he was strangely proud that she’d lived up to a Viking’s reputation for overcoming her fears.

Hana nodded toward the Abrams. “So, how do we get into one of those things?”

“There’s an emergency belly hatch on these new A4 models. They designed it to let the crew place mines while taking heavy fire on a battlefield. The hatch is tough enough to deflect the biggest anti-tank mine. Stronger than the rest of the armor in fact.”

“Can’t we go in the top hatch? Gotta be easier.”

Rob shook his head. “Some technician or guard might spot us if we get up that high. Plus any noises will be transmitted across the tarmac instead of muffled under the tank.”

“So the secret of our success is...?” She gave him a questioning look.

“Your bare hands against the belly hatch. You should be able to get a purchase on the plug.”

Hanna sighed as she sagged against the hangar wall. “Seriously, did you really read comic books to prepare for this mission, Sarge?”

“Some,” he said soberly. “But mostly Norse mythology. And despite your trouble with the fence, I still think Supergirl is my best model for judging your strength. So I’ll have you open it the same way I’d have her.”

“As I said before, I’m not wearing a freakin’ cape, Sarge.”

“Blonde, cute, young and strong as hell. Same difference from where I stand.”

“Your sense of reality and fantasy is getting confused.”

“Gotta have a model to work from. Can’t use human norms. Don’t know enough about Valkyries.”

“So, where’s the fucking hatch?” Hana demanded impatiently, not wanting to continue that discussion.

“Do you think it’s possible for you to complete more than a couple of sentences without the word ‘fuck’ in them?”

Hana stared at him for a long moment before answering. “I’m not here to show off my fucking language skills, Sarge. My muscles are the only tools we got. So let’s use them.”

Rob bristled in return. “Long as you agree not to use your mouth any more than you have to.”

Hana glared at him before ducking down to slip under the tank.

Rob lay on his back and wiggled under the Abrams to lie close to her, winching as his hands scraped against the rough concrete. He could tell Hana was pissed now. Maybe that would fire her up more.

“We can’t use a light without attracting attention,” he whispered after a moment, “but feel around for a circular plug-type hatch. The outside of the hatch will protrude about two inches from the belly armor.”

“Here’s a news flash: I can see in the dark as well as a cat.” Hana reached up to grip the rim of the hatch. It was raised a couple of inches above the belly steel. “Now what do I do?”

“Work your fingers into the gap and try to pry the hatch open.”

Hana felt around with her fingers. “There isn’t a gap.”

“Then make one.”

“Yeah, right. And exactly how thick is this fucking steel?”

“Ten inches, more or less. It’s also Heflin Armor-Gard. Toughest damn steel on the planet.”

“Fuck,” Hana cursed again. “Only the best for me, huh?”

Rob gritted his teeth against the throbbing pain in his hands, knowing he couldn’t afford to distract Hana with his own injuries.

“It’s designed to stop anti-tank mines. Saved my life a few times. But a Valkyrie should be able to open it.”

“Except I’m not really one yet. I haven’t had my Aérie.”

“Whatever that is.”

“My coming of age thing. Eighteenth birthday.”

“You get stronger then?” Rob asked, finding that hard to imagine.

“Valkyries get stronger every year they live. But the Aérie mostly has to do with learning how to fly.”

“Like an angel? That part should be fun.”

“No wings, remember?”

“That’s at least six sentences.”

“What?” Hana asked.

“Six sentences without the word fuck in them. Congrats.”

“Fuck off.”

Rob grimaced as the pain in his hands began to tear at him like a thing alive, radiating up his arms. His burnt skin had started to give off a stench.

“Try to use your fingernails to get a gap started,” he said in a strained voice. “Work them into the gap and try to distort the steel enough to get your fingertips in far enough to get some more purchase on it. Keep going that way.”

Hana gritted her teeth and struggled. “This shit always looked so damn easy in the comics.”

Chapter 9

While Hana worked on the hatch, Rob rolled over and peered out through the machinery of the left track to study the flight line. A crew was lowering the huge cargo ramp of the C17. He saw a tug with an attached pair of tow hooks parked next to the plane.

“We don’t have much time, Hana. Twenty minutes maybe.”

He suspected he had less than that before the pain or shock got to him.

Hana pushed upward with outstretched fingers as she lay on her back, her elbows rising slightly off the concrete. She wiggled her fingertips as she tried to expand the gap around the plug hatch. Nothing happened. She pushed upward even harder, but instead of the steel yielding, the tank’s suspension gave off a loud creak and began to rise.

Rob recoiled from the track as he saw it lifting off the pavement, remembering too well his last experience with getting under a track. He rolled back the other way to see Hana struggling to extend her arms.

“This ain’t gonna... work, Sarge,” she said through gritted teeth. “Feels like... I’m lifting the entire... fucking... tank.” Her chest was heaving as she gasped for air.

Rob swallowed hard as he saw a sliver of light appear under the track on that side as well, and quickly upped his estimate of her strength.

An M1 weighed seventy tons, give or take a few. This M1A4 model was the heaviest of the line.

He stared at the dim outline of Hana’s body, struggling to push past his growing amazement and focus on what he had to convince her to do. He returned to his Kryptonian model.

“Try and wiggle your fingertips while holding as much weight as you can on them, Hana. Keep your fingers stiff, carrying the weight on the smallest area possible.”

The Abrams rocked back and forth slightly as Hana arched her back, then lifted one shoulder and then the other. She was gasping for breath by the time the steel gave off a muted scream.

“O.K, I got a good grip now,” she said breathlessly as she lowered the back half of the Abrams.

She worked her fingers into the enlarged gap and squeezed inward, putting her powerful chest muscles to work. The steel gave off a louder keening as her breasts rose to strain the nylon of her borrowed jacket. The keening of the steel turned into a muted squeal.

“That’s it, babe. Keep going. You gotta bend and curl the plug inward with your wrists to pull the locking dogs out of the frame, and that means bending the hatch nearly in half.”

“I ain’t... your god-damned... babe,” she gasped.

Rob smiled as he found he could now make out the edge of the hatch in the darkness as the metal around her fingers began to glow faintly from internal friction. He was startled to see that the steel looked like children’s Play Dough, the deep impressions from Hana’s fingers distorting it.

Hana pulled her legs up, pressing her knees against her chest as she wiggled her bare toes against the bottom of the tank along each side of the hatch. She then smoothly extended her legs halfway, taking most of the weight of the tank so she could lower her arms to shake the strain out of them. The tank bounced slightly and the concrete began to crack noisily behind her back as she put her strongest muscles to work.

“You O.K.?”

“Yeah, but I know what you mean now about muscles burning. My arms are getting sore as hell.”

“We’re almost done. You need to insert your fingers as far as you can in the gap around the plug and bend the sides away from the surrounding armor. That will withdraw the locking bars.”

Hana did as he said, working to squeeze the thick plug hatch inward until her chest burned as painfully as her arms. She gave the hatch a final powerful grip with her fingers, and two of the locking bars snapped out of the surrounding frame. She finished by pulling the plug down, opposing the strength of her legs with her arms. The hardened steel hinge tore free of the armored frame with a screeching groan and a shower of sparks. The now freed plug hatch fell heavily onto her chest, pinning her to the concrete.

Rob reached over to try to push the heavy hatch off her, only to jerk his already burned hand back when he touched the smoking hot steel.

Hana gripped the quarter ton hatch with one hand to lift it off her chest and set it silently down on the concrete. She then curled herself upward to take the Abram’s weight on her hands again, and carefully lowered her legs. She finished with a slow bench press to lower the tank quietly back onto its treads.

Her young breasts stood up like pyramids under her jacket, the nylon half melted across her chest, her body lit from the faint reddish glow of the hatch opening above her.

“O.K. I guess we’ve finally found a suitable weight for me to train with,” she quipped.

“Get in,” Rob whispered.

Hana shook the strain from her hands. “You go first. I gotta close the hatch behind us.”

Rob twisted himself under the opening and climbed upward into the greater darkness inside, the blisters on his hands popping painfully as he gripped the internal ladder. The pain and shock was fully upon him now, forcing him to grit his teeth to bear it.

He looked down to see the young Valkyrie as she climbed halfway into the hatch, positioning herself nearly upside down, her hair hanging below the tank’s belly.

She reached down with one hand to pull the hatch plug up, tossing her hair back to free it. The groan of tortured steel filled the interior of the tank again as she twisted the hatch to wedge the plug in the opening.

The interior was pitch black now as Rob felt Hana climbing past him, and reached out blindly in the darkness to locate her, his fingers closing around her calf. It felt as hard as the steel of the Abrams, but was warm and alive, her muscles flexing lithely as she moved.

That pleasant sensation lasted for a brief second before the pain from his hand grew unbearable. He groaned and sagged back against the steel wall, trying not to scream, only to have his concentration broken as a series of metallic clanks filled the tank.

The tow crew had arrived.

“We gotta hide down below, Hana. Driver’s coming.”

“I found a pile of flak jackets over here.”

Judging where she was by the sound of her voice, Rob crawled painfully over to join her, burrowing under the nest of jackets just before the driver unlocked the top hatch to send a pale beam of light inside. He turned on a couple of red night vision lights as he scrambled down inside to disengage the track lock.

Rob was intensely aware of the sweet fragrance of Hana's hair as it fell across his face, her lips only inches from his, with one firm breast pressing tantalizingly against his chest. He felt the spring-steel tension in her body, and had no doubt that she'd deal decisively with the driver if he found them. She was a daughter who was capable of doing nearly anything to save her father.

Fortunately, the mechanic didn't leave the driver's seat while the tank was slowly towed across the ramp and up the ramp into the belly of the giant C17. Once positioned inside, the driver set the track lock again, turned out the lights as he clambered out the top hatch, carefully locking it behind him.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, we did it," Hana cried out in glee as she hugged Rob tighter, emptying the air from his lungs in her exuberance.

He instinctively clamped his hand over her mouth to whisper. "Shhh... plane's... not in the air yet. They might hear."

"That's bullshit, Sarge," she said as she released him, tossing the flak jackets to the side as she rose to her knees. "The inside of a C17 is loud as hell with the APU running. We can talk all we want."

"So how come you know about C17's?"

"My dad's a pilot, remember? We used to take hops all the time. Up to Japan, down to Philippines. All over." She reached up to turn a white light on. "Tanks don't have windows, right?"

Rob struggled to drop a flak jacket over the damaged lower hatch, only to gasp in pain as the rough fabric tore at his burns. "Just periscopes. Should be... safe enough though."

The pain was starting to get to him now.

She heard the strain in his voice, and reached out to grip his wrist, pulling his arm closer to her, sniffing. "Shit. What's wrong with your hands?" She lifted one hand to her face, and gave off a soft cry.

"Just a few burns," Rob said in a strained voice. "No big deal."

"Yeah, as in third-degree no big deal."

She studied his burned skin, her eyes looking both concerned and confident when she turned back to meet his. "Good thing I have some practice fixing burns."

"How... how can you...?"

"Healing is one of a Valkyrie's skills. Burns as well as lacerations were common after Viking battles. And remember the girl in the car wreck I mentioned?"

Rob shook his head as a wave of chills made him shiver. "No. There's morphine in the Med kit. That'll hold me until we get to a..."

"And have your head all floaty, your mind drugged, you body half in shock? We'll never find my father that way."

"Then I'll just deal with the fucking pain," Rob said angrily. "Been injured before."

"Bullshit." She twisted herself around to sit between his legs as he sat on the floor, leaning her back against his chest. "Not like this you haven't."

"What... what are you doing?" he asked shakily.

"You're going into shock, Sarge. Without medical attention, you'll be out of it soon."

She reached up and turned off the light, plunging them back into darkness.

Rob heard her unzip his borrowed jacket, and then felt her cool hands on the back of his burning skin, guiding his hands upward and then inward. He gasped as he suddenly felt the warm, softness of her breasts filling his hands. He struggled to pull his hands back, but she held him too tightly.

“What are you doing, Hana? This isn’t part of any healing...”

“Or course it is. Be quiet.”

Rob struggled again to remove his hands, her breasts overflowing them, but her arms were as rigid as steel.

Frustrated and embarrassed by whatever she was doing, he was astounded when a warm glow began to envelop his hands, making them feel as if they were melting into her. The pain began to gradually release its strangling grip as a further rush of tingling warmth radiated up his arms.

“This is how you express a Valkyrie’s healing power?” he asked in astonishment.

“The Vikings never complained,” Hana whispered, seemingly concentrating on something.

Rob had to keep talking, if for no other reason than to keep from focusing on the remaining pain. He daringly gave her a tentative squeeze, finding that the soft resilience of her heavy breasts was firmer than normal. Her nipples seemed to come alive as one thumb accidentally traced across it.

“O.K, now I’m absolutely convinced you guys are the result of alien DNA being inserted into a human. Your scent is both Earthy and very human.” He paused, and then said daringly, “And you certainly feel human.”

“You like the way I smell?” she laughed. “Despite being all sweaty and half fried to death?”

“A salty sweetness. Intensely human and fresh. Also very feminine.”

“You’ve been spending way too much time in a gym, Sarge.”

Rob wasn’t going to respond to that. A strange sense of euphoria had started to fill him, that and a sense of incredible healthiness. He found he had to hold back a growing desire to kiss her, for taking away his pain if nothing else.

He heard her chuckle as his manhood came alive, pressing against her back. “You sure you aren’t just getting off on holding my tits.”

“God, I’m trying so hard not to.”

Hana laughed louder. “It’s goddess to you, mortal. And you can enjoy whatever you want. You’re the one who’s injured.”

Rob said nothing for a long moment, his thoughts racing. He forced himself to think of something other than the warmth and softness of her body.

He finally picked up the thread of their conversation back at his garage. “So why did Odin and his crew help such a frail and helpless race as we humans?”

“They were shipwrecked here, remember? How else could they keep from going insane?”

“So they played games with the local wildlife?”

“Maybe at first. But my mom has a better theory. She says that Odin figured out that you humans are important because you’re forced to develop your brains instead of your bodies. That the future belongs to you.”

Rob opened his mouth to reply, and then closed it, realizing how profound her words were. Even stranger, this wasn't like anything he remembered reading in a Norse legend.

He tried to concentrate on those tales, but his head began to swim, a warm buzz filling his body. Strangely, it passed in a few seconds, leaving his head clear as a bell, minus the pain.

"You're stimulating my own endorphins?"

"Good guess, but damned if I know. I just know this works."

Rob came back to the previous subject. "So that's your theory on the role of humanity? To be thinkers and inventors?"

"It's my mom's theory, but it makes sense to me. I mean, we Valkyries have physical perfection: beauty, strength, invulnerability; you name it. Your hands can sense that. Holding my best parts, so to speak."

Rob didn't reply. Of course, it was true. He'd never felt such perfection.

"But what good are our bodies except to continue doing what we've always done. In contrast, you humans have to strive every day to stay alive. You have to invent tools to overcome your weakness. You need art, music, and dance to fill your souls with hope, otherwise your desperate struggles to survive would overcome you. It's why the human race is far more important than the Gaians."

"Gaians?"

"Odin's race."

"Surely you simply mean more populous? The technology of the Gaians must have been incredible."

"A static technology. People had stopped learning. Why do you think it took millennia for his crew to improvise enough to escape Earth?"

"So they're a race that has fully realized their potential."

"Yeah, I guess. That's why Odin's crew got so involved in helping humans develop. They didn't conquer the world, but they protected and nurtured humans." She paused to shrug again. "Well, at least that's what my mom says."

"Tell me about her. Everyone thinks she's some kind of ice queen. Cold, haughty, distant and arrogant."

"Yeah, she comes across that way sometimes. Mostly it's her way of keeping men from hitting on her all the time. You know how military pilots are." She paused, and then, "but she might like you."

Rob wasn't so sure about that. Instead, he briefly considered the consequences of her mother finding him sitting here in the dark, holding her daughter's breasts. He decided she'd probably kill him. If not her, then Hana's father definitely would.

"She and my dad don't really have the kind of relationship everyone assumes. You know, a normal marriage, whatever that means these days. She saved his life in battle; back during the Iraqi war of 2003. Plucked him out of his helicopter just before it hit the ground after he was hit by a missile."

"Why didn't she take him to the Faroes?"

"We rarely do that anymore. Instead, they came up with this arranged marriage so she could live among humans."

"No romance, huh? Just a cover story."

"At first."

“Then he isn’t really your father?”

Hana laughed. “Do you really think a mortal could impregnate an immortal? I mean, the sex act alone is physically impossible. When it really counts for procreation, I mean.”

Rob felt confused and intimidated by that, but he had to ask. “So your step-father and your mother, they don’t share any intimacies?”

“She’s beautiful. A Valkyrie goddess. So of course they do, during that time each month when they can.”

“Wait a minute. I remember this legend saying that Valkyries will lose their strength and invulnerability if they don’t remain virginal.”

“That legend is both true and not true, Rob. I mean, other than those couple of days a month, it is accurate that we remain virginal. But for a different reason than you think.” He felt her skin warming as she blushed.

“O.K, tell me?”

“Let’s just say the sex act is fucking impossible, pun intended, unless your name is Clark Kent.”

“You’re shitting me,” Rob gasped.

“I’m not. But during those two wonderful days, well, everything gets reversed, and all those human desires that bubbled up all month get released. The ancient Norse were pretty lusty and our human part came from that stock.”

She paused for a long moment.

“Although before our 18th birthday, before our Aérie, the virginal thing is absolutely true.”

“So much for love conquers all,” Rob said lamely, thinking about her mother, and then about the purity and innocence of virginity. “So they’ve become more than an arrangement now?”

“My father adores her. And I think she loves him in her own way.”

The uncertainty in her last sentence disturbed him as he sat here in the dark, holding her the way he was. Hana wasn’t acting very pure and he was hardly being proper. He couldn’t help but wonder if he was the first man to touch her this way. Given the way she was estranged at her school, hiding herself under unrevealing clothing and bad attitudes, it was possible.

Then he remembered that she’d healed that girl, and he decided not to speculate further.

“Anyway, that’s why I put that phrase on that bag you saw. I just wave it to the guys who try to hit on me.”

Rob said nothing.

“And I’m sorry if I might have got your hopes up, but I’m a certified virgin, and will be one until my Aérie.”

Her apology shocked Rob with its implications. “I hadn’t thought for a moment…” he started to say.

“Liar.”

He struggled with how to reply to that, opening and closing his mouth twice before finally deciding to just be honest with her.

“O.K, I’ll give you that there is thought and there is hope. Fantasy and reality. I can’t avoid the first, I’m a man, but I’ve got more sense than to consider the second. I’m more than twice your age, and I’m looking after you for your dad.”

She chuckled. "A serious flaw in your imagination, Sarge. I mean, is my mother too old for my dad? She's going to be 2141 this year. He's 41."

Rob had to change the subject yet again. "So... so you gain your full abilities when you start having periods. Then you finally become a woman when you're eighteen. Has it always been that way?"

"Far as I know, yeah."

"I ask because eighteen would have been very old for the start of womanhood a couple of thousand years ago."

"Guess we needed longer to mature," Hana said with a shake of her head. "But starting from age twelve or so, we roamed the battlefields. And we did this healing thing."

"Beautiful virgins in white bearing dead warriors to Valhalla to heal them... this way." He refused to think of holding a girl that young this way. "Almost worth getting hacked up for," he finished lamely.

"So, you think I'm pretty?"

"The word is beautiful," Rob said, and then stopped. He didn't want to talk about the inappropriate way he was starting to feel about Hana.

She chuckled at his compliment, which embarrassed him further.

"So this Aérie is some kind of pagan festival?"

Hana sighed in frustration as he changed the subject again.

"I'm serious, Hana. I want to know everything about you guys."

"O.K. O.K. Asatru is our religion, and yeah, I'm told that an Aérie is pretty ribald, although we haven't had one in hundreds of years. Lots of sexually-oriented sacraments and stuff like that."

Rob felt her nipples quicken under his fingers as she talked about her Aérie. It was obviously something she was looking forward to.

"And you have to be absolutely pure until then?"

She shrugged. "Sadly, yes."

Rob felt a wave of relief wash over him. "So, you really are a little angel, huh?" He held her breasts more tightly as the pain in his hands faded away completely.

Hana nudged her shoulder gently against his chest as she laughed. "Is this how you dreamed you'd be holding your guardian angel?"

"I thought we were a pretty good team tonight," Rob said, refusing to play her game.

"We, huh? So how about next time, you bend the steel with your bare hands, not just play with my tits."

"You know what I mean. My experience, your talents." He was even more determined not to rise to her baiting.

"Your brains and my super-bod. Like I said before, we're living the age-old dance of mortal and immortal. Hasn't changed in two millennia."

"Except you aren't really. Immortal. You talked about that Valkyrie who was killed, which is why you were born." He almost said, "Created".

"Unless we run into a nuke or some really heavy-duty weapon, like the gun on this tank, then yeah, we are pretty much immortal. I mean, my mom has been able to pass for thirty something since around the birth of Christ. We mature kind of normally until our thirties, and then more or less stop aging."

“The dream of all women,” Rob chuckled. “But what I don’t understand is that if there aren’t male Valkyries, how did your mother get pregnant with you?”

She giggled. “You mean, who can properly fuck a super chick like her?”

Rob felt himself quickening further from her crude language. “I mean... you’re invincible,” he shrugged. “Obviously in more than one way.”

He wasn’t sure how else to say it.

“Obviously. Fortunately, there are male immortals, as we’re fertile only during the strongest part of our period.”

“Oh,” Rob said, truly feeling intimidated. “Not much chance for mortal man then, is there?”

She shook her head vigorously. “You weren’t listening, Rob. Each month, for that couple of days when we get weaker, then we’re no stronger than a mortal woman. It’s called *dalvjra*.”

“So that’s when...”

“We get horny as hell?” she completed his question, but less delicately than he was trying to.

“No, I meant...”

Hana laughed again. “Yeah, that’s when things can get very romantic with regular guys.”

“Good thing your time isn’t now. Your strength is coming in very handy here.”

He wasn’t going to comment on the other possibilities.

“Which is when my mom would always disappear during her period, and that’s what started all those rumors.”

“But not with your dad?”

“If he was home, of course. But if not... well, it’s not exactly an urge we can ignore.”

“It must be hard before your 18th. When you have to ignore it.”

She leaned her head back, her silky hair falling over his shoulder as she sighed. “You so don’t want to know the details. I have to lock myself in the basement for two days or I’ll lose it completely. I mean sex toys only go so far.”

Rob swallowed hard, finding his mind filling with forbidden images again. “There are going to be some very lucky guys then. After your Aérie I mean.”

“Except there’s nobody my age I’d want to be with, Rob. Boys don’t interest me. Only men who’ve been around a bit. Other warriors.”

“Rob? Do you realize that’s the first time you haven’t called me Sarge?”

“We’re comrades in arms now.” She snuggled closer, jiggling her breasts. “Well, something like that anyway.”

If not for the wonderful sensation enveloping his hands, he would have found a way to withdraw now. This wasn’t how he was supposed to be taking care of her.

“Can I ask you something, Rob? A special favor?”

“I owe you my life. Of course you can.”

“Come to my Aérie. Be my Rógnar.”

“Or course,” he said without hesitation, only to feel her nipples harden more. He was almost afraid to ask, “What’s a Rógnar?”

She snuggled closer. “It means, *First*.”

Rob gasped. “That’s... that’s impossible. How can you even ask me such a thing, Hana?”

“Why not?” she said, her voice rising. “Am I too freaky for you? Some alien slime chick that you can’t bear to...”

Rob felt the warmth evaporating from his hands as she pushed his hands away, leaning forward out of his reach.

“Hana, no, it isn’t like that at all. I’d... I’m incredibly honored you’d ask. But I’m hardly the kind of man to...”

“To what?” she said angrily, the hurt clear in her voice. “To be close to me? To be my friend?”

“I’m definitely your friend, Hana.”

“But not a good enough friend to come to my Aérie?”

“Such a man is called a lover, Hana. That would be... wrong.”

“Wrong?” she cried. “When it so fucking wrong to care about someone. Since when is it so fucking hard to show a little kindness, to share some intimacy with someone? To be sensitive to someone else’s feelings?”

Rob felt his heart break. For the first time he truly understood Hana. Why she had friends who really weren’t friends. Why she pushed everyone else away, giving everyone attitude, acting like a Goth. No wonder she hung around his shop so much.

It was the only place in her life where she felt at home.

He leaned forward to hold her shoulders, but she jerked away, climbing in the darkness to settle into the commander’s seat above him.

Chapter 10

Rob endured the returning pain as long as he could, giving Hana time to cool off. The pain seemed even worse this time. “Hana... I’m sorry. I guess you just caught me by surprise.”

She didn’t reply.

“I’d like to talk to you about that later. The Aérie thing. I’m flattered and awestruck and... and I don’t know what to say except thank you for the invitation. I’m honored. But as wonderful as it would be to talk about that, to think about such a privilege, right now, we have to think of your father.”

He heard Hana stir.

“I think I’m going into shock again. I need your help.”

He heard her feet on the ladder, and moments later, he felt her warmth in front of him again, and inhaled her sweet, salty scent. A wave of joy washed over him as she took his hands in hers.

“Sorry I was such a bitch,” she said contritely. “I hadn’t really thought it through. Asking you that way I mean. Out of the blue.”

“Then we can both look forward to an interesting discussion later.”

“Yeah. I guess. But right now, I’ve gotta do something different to heal you. All I did before was to buy time by getting your endorphins involved.”

Rob nodded, not sure what to say or to expect.

“This will probably shock you, especially given what we were just talking about.”

Rob didn’t know what to say to that as he felt her lift his hands and place them on her warm breasts again. Her nipples were soft this time.

“Hold me tightly.”

He did, gritting his teeth against the pain. It quickly faded again into pleasant warmth, which in turn sent an even greater excited rush through his body. He closed his eyes and tried to push those feelings away, trying to stay in the moment, reminding himself who he was. A soldier nearly at his retirement. And who Hana was. A teenage girl just starting her life.

Her voice was soft when she spoke again. “Please... don’t say anything. Just hold me as tightly as you can when I ask you to.”

She began to a whispering chant. It was full of words he didn’t understand.

“Hana...?”

“Shhh...”

She began to breathe faster and deeper, her soft body slowly tensing against his. He gasped in surprise as her nipples became engorged again, even larger this time. She leaned her head back against his shoulder, her chanting growing faster each moment, her voice rising in pitch as her lips brushed his ear. One of her hands left his, moving lower, and she stiffened, arching her body further backward, her breasts rising, seemingly growing fuller, her nipples standing up like small thumbs now.

“Hold... hold me so tightly... now!” she cried out.

Rob forgot both his injuries and any vestige of propriety he had left as he poured all his work-hardened strength into his hands, burying his fingers in the firmness of her young breasts, hugging her to him with a fierce passion.

Hana’s chants grew louder as her body began to vibrate, her voice growing breathless, her chanting punctuated now by little cries.

A shocking white glow illuminated his hands, coming from inside her breasts, growing so bright that it illuminated the dank interior of the tank.

The glow brought with it a painful prickling heat that washed over his hands and raced up his arms, sending painfully pleasant pinpricks deep into his body. Looking down over her shoulder, his eyes wide, Rob was astounded to find he could see through the flesh of his hands as if they were transparent. He saw the blood coursing through his veins and arteries in living color, a pinky fleshiness defining his muscles and darker lines defining tendons and bones.

Hana threw her head forward, waves of long hair falling over her chest to block the view of his hands, the light making her hair glow like white gold. She shook her head violently, and silky strands flew up to cover Rob’s face, nearly choking him when he took a breath.

They both began to gasp for air, with each of Hana’s gasps punctuated by louder cries, her chanting growing louder and faster each moment. She was shaking almost painfully in his arms when she suddenly froze, and all the softness of her body turned to steel as she arched herself backward again, her shoulders crushing the air from his lungs as she pressed him back against the bulkhead, the glow surrounding his hands becoming blinding.

Her body remained steeled and breathless that way for nearly twenty seconds, and then she exhaled. The glow faded as she collapsed limply back to the floor, and was nearly gone by the time her lungs emptied.

Stunned by the realization that Hana had just experienced some kind of orgasm, Rob felt a radiating sense of youthful warmth and well being filling him with nearly uncontrollable desire.

The wave of overwhelming healthiness made him feel as if he was seventeen again, as he remembered making out with a girl in the basement for the first time, finding that the wonders of her body greater than he'd had the capacity to imagine.

For a moment, his world was new again, and everything was again possible.

Then Hana shifted in his arms and the moment passed.

She rose to her knees, the faintest glow from her chest, the only thing visible in the near darkness now. He dared to dream that she was going to sit back down to face him, to help him with his sudden ardor, but instead, the last of that wondrous light disappeared as she zipped her jacket back up. She didn't say a word as she climbed back up the ladder to the gunner's station.

Rob collapsed flat on his back, breathing deeply, his body so ready that he couldn't stand it.

He was also ashamed of himself, knowing how perilously close he'd come to losing control. If not for her self-discipline in leaving him, he would have...

He didn't let himself finish that thought. Instead, he contented himself to curl up in a corner as he tried to sleep, his body still tingling wildly with the wondrous sensations of healthiness and arousal.

Chapter 11

The flight to Iraq was long, but Rob slept only fitfully, his dreams filled with visions of forbidden love. He was lost in a twisted dream that involved Hana and her mother when he was rudely awakened as the wheels slammed down on a runway.

The C17 was making a very rough combat landing, engines roaring in reverse thrust as the pilots applied maximum braking, standing the cargo plane on its nose.

Hana tumbled down from the gunner's station, still half asleep when she landed in the pile of flak jackets.

Confused by his sudden wakening from a dream, it took Rob a few moments of studying his glowing watch to confirm that they'd been airborne for fourteen and a half hours. That made it about 2PM in Baghdad.

He briefly prayed that the transit crew was going to park the Abrams tank in the shade. Otherwise, it was going to get damn hot inside the tank before the sun went down. The chances of getting out of the tank unseen in the daytime were diminishingly small.

He reached up and turned a light back on, filling the lower half of the tank with a reddish glow.

"Hana, we have to hide down below again. The tow crew will come back."

She lifted her blonde head from the pile of flak jackets and wordlessly began rearranging them. The sight of her torn blacks and the smooth skin it revealed fueled the vestiges of his interrupted dream. He struggled to push those thoughts away as he huddled under the jackets with her, turning off the light.

A driver entered like before, bringing with him a shaft of intense desert sunlight and dusty air. He didn't smell as if he'd had a bath for a while, a sure sign they'd entered a combat zone.

He released the brakes to allow the massive Abrams to be towed down the C17's ramp and across the tarmac. As before, the driver set the track lock and left without starting the turbine engine, locking the hatch securely behind him.

Rob knew the drill. A very large security padlock was located on the outside of the tank's hatch.

He turned on the light again, this time a daytime white light, and studied his hands. He was shocked to find that they were not only perfectly healed from his burns, but they looked younger. Even the faint scars from his work injuries were gone.

He blinked, struggling to believe what his eyes were telling him. He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out.

"You're welcome," Hana said as she climbed back up to her perch.

Two hours later, it was 120F inside the tank. Rob had stripped down to his skivvies and together they'd drank most of the water from the emergency supplies. Hana was still wearing his jacket, her face reflecting the sheen of gathering sweat.

"So much for your invincibility," Rob quipped. "You sweat like everyone else."

She shrugged. "I was born to live in the Arctic. But heat affects me differently."

"Different is why I'm alive. Different is why we're sitting here in this tank in Iraq. I like different."

"Then to keep you alive, I better cool off a little."

Before Rob could ask what that meant, Hana tore the ability for rational thought from his mind by unzipping her jacket, revealing her fantastic cleavage. The edges of the zipper caught on her firm nipples to reveal flat, drum-tight abs, the tight curves punctuated by a very cute navel.

She paused there, her eyes meeting his to ask a silent question.

He shrugged, feigning indifference. "Cool off however you have to."

She glared at him as she opened her jacket further, freeing her breasts. Nearly perfectly round, they rode high and firm on a broad plate of thick pectoral muscle. Despite their large size, they were as pertly uplifted as the small breasts of a younger girl.

She slipped the jacket the rest of the way off to reveal the sinewy strength of her shoulders, and handed him the sweaty fabric, then leaning down over to roll up what was left of her black tights, revealing her long, lean legs. They stuck to her moist skin, so she resorted to just tearing the waistband apart as they blacks began to shred, revealing that she was not only naked, but devoid of even a trace of pubic hair.

Rob's heart raced as he decided that she was without a doubt the fittest woman he'd ever seen. Her skin was flawlessly tanned and tight. A young goddess indeed. He tried to say something complimentary, but was at a loss for words that didn't make him sound like a leech. He played it safe by observing, "The lady really is a swan."

"A steel swan, maybe," Hana blushed as she watched his eyes, sensing the quickening of his body. "Seems as if I got my mother's muscles." She reached up to hold herself. "And I definitely got her tits."

"A gift from a time lost to history."

"My tits?" Hana laughed.

“I meant, your being a warrior goddess,” Rob said, trying to stay cool. “A woman formed from erotic steel, yet beautiful beyond the praises of mortal men.” He stopped there, embarrassed as he heard himself saying the words from his dream.

She actually smiled at him this time, the glow of her perfect white teeth accenting eyes that sparkled like blue diamonds in the sunshine. “Now I know we’ve been locked together in this tank too long. I thought I was the alien Goth slime bitch?”

“A role you played well enough to deserve an Oscar.”

She looked away from his eyes as she crossed her arms over her chest. “My only role now is to rescue my dad,” she said, glancing upward. “So how about I open the top hatch to get us some air.”

Rob shook his head. “Too visible.”

“Then how about the bottom one?”

“Somebody might see if it was hanging open or lying on the ground.”

“Then I’ll open it from the inside.”

“It’s a plug, remember?” Rob smiled tolerantly, realizing that Hana didn’t understand the structure of the tank. “The tapered entrance is far smaller than the hatch. Only opens outward.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Hana said as she squeezed past him to squat over the hatch, her eyes only a few inches below his. “How about if I just pull it through the hole?”

Rob inhaled the sweet, saltiness of her body again as she moved closer, the cascade of her blonde hair glowing like a ray of pale sunshine inside the gritty tank. Studying her in the brighter light streaming up through the partially closed hatch, he found that her skin was flawless, even this close up.

Hana interrupted his musings as she bent lower to slip her fingers into the depressions she’d made earlier in the side of the hatch, and started to pull upward. Her shoulders turned to sculpted steel again, back muscles straining beneath tight skin, her biceps flexing into tight balls, an array of secondary muscles tensing visibly to support them.

Yet all of that strength was simply there to transmit her true power: her thighs. Her quadriceps flexed with power that only a goddess could understand, the tanned skin of her lean legs stretching smoothly over expanding steel-hard muscles as she tried to straighten her legs.

The overstressed Armor-Gard gave off a muted squeal and started to give.

“Jesus, Hana. That’s... that’s...”

“...hard as hell?” she grunted. “Yeah, this has just gotta be the toughest fucking steel on the planet.”

“I was going to say impossible,” Rob mumbled as he found himself awestruck by the transformation of her body. Powerful tendons now shaped her slender hands, her fingers digging deeply into the steel once again as if it was little more than wet clay.

She tossed her long hair over one shoulder to reveal more of the tight expanse of her sculpted back, and tilted her head upward to meet his eyes. She smiled slightly before gritting her teeth and putting every ounce of her strength to work.

The thick plug hatch began to elongate as if it was made of sponge rubber, her fingers digging in to their roots. He had to quickly cover his ears as the interior of the tank filled with the deafening high-pitched squeal of overstressed steel.

He prayed that the hull of the tank was containing most of the noise, only to be interrupted as a blaze of sparks suddenly exploded from the friction of the hatch against the hatch opening. It looked as if a welder was working on it.

“Jesus Christ Almighty!” he gasped, his heart skipping some beats. He’d always believed that Armor-Gard steel was impossible to bend or shape outside of the massive press shop of the manufacturer.

Hana didn’t know what was possible or impossible as she strained against the hatch plug. She tried to smile as she exhaled, inching her way higher, her body a maze of hard muscle.

The thick plug of steel slowly elongated until she finally jerked it free inside the tank. The edges of the quarter-ton hatch were glowing cherry-red and the hatch itself was now shaped like a sausage as Hana reached out to set it down against the back wall of the compartment.

Instead of cooling down the interior, the cherry-red hatch plug was radiating enough heat to raise the ambient inside the tank by several more degrees. Turning back to face him, her chest heaving as she tried to catch up her breathing, Rob was startled to see droplets of sweat forming on her nipples before dripping to the floor.

“You got a dry jacket or something over there?” she asked Rob.

He looked around. “This blanket is about it.” He handed it to her.

Hana took the blanket, and applied it to her face, then her throat. After those areas were satisfactorily dry for the moment, she rubbed the blanket very firmly over her chest, then down over her breasts. A hole in the blanket caught on one nipple, and a ripping sound distracted her attention. She quickly looked up at Rob, mortified that her nipples were standing up that hard -- like small thumbs.

"You get turned on when you exert yourself?" Rob asked, trying not to stare at her chest. A different kind of heat raced unbidden through his body.

Hana looked at him. She didn't know how to take the question. She studied Rob's face a moment, searching for a way to answer, then opted for the obvious.

"Don't let it go to your head," she advised him with a tired smirk.

"Which head are you referring to?" Rob rejoined slyly.

Hana blushed at this - she couldn't help it. She smiled, and looked away. She liked this mortal, but how could just the fact of being near him make her feel so strangely? She felt . . . she didn't know. It felt wonderful, but, at the same time, it hurt too. How could a mortal make her feel such exquisite pain?

I'm supposed to be invulnerable, she considered as she busied herself with the blanket again. *Yeah - right!*

She found she liked his eyes on her - and was pleased that he wanted to look at her - a freak. His stolen glances - his caressing gaze - it encouraged her to think that she might be pretty after all.

She wiped the sweat from her abdomen - trying to keep her mind on her task, but she couldn't keep herself from thrilling at Rob's casual attention as the blanket lowered.

What's happening to me? She wondered.

She had a wild thought as her hands worked the blanket lower. A wild, and wicked, and daring thought! Her groin was lousy with sweat. She could feel it running over her sex. Should she dry herself in front of him?

What's he going to think?

Touching myself that way?

He's going to think I'm a slut.

Just for him I could?

Yes!

The skin on her arms felt all tingly, and funny as her hands moved the blanket lower.

"You're getting goose bumps," Rob observed as he sat up suddenly. "Are you cold?"

She looked up at Rob, and could see the concerned expression on his face. Her hands became still, and her mouth dropped open. She couldn't believe what he'd said. She wanted to die.

Rob saw her embarrassment and quickly began rummaging through the pile he lay on.

"I think there's a jacket here if you want to put - "

"Oh, shut up!"

He heard her shout at him a moment before his world went dark and damp and wondrously aromatic. It took a moment for him to realize that she'd thrown the wet blanket over him. Rob slowly, cautiously began to emerge from beneath.

What'd I say to make her so angry? He wondered.

She was now sitting on her heels with her back to him.

Hana stared at the hatch plug where she'd tossed it. She wanted to throw *that* at him too! She could feel his eyes on her back, and she suddenly hated it. But having lost her blanket to a higher purpose, she had nothing to cover herself with, so she had to make do with what she had, and moved her hands around in a vain attempt to cover her bare butt.

"Don't even look at me!" she ordered him without so much as glancing over her shoulder.

She thought she heard him sigh in the semi-darkness they shared. It made her feel good - even smug, and then she heard him quietly tell her, "I'm not looking at you."

Hana's eyes squeezed shut as they filled with tears. She wanted to die. *He doesn't even wanna fucking look at me!* her troubled mind, and aching heart, whined in unison.

Rob didn't know - couldn't know, but . . . in a way, he did know. He gave up trying to sort out his head, and simply approached Hana, cupping his hands around her shoulders.

"Hana, don't cry," he bid her.

"I can't die and I can't cry," she told him in a thick voice as her tears betrayed her and ran down her cheeks. "I'm immortal.

She'd resented his touch as first, only to be surprised that she liked his hands on her skin. The pain, the ache, it suddenly disappeared, leaving her feeling better than she would have allowed.

Can mortals heal immortals? She wondered in amazement.

No... he's just being a man.

"Don't forget the virginal freak girl thing," she heard herself say, her voice hardening.

She abruptly turned to regard Rob. Her look was stern - except for the conspicuous pout of her lower lip.

"I have to keep this body pure as fucking snow until my coming of age," she went on to duly inform him, "and then *somebody* might, hopefully, care to do the fucking honors," she further stated.

She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to conceal her breasts.

"So, don't get any ideas," she instructed him - sternly, "about . . . well, you know what I mean."

The worried and slightly frightened look on his face made her feel confident again.

"And you keep yourself to yourself."

She was in control again.

"You hear?"

In control of the situation, if not entirely of herself.

Rob averted his eyes until they happened to settle on a nipple, and then he averted them yet again until they'd settled on her thigh. It was so strong, so lean.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," she said softly, trying not to plead.

Trying hard of his own to comply with her ever shifting moods, Rob dutifully looked up into her eyes.

Hana's emotions tumbled for a moment as she saw his face, then she expelled a forceful sigh, and turned her back to him once more.

Rob saw rivulets of perspiration coursing down her back. Despite her girlish moods, her anger, her confusion, more than anything, he wanted to hold her, to reassure her. He dismissed that thought, and tentatively applied the blanket to her back. He paused as he saw her squirm, but felt forgiven when she reached around, and pulled her hair aside for him.

"Is it just me," Rob wondered as he gingerly patted her skin dry, "or has it actually gotten hotter in here?"

"It's gotten hotter," Hana answered. "My pulling that plug generated a lot of friction heat."

She moved slightly so he could attend her other shoulder.

"Got any more bright ideas?"

"I didn't tell you to pull the plug."

At once, she was facing him aghast.

"Of course you told me to pull the fucking plug!"

She snatched the blanket from him, draped it across her back and closed it firmly over her chest.

"I didn't *tell* you, I *suggested* you open it!"

"Oh, and who wanted some fresh air?"

"I didn't know you'd turn the thing into a glowing red salami!"

"What'd you expect of a conical fit, Mr. *ace* mechanic!"

Both of them glared at each other for a long moment, and then Rob sat back down, leaning against the bulkhead as he smiled. "I didn't think that you could actually do it," he admitted.

Hana felt triumphant. She maintained the blanket over her chest as she struggled to gather it over her hips.

"Oh," she granted regally, "thanks for having so much confidence in me."

Rob looked up at her from where he sat. She was having a hard time covering her hips.

"You're amazing," he uttered in a muted tone of rapturous wonder. "Truly amazing."

Hana wasn't about to thank him. She was determined not to, but her eyes spoke for her.

"Do you even know the limits of your strength?" Rob asked her.

"Not really," she answered honestly.

She relaxed - to the point of spreading her knees apart to press a corner of the blanket to her still perspiring groin -- just for him -- and then closed her thighs tightly against it.

"I think you're the one who gets turned on when I exert myself," she dared coyly.

A smile formed on his lips that made her feel light, and faint. She pressed the blanket harder to herself, her fingers barely moving.

"But I don't let it go to my head," he rejoined wryly.

Hana laughed, and Rob laughed with her. She rubbed the blanket over her chest until a nipple imposed another tear in it.

"Oh well," she merely offered that time with a shrug.

"I wonder how Kevlar would hold up against you?" Rob speculated absently.

Hana's glowing face hardened slightly.

"Wouldn't stand a chance," she stated with casual pride.

"You've already tried it?"

She nodded confidently.

"Um-hm," she deigned to mumble. "You heard my fist hitting that stake. Everything gets really hard."

Rob couldn't help but note how she clutched her breast.

"And I can bust out of anything," she assured him.

Rob saw the lengthening shadow through the open belly hatch, and knew he had to chance the subject now.

"The sun's going down," he observed. "We'll get some cooler air in here soon."

Chapter 12

The open belly hatch kept the interior of the Abrams barely tolerable until darkness and cool air descended together.

Rob pondered the wild swing of her emotions, waiting until it was too dark to see the ground beneath the open belly hatch. Far be it for him to ever understand a woman's feelings, although at times, Hana's emotions seemed simple and direct, more like a man's than a woman's. Then she had these mood swings that completely disoriented him.

He glanced at his watch: 7:40PM. Sunset had been at seven. He pushed his troubled thoughts away, and braced himself to slowly lower himself head first through the hatch to look around.

The tarmac was deserted and dark enough to provide cover. He retreated inside to reverse himself and climb down to stand on the hot pavement.

Hana dropped silently to the tarmac behind him, still barefoot.

They both crawled out from under the tank to stand in the darkness between it and the hangar.

She looked like a Nordic fantasy, what with being naked except where her blonde hair fell over her, not to mention being taller in her bare feet than Rob was in his boots.

"We gotta get over there." Rob pointed to the closest hangar. "We should be able to find some work uniforms and water."

Hana dashed past him, flitting lithely from shadow to shadow, moving faster than his eye could follow, a vision of blonde starlight. She reappeared seconds later by the corner of the hangar door, her clear, blue eyes reflecting the faint light.

Rob did his best to duck low and follow in the same shadows, but he felt like a fat bear wallowing through a swamp in comparison to her light-footed dash. When he arrived, he found that she'd peeled one side of the hangar door off its frame.

He squeezed through the opening to find Hana standing in the muted light inside, buttoning up a desert gray khaki uniform shirt with Private's stripes on the arm. The tails flared over her hips, leaving the lower half of her rounded derriere visible. She started to tuck her hair under an oversized work cap.

Rob couldn't help but chuckle, finding that she looked like something out of an Army edition of Playboy, what with her legs so long and bare beneath a khaki shirt.

"I don't think khaki is your best color. But the fit is interesting."

"I bet you say that to all the guys in the locker room."

"They've never assigned me anybody who had legs that long."

She looked at him funny until he turned his back to her and stripped down to don a clean pair of khaki's pants from his flight bag.

"Nice ass, Sarge," she offered, trying to embarrass him now.

"For an old fart maybe," Rob replied, suddenly aware of their age difference again. He ran every day, but exercise could only hold off the aging for so long.

"Do me a favor, and can the old shit."

Rob smiled as he forced his thoughts back to his plan, sketchy as it was. The four stripes of a Master Sergeant on his sleeve would make the two of them look like a work detail. There were enough female soldiers in Iraq to avoid raising any eyebrows, although if anyone looked close enough, Hana would come across as a bit too young to be a grunt.

"Our best bet will be to get into the local CP and figure out where the terrorists are holding your father."

"CP?" Hana asked.

"Command Post. Should be located near the flight line."

She nodded as she walked over to a very large water cooler, and lifted the nearly full twenty-gallon bottle from the machine and started to chug the water down. She drank nearly a quarter of it, her stomach bloating momentarily before her body assimilated the water. She held the bottle out.

"Here, come and get some of this."

Rob walked over as she held the bottle high over his head, pouring half of what was left over him as he swallowed rapidly. His soaked uniform cooled his skin, making him comfortable for the first time in hours.

Hana set the bottle back in place and proceeded to pry open a vending machine with her fingernails, reaching in to grab a few handfuls of crackers and candy bars.

Rob stuffed them in his shirt as Hana squeezed back through the hangar door. He followed her, pausing to watch her bend the door more or less back in place after he exited. It looked effortless.

He gripped her arm and led her around the short end of the hangar, both of them looking for signposts. "What can you see anything along the road over there?"

Squinting her eyes, she began to read off signs that Rob would have needed high-magnification night vision binoculars to see.

She was on her fourth sign when Rob grabbed her arm. "Are you sure that last one said IDF CP?"

She nodded. "An arrow points to the third building from the left."

"IDF stands for Iraq Defense Force, Hana. It's a euphemism for the US command structure. The Iraqi's have never taken full responsibility for their own defense.

"So, that's the building we want?"

Rob scanned the front of the distant building, spotting the high-security fence around it.

"Yeah, I think so. The fence won't be electrified this time, but there will be ground-level sensors and plenty of guards."

He paused as he had an idea. "How far can you jump?"

Hana shrugged. "Never measured."

"Well, given what I've seen of your legs, and that thing with the tree, I'm betting you can go some distance."

"You've been studying my legs?"

"Would you ignore the Mona Lisa if it was in front of your eyes?"

"If I was on a mission, yeah," Hana replied, looking blankly at him for a long moment before turning her back. She secretly smiled, finding that she liked the idea that Rob was watching her that closely.

Rob returned to thinking like a soldier again. "What I need you to do, Hana, is to jump from those trees over there, to there."

He pointed to the right and then swept his finger to the roof of the CP.

"You need to land on the roof top. The trick is to stay high enough when you cross the fence line to keep out of sight. Think you can do that?"

Hana looked back and forth, measuring the distance, deciding it was slightly over a third of a mile. "Yeah, with a running start, maybe. But won't the radar pick me up?"

"If you're that high, moving that fast, they'll assume you're a big bird."

"How high we talking?"

"You should be a couple of hundred feet over the building before you start to fall."

"That's a hell of a jump, Rob."

"You're a hell of a girl."

"Just wish I could fucking fly."

"There will be a guard on the roof," he continued. "Disable him and then take roof access stairway downward. You want to work your way down, floor by floor until you find a room with a big screen, lots of desks and folks on duty. Probably underground. Most desks will have a top surface that's a high-resolution video display. You want to scan those for info on your dad's location."

He looked up at her as she turned back to face him, arms still crossed, her remarkably blue eyes glowing in the dark. "With those eyes, I presume you can read fine print from fifty feet away?"

"Lot further than that," she nodded. "My eyes are better than a hawk's."

Rob took that in stride. “Good. Meet me back at the Abrams once you figure out where your father is. Meanwhile, I’ll find us some transportation.”

Rob turned to fade back into the shadows.

He paused halfway down the side of the hangar, looking back just in time to see a small shadow sailing high into the night sky, nearly overshooting the CP’s roof before landing lightly on the far side.

“And she said she couldn’t fly,” he whispered to himself.

Chapter 13

Hana landed hard enough to sink slightly into the tar roof. She pulled her toes free and began to slink around the HVAC equipment that cluttered the rooftop until she spotted the guard. He was leaning against the fence that protected the south edge of the roof, facing the roof access door as he smoked a cigarette.

Hana considered circling around the roof to approach him from behind, over the fence, but knew she’d be visible from the ground part of the way, and it would take time. The only way was to brazen it out and try to confuse the guard enough to get close to him.

Looking down, she undid three buttons on her khaki shirt and pulled the shirt open to reveal her cleavage. She then stepped boldly out of the shadow, hoping that acting sexy would work as well to distract the guard as it always did in the movies.

The soldier took a deep drag on his cigarette as his eyes rose to focus on her. He shifted his weapon closer to the ready position, but didn’t throw his cigarette away.

“You’re not supposed to be up here,” he shouted. “Halt right there.”

Hana exaggerated the sway of her hips as she continued walking toward him. Hoping to confuse him further, she took off her cap off and shook out her long hair, the pale strands glowing in the starlight as they fell halfway to her waist.

It was a bad move. The soldier stiffened, and tossed his cigarette away. He raised his rifle, clicking the safety off.

It occurred to Hana too late that Army regulations forbid a female soldier to have hair as long as hers. Nor would any soldier give up her boots and walk barefoot on the hot roof.

“I fucking said to halt, lady. **Right now!**”

So much for putting the moves on him, Hana thought sourly. She paused, judging the distance between them at thirty feet. Could she move fast enough to keep him from pulling the trigger? She had to try.

Bending her legs only slightly, she pushed off with her toes.

She almost made it. Her hand was reaching for the end of his rifle when it flashed and a stinging blow deflected her palm upward.

The bullet traveled up the inside of her sleeve to flatten itself painfully in her armpit.

She ignored the pain as she threw a careful punch at the guard before he could fire again, staggering him and dropping him to his knees. Before he could recover, she ripped the rifle from his hands.

The guard groped for his radio, but her hand found it first and a quick squeeze crushed it into junk.

That left her with just one problem. How to keep the guard quiet without injuring him. She had no training in such things, and she was afraid to hit him again, so she went with her instincts. Spinning him

around to hug his back to her chest, she held one hand tightly over his mouth and pinched off his nose with her other hand.

The soldier began to struggle frantically to take a breath, his fingers and nails clawing at her hands. When that didn't work, he jammed his elbow back into her solar plexus hard enough to empty a normal person's lungs, then began kicking the heels of his combat boots into her shins, trying to cause her enough pain to weaken her grip. All standard hand-to-hand techniques.

"I'm not going to kill you," Hana whispered in his ear as she restrained him as gently as she could. "You just can't be awake for a little bit."

He fought against her overwhelming strength until his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell limp in her arms.

She set his unconscious body down beside an HVAC unit, and after making sure he was breathing again, she bent a section of metal conduit around his wrists to form a crude handcuff.

She started to flit across the roof on tiptoes, moving with the grace of a dancer until she reached the building entrance that he'd been guarding. The biggest padlock she'd ever seen secured the door. It had the letters **US Maximum Security** molded into the face.

She debated going back to the soldier and searching for the key, but she was afraid he'd wake up and start yelling.

Instead, she gripped the lock tightly, adjusting her grip until her long fingers wrapped most of the way around it. She squeezed it as hard as she could, and was promptly rewarded with a high-pitched keening as the lock began to vibrate in her hand. Gritting her teeth, she closed her other hand around her first and put both hands to work.

It took every ounce of her youthful strength to force the brittle case-hardened steel to finally shatter with an explosive CRACK, sending steel fragments tinkling across the rooftop like shrapnel.

Unfortunately, between the shout, the muffled gunshot, the radio out of commission and now the sound of breaking and entering, she figured she had only minutes before someone came to investigate.

A brilliant beam of light greeted her as she opened the door. Covering her eyes with one arm, she cursed her oversight in leaving her sunglasses back in the Abrams. Her eyes had always been slow to adjust to changes in light.

Groping for the stairway railing as she blindly descended the steps, she struggled to use her other senses to gain some situational awareness. She was nearly at the bottom of the steps when she heard someone's slow breathing and caught the scent of cheap deodorant and shaving cream. A male soldier. Blinking away her tears, she made out a steel door separating her from the guard. It was locked from the other side.

Determined not to let that slow her down, she braced one foot against the frame, wiggling her toes to get a good grip, and then grabbed the welded handle with both hands. She threw her back into it, and the armored door gave off a horrible popping shriek as it bent her way. She grabbed the edge of the bent door and braced her foot against the wall behind her to shove the door toward its hinges. It folded up like an accordion.

Before the surprised guard could raise his rifle, she slapped it away, spinning him around to hold him until he passed out like the first guard. She crushed his radio like before and dragged the unconscious soldier into a nearby closet.

She finished by straightening out the door as best she could before jamming it back in its frame to make it look closed.

Fortunately, there weren't any other guards on the upper level. Nor any in the stairwell that led down along the north end of the building. Listening carefully for activity, she tiptoed down the stairs until she reached a sub-basement. There she heard the hum of computers and the muffled sound of voices.

Glancing up at the overhead air ducts, she decided to try another kind of movie gimmick. She used her fingernails to pinch off the bolt heads that fastened an access panel to one air duct, and then hoisted herself up, tearing her khakis slightly on the sharp edges. Once inside the duct, she carefully distributed her weight on her chest and hips as she stretched her arms out ahead of her, using her fingertips and toes to silently walk herself along.

She found a grill about twenty feet into the duct that looked down into a room like the one Rob had described. Squinting, she began to scan the documents on each desk. She quickly found a reference to hostages being held at Tuwella, a town just inside Iraq near the Kurdish area. The report said it was receiving heavy support from the Iranians, and according to the briefing sheet, it was an old Al Qaeda stronghold.

The photos on the desktop video display showed a town with many of the streets choked with armored vehicles. She knew enough from her father's books to recognize the latest model of Russian export tank, the "Tjorny Aryol". Known as the T98 series, it was the deadliest tank on the planet.

Scanning further, she found some higher resolution print photos showing a building near the center of the town that had the rounded towers of a mosque.

Three men were standing around the planning table, one of them talking on the phone. Hana brushed the hair from her ear and listened.

"Yes sir, we have confirmation. The third casualty is Sarah Jacobson."

The officer paused to take a deep breath as he listened.

"We don't know anything about rape, sir, but they put her severed head on a stake, just like the others. IRNA is putting up video on the Net as we speak."

Hana felt her heart go cold. Sarah Jacobson was dead? She was one of the best-known reporters in the journalistic world. Her in-depth articles and her precision reporting that made her one of the most recognizable and trusted reporters on the planet. They'd beheaded her and put her head on display for the entire world to see?

Hana balled up her fists as the coldness in her heart turned to fury. She wasn't going to let that happen to her father.

"That's correct, sir," the officer continued on the phone, Hana hearing only one side of the conversation. "They're in a mosque in Tuwella."

"No, sir. Too many civilians around to use precision weapons. We don't have an accurate location on where the hostages are in the mosque in any case."

"Surrounding troops are supported by heavy armor, T90 and 98's. We'd take a lot of casualties going in, sir, and they'd have more than enough time to kill the hostages."

"About every twenty-four hours, sir. Seems as if they're on a schedule."

"No idea who's next, sir, but they seem to be going after the most senior and recognizable hostages first."

"Yes sir, my guess would also be Captain Bjork Nielsen. He's next most senior."

Hana's eyes opened wide as she heard her father's name. He was next to be beheaded?

She took one final look around the room, then glanced at her watch before starting to worm her way back toward the duct exit. She didn't have much time, and she had no idea how to get to this place called Tuwella.

But Rob would know.

Chapter 14

Rob and Hana were a hundred miles from Tuwella four hours later, courtesy of a Blackhawk that had been heading for the Zone. Rob had been stationed in Iraq twice before and knew the protocols well enough to intimidate the young crew chief into letting them board without formal orders. The kid was already scared enough as it was.

The latest Russian weapons, purchased with Iranian oil money, had proven very effective in taking down this older model of Blackhawk.

Once back on the ground near the front lines, Rob found an unattended Bradley, one of the latest Mod 5's with reactive armor. Hana put her fabulous grip to work to break the lock, and he put his maintenance knowledge to good use to bypass the driver's lockout system.

Together they roared off in a cloud of dust, heading toward the quarantine zone. The boundary of the *Zone*, as people called it locally, was more like a WWII-style front line than anything else.

Rob ignored the signs to slow and show his orders, nearly running over the Marine detachment that tried to wave him down. The guards shouted at him to halt, but he floored the accelerator and roared off in a cloud of dust. He prayed the Marines would hold back their anti-tank weapons. Given that he was a friendly and going the wrong way to be a threat, it was a good bet.

Still, he didn't dare give a sigh of relief until he was out of range.

Hana sat beside him, oblivious of Rob's worry, staring intently at the video screen that was their only connection to the outside world.

"How far you figure we can get before the Iranians target us?"

"Not all the way to Tuwella, that's for sure," he replied. "But every mile is one less to go on foot."

She turned to look at him. "Why don't you stay back here, Rob. Near the border. You've done wonders in getting me this far, and I've watched you drive this Bradley enough to know how to do it."

"We're a team, Hana," he answered grimly.

"Yeah, except I can probably survive if we take a round from some T98. You can't."

"Thankfully there aren't any of those in Iraq."

"Wrong. I saw a bunch of them on the surveillance photos back in the CP."

Rob's eyes opened wide. "T98's? Shit. This tin can can't take a round from one of those things, not even with this reactive armor. They've got a god-awful big gun."

"Duh. What did I just say?"

"But what about..."

"This kid's invulnerable, remember."

Rob shook his head. "That electric fence proved that my Kryptonian model for you was way off. You aren't nearly that tough."

"I'm a lot fucking tougher than you are, mortal," she said in a deeper voice.

Rob couldn't help but grin. "Don't worry. Our laser detectors will pick up a range-finder probe before they target us. Plus they're not expecting us, so they'll take a moment to get confirmation from their command before they open fire."

"You're risking your life on that logic?"

"There are worse odds."

Hana said nothing.

Rob glanced over at her as he wrestled with the controls. "How fast can you run anyway?"

She shrugged. "No idea in numbers. But you saw me leap onto the CP didn't you?"

"Yeah," Rob nodded, "I did. But it's still a hundred miles to Tuwella, and you've got to arrive ready to fight. Can you run that far in a couple of hours and not be tired?"

"No idea."

"I thought as much. Until we have to abandon this mount, we ride. We'll bail out the moment we get a skin paint. I'll jam the controls so the Bradley will keep going for a bit, drawing their fire. They'll be enough fireworks after that for us to duck into a ditch or something."

"And then I run the rest of the way, taking out any insurgents that stand in my way?"

"No, you avoid confrontations until you get into the town."

She paused before asking, "But I don't know anything about taking on soldiers, other than one-on-one. Once they figure out what's going on, won't they target me with heavy weapons? I can't take on a T98 with my bare hands."

Rob turned to look at her, noticing the tanned skin that showed through the rips in her khakis. He thought back to the nearly unlimited strength she'd displayed, and the electrical shock she'd endured.

"Says who?"

"You want me to duke it out with a Russian-made tank?"

He grinned. "You'll definitely confuse the hell out of them. As I mentioned before, soldiers don't react well to things outside their training."

"So how do I take one of those things out?"

"Three ways I can think of. One, try to damage the barrel of their main gun. Two, try to jam their turret, or three, damage their tracks badly enough to immobilize them."

"Maybe I can just turn them over on their backs like turtles or something."

"They weigh 60 tons, Hana."

"So?"

Rob stared at her for a moment, and then shook his head. "Better you try to jam the tracks. Shove a big rock into the drive wheels, or tear it apart with your hands if you can."

"While a second tank blasts me?"

"They won't target you when you're that close to a friendly tank. Besides, they won't have a clue what's going on at first. It took me long enough to accept what you can do."

He didn't say that he was still working on that.

Hana smiled as she thought of an amusing tactic. "Hey, how about if I strip off these khakis before I engage?"

Rob's eyebrow lifted. "Hmmm... naked women who can punch out a tank aren't exactly in the Arab play book. Or anyone else's for that matter."

Hana smiled at him. "Finally, he's starting to think like a Valkyrie."

"I've been here in combat a few times," he shrugged, "although not exactly with this kind of armament."

He glanced over at her to see her starting to unbutton her shirt.

"But now that I've figured out what a Valkyrie is all about, it's not so hard to plan how to use you."

Hana smirked as she started to unbutton her torn khaki top. "Use me like a weapon, huh."

"An unstoppable but intensely cute one," he quipped.

She couldn't help but smile. "Well, in that case, I gotta ready my weapons. You keep your eyes on the road, Sarge."

Chapter 15

The next three hours were the luckiest in their lives. Hana climbed up on top of the Bradley and used her keen eyes to search the landscape around them, sometimes leaping hundreds of yards into the air to get a bird's eye view beyond the terrain. Together they managed to avoid contact with any Iranian units until they were within visual distance of Tuwella.

Then their luck ran out.

A roving pair of T98's spotted them, and started to close.

Rob jammed the controls once the enemy tanks started to use their range finders, and he climbed up and dove out the exit just as they'd planned.

That's when Hana changed the rules. Instead of exiting, she grabbed the controls and aimed the Bradley right at the closest T98, hoping to ram it.

She was still a hundred and fifty meters away when the tank's main gun flashed, and then everything went black.

When she woke up, her head spinning, the T98 was rumbling directly toward her. It was all she could do to roll onto her back before the left track started to run over her, the massive weight crushing her deeply into the sand. She held her breath until it passed, and then leaped up to grab the back portion of the track with her hands, letting it carry her forward the length of the tank before she fell in front of it again. There she ran backwards until the tank drove over an area of exposed shale. She finally stopped running and crouched down on her hands and knees.

The tanker foolishly tried to run over her a second time.

Gasping in pain as the track clawed its way over her crouched body, she dug her toes and fingers into the rock and waited. Then, when the strain was the greatest, she straightened her legs in an explosive burst of strength.

To her own amazement, the huge tank tilted to the side and fell upside down to land on a small building.

She didn't have time to worry if the building was unoccupied as a second tank opened fire with its main gun, barely missing her. The turret was tracking her as it tried to spin around, tracks spewing sand, its turbocharged diesel engine roaring.

Reveling in her newfound confidence, Hana ducked low and ran straight at the tank, deciding at the last moment to throw herself bodily into the track between two of the drive wheels.

She struggled to stand on the moving track as she thrust her hands upward, trying to unweight the suspension enough to get the track to dismount from the drive wheels. Instead, she slipped, and the cogged drive wheel tore at her bare legs. It got a grip on her ankle and dragged her into its maw, the cogs chewing their way up her leg until they reached her thigh. The drive wheel jammed there as her thigh muscles proved to be too thick and unyielding to either compress or draw in further. The diesel roared even louder as the viscous transmission took up the slip, delivering a thousand horsepower to the task of crushing her body.

Hana struggled mightily to pull her leg back, but it kept chomping on her like some kind of crazed killer shark. She finally hammered her fists on the drive wheel out of desperation, and it exploded in a blaze of sparks, shattering as it snapped off its axle.

She dragged herself free, only to throw herself at the second drive wheel, wrapping her arms around it to hug it to her chest as she braced her feet against the tank's frame. The entire power of the diesel was now directed into that single wheel, but she held on grimly, trying to overload the engine.

She grimaced as the cogs tore at her bared chest, but the wheel gradually spun slower and slower as smoke and sparks and flames from the friction of steel against skin began to rise, finally igniting the lubricants that covered the wheel. She was engulfed in flames when the big diesel finally coughed and died, overpowered by nothing more than her raw strength.

The hellish roar of machinery suddenly was replaced with silence.

Hana wasn't done with the tank yet. She had to break its legs completely.

She braced her fingers against the upper track housing while digging her fingers into the gap between two sections of the track and pulled outward. On her third try, the heavy track ripped apart in a blaze of sparks.

Now she had to pull its teeth. She leaped up to brace her feet on the forward deck of the tank and slipped her hands under the turret. Lifting upward with all her strength, she heard the steel groan and pop before starting to give off a hellish scream. The shouts and screams of the tankers reverberated from inside the armor as the thick swivel ring of the twenty-ton turret tore explosively apart. She levered one side of the turret up a few more inches, jamming it in its track and rendering it useless forever.

Satisfied that the second tank was out of commission yet the tankers were still alive, Hana jumped down to brush off her hands.

She was promptly blasted off her feet as two huge explosions churned the sand up in front of her. Two more tanks were racing toward her. One of them fired and scored a direct hit on the tank she'd just damaged, the explosion sending her tumbling for fifty feet.

When she looked back, flames were shooting out of the gap she'd torn under the turret. The men she'd tried to keep alive were screaming as they burned alive.

Horrified, she knew there was nothing she could do for them in time. She spun around instead and began running toward the edge of the village.

The tanks started firing on her by the time she'd traveled ten yards, three powerful near misses exploding to throw her off her feet, peppering her skin with shrapnel. Fortunately, the billowing sand from the explosions hid her well enough for her to make it to the first building.

Chapter 16

Mustafa Al-Sa'ud was shouting in Arabic as his men struggled to haul the handcuffed hostages out of the fortified basement of the old mosque when the ground shook from a violent explosion. He grabbed for his radio.

“<What’s going on?>”

“<Someone’s attacking from the east road.>” a frightened voice shouted back at him.

“<Americans?>” Mustafa stepped outside to look up into the empty sky. The Americans never went anywhere without air cover.

“<We don’t know, my brother. One of the T98’s just turned upside down and blew up.>”

“<Upside down? Speak sense!>”

“<The attack was made by a single...>” the radio crackled and the transmission ended.

“<Report. What kind of attack?>” Mustafa thundered into the radio. All he heard in return was more static. Cursing, he set the radio down and ordered two of his men to go and observe what was happening at the edge of the town and report back directly to him.

Chapter 17

Hana ran along the bottom of a dry irrigation ditch. Above her, a dozen soldiers and two T98’s were tracking her. The T98 was firing its heavy machine gun, the huge bullets kicking up clouds of choking sand just above her head.

The ditch started to grow shallower as it approached the village. She paused against the dirt wall, and then made a run for the buildings at the edge of town.

Her long hair streamed out behind her as she raced toward the closest buildings, her feet moving far faster than humanly possible.

The soldiers fired at her, but most of their rounds kicked up sand behind her feet.

She was only thirty yards from the first building when a rifle bullet slammed painfully in the small of her back, folding her almost in half before it sent her flying. She picked herself up, ignoring the sting, only to have a far more massive blow land against her right shoulder. The impact spun her around crazily in mid-air to land head first, her face plowing a short trench in the sand.

Shaking her head as she spit out a mouthful of sand, she flexed her aching shoulder. One of the heavy machine gun rounds from a T98 must have hit her. She looked around for Rob, but couldn’t see him in the dust clouds. They’d separated after he’d jumped clear of the Bradley.

She continued what she'd started, picking herself up to run as fast as she could, only to find the soft sand made it hard to maintain much speed. She was knocked down once more when a bullet clipped her left calf to trip her up.

She finally rounded the corner of the first house and skidded to a stop in front of the open front door, mesmerized as she saw the pleading, brown eyes of a terrified Iraqi family stared back at her.

She started to lift her hand and smile to reassure them, forgetting for the moment that she was nude, when the entire building seemed to bulge outward. She saw the Iraqi’s bodies, large and small, disintegrating before her very eyes.

The huge explosion picked her up and threw her half a block further into the town. She landed hard on her back on the rough paving bricks. Trying to stand, she was overcome by a wave of dizziness, only to stumble and fall back to her knees, her tangled hair covering her face.

Her eyes were wide with the horror of what she'd seen. The innocent Iraqi family was dead, their bodies torn to fragments by the exploding HEAT shell from one of the T98's.

A shell that had been aimed at her.

Dazed and filled with grief, she pulled the hair from her face to find herself facing two soldiers in desert brown uniforms. One of them simply stared at her, while the other raised his Kalashnikov rifle and fired a quick burst at her.

Two painful THUDS slammed against her chest to throw her backward.

She instinctively put her hand out to block the next bullet, only to have it nick her wrist before slamming painfully into her sternum. A fourth round caught her in the delicate hollow of her neck, setting off a spasm of pain. She grabbed for her throat as her trachea closed off, and her gasping cough turned to nausea as she struggled for air. She fell to her knees to vomit up the contents of her stomach.

Gasping for breath between spasms, she barely had the presence of mind to dig her fingers into the vomit-soaked paving bricks and tear one free. She launched it at the soldiers, sending them diving for cover.

Several seconds passed before she was finally able to take a full breath, during which a stray round caught her left shoulder and flipped her on her side. Breathing deeply, she used the rush of returning strength to get back to her feet and throw a second brick at the cowering soldiers.

She was rewarded with another burst of Kalashnikov fire that slammed into her stomach, doubling her over, but not hurting as much as the ones that had hit her chest. She made a diving lunge to the side to throw off the shooters' aim, somersaulting across a small square, grabbing two more bricks on her way to a hiding place behind the central fountain.

More bullets began to chip away the rock wall just above her.

She waited until the firing slowed, growing more and more afraid that she was going to have to kill the soldiers to get out of the square. The firing began to intensify instead of slowing down.

She gritted her teeth and counted to three, then leaped up to wind her arm up to throw the bricks at the soldiers. She was halfway through the motion when a vehicle burst into the square from a side street. It was moving fast, its unmuffled diesel engine roaring.

A quick glance showed that the driver was waving wildly at her.

It was Rob!

Chapter 18

Hana dropped the bricks as the truck raced in front of her, Rob slowing just enough to reach out and grab her hand before sweeping her into the back seat with his strong arm. He floored the accelerator to skid around another narrow corner to head toward the village center.

Rob glanced back at Hana, finding she looked terrible. Her skin was blackened, her hair a wet, tangled mess of dust and bits of shiny shrapnel. A few red spots pocked her skin.

"Are you O.K.?" he shouted over the roar of wind and engine.

"They shot me. In the neck!"

“And that’s a problem why?” Rob shouted again. “You keep telling me you’re a goddess.”

Hana glared angrily at him as she massaged her neck. “Fuck you.”

“So you offered. But for now, you gotta pull your shit together and act like the warrior you claim to be.”

Hana continued to glare at him as she massaged her throat, angry that one spot had proven to be so sensitive. She gripped the steel doorframe hard enough to feel it bend.

“O.K. If kicking ass is what you want, Sarge, then you just watch what happens to the next asshole who tries to stop us.”

Chapter 19

Mustafa was shouting for his men to finish loading the hostages into two trucks when he heard another rattle of machine gun fire close to their location. He screamed for the drivers to go, and the trucks lurched and roared off, heading west through the village streets. He turned back and mounted one of the older T90’s that was parked in a side street, directing the commander to head toward the sound of battle. He was determined to slow the Americans down long enough for his men to get the hostages to the Iranian border.

The tank’s treads skidded on the paving bricks as it rounded a corner too fast.

The first thing he saw upon entering that street was an old Russian Armored Personnel Carrier skidding sideways across the street to overturn and crash through the front of a bank building. Two Iranian soldiers followed the APC, their bodies tumbling into the opposite wall.

Mustafa had no idea what kind of weapon could cause such damage, for there was no sign of an explosion, but he knew that whatever it was, it was an infidel weapon. He screamed for the gunner to lower the muzzle of his 125mm main gun and fire into the cloud of dust that the APC and soldiers had flown out of.

The cannon fired, and the resulting explosion filled the street with flying shrapnel.

Mustafa was astonished a few seconds later when a blonde girl came flying out of the flames and sparks to leap up onto his turret, landing near the base of the tank’s long gun barrel.

The Iranian driver froze as he stared at his periscope, watching her wrap long, bare legs obscenely around the thick base of the gun. A fantastic array of muscular curves shaped her legs, and the heavy steel gave off a deafening squeal that echoed inside the tank.

Then, before anyone could react, she leaped upward to somersault over the turret and disappear down the street.

The driver braked the tank to a stop, and the gunner leaped out the top turret, screaming that the goddess Anahita had just attacked them. Anahita was the ancient Persian goddess of warfare that many soldiers still worshipped. All three crewmembers climbed out of the tank to kneel beside him in the street.

Mustafa knew it was impossible that the girl had been Anahita. He was fighting on the side of Allah, and if there were such a goddess, she would be fighting for the praise of Allah too, not helping the infidels. Worse than that, she most definitely wouldn’t have hair the color of gold or lacked clothing.

No, this was just another plot by the imperialists in America. He’d heard rumors of experiments there which focused on making improved humans, warriors and athletes, drawing upon the forbidden powers of the demon-spawn in hell itself.

“She’s not a goddess, you idiots,” Mustafa screamed at the tank crew. “Just another infidel from the Great Satan. Stronger and faster than our soldiers perhaps, but if you shoot her, she’ll bleed like any other woman.”

The men didn’t believe him as they continued to pray to Anahita for mercy.

She granted them none, for Mustafa drew his gun and shot all three of them in the head, screaming that they were cowards.

A bigger explosion closer to the village center pulled Mustafa’s attention back to the battle. He leaped off the tank and commandeered the first vehicle he found, screaming at the driver to head toward the sound of fighting. He knew it was no coincidence that the sound came from the direction of the mosque.

The infidel was trying to free his hostages!

He was nearly back at the mosque when a burst of heavy machine gun fire ripped through his commandeered car, killing the driver and sending the truck careening into the side of a building. Shaken by the friendly fire and collision, it was all Mustafa could do to kick the door open and drop to his belly on the sidewalk.

He looked up to see the blonde girl struggling to stand in the middle of the square, a fusillade of bullets striking her, her skin dimpling deeply get not yielding, her entire body shaking like a leaf in a thunderstorm. She dove behind the central fountain just as soldiers started to fire from all directions now.

A heavy machine gun began to fire raggedly from the far side of the square, the bullets missing the girl to kill the soldiers closest to Mustafa, the bullets skimming past him as they ricocheted from side to side down the stone walls of the street. He dove for cover.

When the gunner stopped to reload, Mustafa lifted his eyes just enough to see an explosion of sparks in front of the mosque, and a billow of blonde hair flying out of it. The infidel was cowering behind a burning APC now.

Grinning fiercely as he saw two of his men advancing on the woman from the back, he ran forward to jerk the RPG launcher out of the hands of another soldier and aimed it. He was going to kill this heathen himself, if for no other reason than to convince his men that she wasn’t something supernatural.

The heavy machine gun opened fire from behind her just before he could launch, and the impacts slammed the woman into the burning wreckage, spoiling his shot.

She pulled herself free, looking a bit dazed as she stood shakily in the open.

Mustafa grinned as he aimed again, and this time pulled the trigger. The warhead raced down the street to impact the middle of her body.

She disappeared in the flash, the shockwave peeling open the side of the burning APC and tearing a huge hole in the street.

The firing stopped as Mustafa walked triumphantly into the square, tossing his launcher to the side. He started looking for the girl’s remains, only to have one of his men point excitedly at a hole in the mud brick wall of the police station that was opposite the mosque. The soldier screamed that the woman’s body had flown into that building.

Mustafa couldn’t believe that. The RPG should have torn her to shreds, but he waved two men that way just to be sure.

They stepped through the hole, and a moment later began firing on full automatic.

Puzzled, Mustafa raced toward the police station to see for himself, only to have one of the soldiers fly back out the hole in the wall, one side of his face deformed from a crushing blow. He pulled his

handgun from its holster and stepped through the gaping hole just in time to see the blonde woman wrestling with one of his men. She gripped him with her legs and the sickeningly wet sound of breaking bones filled the air.

Horrified that this naked infidel was injuring his men in such a depraved way, he aimed and fired twice into the back of her head, the impacts knocking her forward in a cloud of flying hair.

Instead of dying, the woman used the momentum from the impacts to somersault further forward, then leaped back to her feet as she hit the far wall.

Her eyes snapped around to meet Mustafa's. They glowed cold blue eyes as she snarled like a wild animal.

Mustafa instinctively dove to the side as she leaped toward him, and she soared over his body and back out the hole and into the street.

Chapter 20

Rob heard the heavy machine gun fire resume in the direction of the mosque, and ducked out of the building he'd been sheltering in. He stepped over Mustafa's dead tank crew and climbed into the abandoned T90, marveling for a brief moment at the way Hana had squeezed the barrel into an egg shape. Fortunately, the diesel was still idling.

He struggled with the unfamiliar controls for a few moments before finding a way to engage the forward gear. Stomping on the left track pedal, he spun the tank spun around in the narrow street. The useless barrel tore a long gash through the stone buildings that lined one side as he jammed the accelerator down hard and raced after the Arab commander.

He found Hana near the entrance of the mosque, soldiers firing on her from four sides; the impacts throwing her around like a rag doll. She tried to crawl closer to the mosque, only to have more and more soldiers concentrate their fire on her. They were determined to keep her from entering their holy building.

They were so frantic that their crossfire and ricochets were having a devastating effect on their fellow soldiers. A dozen of them collapsed around all four sides of the square as Rob watched.

Then an officer that Rob recognized as the former tank commander screamed at the crew of the one intact APC to fire, and their 40mm chain-gun began its staccato rattle. The shells tore basketball-sized holes in the paving bricks around Hana until one of them caught her in the side, and she was blown the rest of the way across the square to land against the stone wall of the mosque.

Rob roared into the square at full speed, guiding the tracks of his tank on either side of Hana's body as he smashed halfway through the mosque wall. The chain-gun opened up on his tank now, the CLANG CLANG CLANG of impacting shells nearly deafening him, with the lighter PING of small arms fire adding to the mind-bending din.

He just hunkered down and took the fire, praying that Hana would figure out that he was protecting her with the tank's armor.

A sizzle of sparks soon followed an even louder BANG to send smoke billowing through the cockpit. The chain-gun had found the softer armor around the engine. The engine temperature gauges started to go off the scale, a sure sign that the cooling system had been hit.

Rob couldn't wait any longer. He floored the accelerator to back up, and then spun the tank around to head down a narrow street toward the west. The right side of his tank sheared off the side of a building before he got the tank straightened out.

He'd made it less than half a block before a powerful explosion slammed him back into his seat and the engine rattled and died, sending thicker clouds of smoke into the cockpit. He scrambled out the top hatch, eyes burning, knowing the tank was nothing more than a deathtrap now.

Miraculously, he was able to hide behind the front of the turret without getting hit by the barrage of small arms fire that was still pinging off the stern armor. There he found Hana crawling out from beneath the front of the tank, her eyes rolling around in their sockets, her body covered in a hundred red pockmarks.

He jumped down to scoop her up in his arms and throw her over his shoulder. His adrenaline-enhanced strength made her feel light as he began to run for the relative safety of the next intersection.

He'd almost made it to safety when a soldier stepped out of a doorway and aimed his rifle at him, shouting something in Arabic. Rob instinctively shifted Hana's limp form further forward and kept running, using her as a human shield.

The soldier fired, catching Hana's lower back, the powerful impact stopping Rob in his tracks. He stumbled and nearly lost his footing, but managed to start running again. He ran right into the soldier, using Hana's body as a battering ram. The soldier went down hard and Rob ran over him.

He rounded the corner to suddenly find himself in a quiet street. The walls of the nicely painted houses were free of bullet pocks. He ran half the length of that block before another tank pulled into the intersection ahead, its turret swiveling his way.

He quickly sidestepped through a doorway into a private house, scattering furniture and children in his path until he kicked the back door open and stumbled into a narrow alleyway. There he lost his footing on the rough stone and dropped Hana, falling on top of her.

He was gasping for breath as he felt Hana beginning to stir beneath him, her eyes opening to dart left and right. Before he could move, she leaped to her feet, sending him flying backward to slam painfully into a wall.

"Where is he?" she demanded. "Where is my father being held?"

Rob's ears were ringing so loudly from the explosions that he could barely hear her, relying instead on reading her lips.

"They're in two trucks heading for the border."

"What border?" Hana screamed, balling her fists up, muscles straining.

"Iranian border." He pointed to the right. East. "That way."

Hana turned right and ran to the corner.

Rob limped up behind her to see that there were two damaged vehicles to the right, but the street was empty to the left.

"We'll need better wheels than those if we're going to catch them."

He headed left down the street before slowing to poke his head around another corner to survey the cross street. A T90 was parked to the right, its engine idling, its long barreled turret aimed his way.

Hana arrived to stand behind him, pressing against him as she held her long hair behind her and peeked around the corner as well.

"Damn it," she cursed as she stepped back into the alley, leaning heavily against the wall.

"You O.K.?"

“Yeah. Just need a minute to catch my breath. Dizzy as hell. Got shot in the head too many times back there.”

“Never heard that phrase used before. Once is usually more than enough.”

She nodded while running her fingers through her hair, the blonde strands cascading over her shoulders again as she shook her head slowly from side to side, massaging her temples.

Rob didn't have time for that. “Look, Hana, I know you're hurting, but I need you to capture that tank. With all its hardware intact this time.”

She shook her head vigorously. “They looked pretty well buttoned up. I'd have to get at them through the armor, and that'll make a mess of the tank. Take time too.”

“The top hatch is easier to open than the one on the bottom of the Abrams. You think you can do it again?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“We might be able to find some other vehicle, but the odds of getting into a firefight first are too great.”

“O.K.” she growled. “If you want a tank, I'll get you a fucking tank.”

She straightened up, only to wobble a bit before Rob steadied her. Encouragingly, the red dots were fading fast as a wave of healthiness slowly expanded from her chest, her skin glowing with that same white light he'd seen when she healed him. Fascinated, Rob realized that her phenomenal healing abilities were now turned inward.

Hana took a deep breath and crouched down low to slip around the corner. She launched herself toward the tank, moving almost too fast to track with the naked eye as she leaped from fifty yards away to land cat-like on the top of the turret. She started to punch and tear frantically at the top hatch, the loud ring of steel on steel echoing down the stone walls of the street.

The good Russian armor dented from her blows, but it didn't yield.

She resorted to kneeling over the slightly raised hatch to put her strongest muscles to work again. Squeezing her knees inward, she tried to collapse the hatch collar with the strength of her thighs as she clawed frantically at the steel.

It gradually bent far enough for her to get a purchase on it.

She slipped her fingers into the gap, and her back became a maze of hard muscle, the steel tendons of her wrists and hands standing out as she ripped the heavy hatch noisily from its hinges in a shower of sparks and shattered steel.

Leaning into the opening, Hana's head snapped back as a bullet pinged from her forehead. Yet instead of hesitating like any sane person would, she dove headfirst through the opening.

A cacophony of shouts and muffled gunfire echoing from the hatch opening before two uniformed bodies were launched from it. They landed hard in the street, bones broken but still alive.

Rob took a final look around to make sure no one else was aiming down the street, and then took off at a run toward the tank.

A third body flew out the open hatch, forcing him to dive to the side as it landed with a wet thud beside him. He'd barely picked himself up when Hana's blonde head popped out the hatch to roll yet another soldier down the side of the tank.

The soldier crawled painfully toward the closest doorway as Hana waved for Rob to join her.

He climbed up the rough armor, skinning his hands and knees before Hana grabbed his arm and pulled him the rest of the way up. They both scrambled inside, and she twisted what was left of the hatch steel back into a crude cover for the opening.

She was grinning fiercely when she turned back to look at Rob, her white teeth and sparkling eyes shining from beneath the filth that coated her skin, her firm nipples making it clear that every aspect of her body was excited.

“Now you look like a proper Valkyrie,” Rob grinned back at her. “Bare-breasted, excited and ready to kick some serious bootie.”

She stuck out her tongue and crossed her arms to cover herself.

Rob chuckled as he undid his shirt and offered it to her. “You did good back there, Hana. You ready for some more?”

“I’m ready to get the fuck out of here, that’s what I’m ready for. With my father.”

She pulled his warm shirt on and did up a couple of buttons, finding that she felt much more comfortable wearing it. Clearly, the thin fabric was useless to protect her against anything but gawking eyes, but Rob’s body warmth felt good and she liked the smell of him on the shirt.

Rob was about to make another comment about the way she seemed to be enjoying the fighting, but thought better of it, deciding this was probably just a game for her. If human kids her age thought they were invulnerable, he could only imagine how a Valkyrie felt, especially after taking some very heavy fire without permanent injury.

What worried him was her inexperience. The faces of the men she’d injured or killed would haunt her dreams later.

He pushed those thoughts away as he squinted into the periscope and fed max power to the diesel, and roared off toward the east side of the town.

Chapter 21

The journey from the village center to the east side was a hard fought battle. Their tank absorbed two glancing shots from another T90, and barely managed to outmaneuver a deadly by mechanically ailing T98.

If Hana hadn’t leaped out of the tank to throw herself bodily into another T98’s left track, jamming it so it crashed through a wall, they wouldn’t have made it.

Finally, they were outside the village and racing down a narrow canyon and out onto the broad desert floor heading for Iran. Two dust plumes ahead of them marked the trucks with the hostages.

Rob watched them for five minutes before cursing loud enough to be heard over the roaring diesel.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. They’re pulling away.”

Hana shouted back at him in a shockingly loud voice. “Is this all the speed this piece of shit has in it?”

Rob nodded as he glanced at her, seeing the shredded remains of his shirt as it barely covered her shoulders now.

“Guess I didn’t pick a very good tank. 72 kph is all I can get out of it.”

“I can do better than this on foot,” Hana shouted back again. “I’m going after them.”

She climbed out the top hatch and leaped off the front of the tank before Rob could protest.

He very nearly ran her over before her legs got up to speed, and then she pulled rapidly away, easily moving at three times his speed, her blonde hair streaming out behind her like a comet trail. The remaining bits of his shirt tore free and fluttered to the ground in her wake.

He eventually lost sight of her as she ran far enough ahead to drop below the summit of a distant ridgeline.

Chapter 22

Aboard the Iranian trucks taking the hostages to Iran

It was stuffy, hot and incredibly dusty in the back of the canvas-covered trucks.

Captain Bjork Nielsen held a rag over his mouth the way he'd instructed the rest of his men to do, using the cloth to filter at least some of the choking dust. The two Iranian soldiers who sat by the back of the truck didn't seem to be affected by the dust, despite having to breathe the worst of it. They sat with rifles ready, safeties off, and their eyes alert and suspicious.

Bjork had pinned his hopes on getting the drop on the guards as they drove, but he could see now that Mustafa had assigned top caliber men to guard them. He assumed that a Delta team had tried to rescue them back in Tuwella, and Mustafa wasn't taking any chances now.

They bounced along for an hour before the truck left the soft sand and began to bounce over a rough road strewn with rocks. The men hung on desperately, only to be thrown out of their seats when the truck suddenly swerved and nearly tipped over.

It coasted slowly to a stop as one of the guards stuck his head out from the canvas at the back of the truck and started to yell something at the driver.

He heard a series of flesh to flesh impacts, but they came at a speed that lead him to believe that there was a full-out donnybrook going on outside. As abruptly as the 'fight' had started, it stopped, leaving in its wake a deeply unnerving stillness. The need to know quickly outweighed Bjork's concern for safety. He slowly parted the canvas flaps just enough for him to see outside.

The first thing he saw was their Iranian captors sprawled out on the ground just behind the truck. The other truck was stopped about thirty yards further back. He saw the vehicle's driver's side door lying on the ground along with the driver. He wasn't moving. The passenger side door of the cab was also open, and the Iranian who'd been riding 'shotgun' was sprawled out on the ground close by.

Bjork pulled his head back into the darkness.

"Looks like we got friendlies," he informed them. "The Iranians I can see are out of commission. Phelps, the guards are disarmed. Weapons are just outside. Let's you and me see if we can get to them, then find out what's going on. The rest of you stay put until one of us gets back to you."

Both men slipped out the back to disappear.

In the back of the second truck, the men were also waiting after the hellacious scuffle they'd heard had stopped. Lieutenant Jeff Cody was about to risk looking outside when the flaps suddenly parted like the Red Sea, and there stood a goddess, holding them apart.

She was very tall, blonde, lithe, and totally nude. She seemed completely unconcerned about her state of undress as she quickly looked about the dark interior.

"Captain Nielson!" she anxiously addressed everyone. "I'm looking for Captain Bjork Nielson!"

"He's in the first truck," Cody told the woman, the urgency of her tone overcoming the shocked distraction of her presence.

She jerked her head to the side to look toward the other truck.

"What happened?" Cody quickly asked her, trying to keep her attention.

A look of confusion came over her singularly beautiful features as she turned back to face him.

"Uhm," she uttered, seeming to need a major change of mental bearings. "You guys can come out now."

Nobody moved, all eyes watching her in a state of stunned wonder. They saw her smile, hesitantly at first, then with more certainty.

"Seriously. It's all cool out here," she assured them, still seeing the blank looks in their faces. "Like in, you know, safe!"

They were still disoriented, and they clearly remembered the Iranians' promise to shoot anyone who tried to escape.

"Uh," she said, then, "look - I'll show you."

She disappeared in a blink of an eye.

Cody watched the flaps of the canvas close, still completely dumbstruck.

"Did I just see what I think I just saw?" a soldier at Cody's shoulder ventured to ask.

Cody didn't answer. Instead, he gritted his teeth and threw himself through the flaps, landing in a crouch behind the truck. There, a few yards off, was the blonde woman holding a fully grown Arab man in both of her outstretched hands at the level of her shoulders, showing them off like a fisherman did his catch.

"See?" she called to them. "No problem," she added with an easy shrug of her shoulders.

Both the Arabs hung completely limp in her hands. The dead weight of two hundred and eighty pound men seemed not to bother her. Several of the men in the truck stuck their heads out the opening.

"Jesus!" one of them uttered in muted amazement.

"Quiet!" Cody told him.

Hana lowered the men in her grip, and casually walked back to the truck - dragging the Arabs with the alternating swing of her arms to balance her stride, seemingly unnoticing of their presence.

"They won't be giving you any more trouble today," she further assured. "But they'll live."

Bjork stepped around the second truck just in time to observe the spectacle.

"My God!" he swore, dropping the captured automatic he was holding into the sand, staring as a gloriously naked blonde woman emerged from behind the other truck, carrying an unconscious Iranian soldier in her hand - his weight apparently nothing to her. He knew instantly that the woman had to be a Valkyrie, but never, in all his life, had he ever expected to see...

"Hana!?" he gasped

Her face had lost all expression when her eyes met his. She dropped the unconscious soldier, and appeared ready to run to him.

Bjork was almost too shocked to react, but he instinctively raised his hand, telling her stay put. They both knew the rule about letting others know that he had any knowledge of the Valkyries. Let alone that she was his daughter.

Hana stayed as she was bidden, but the frown on her face told Bjork that his gesture had been the wrongest of things. Then, before he could do, or say, anything more, she disappeared behind the truck.

Bjork's emotions reeled as he sagged against the fender of the truck. How many times had he pushed her away like that? How many times had she pushed him back?

"Dammit!" he swore at himself.

He ran to the other truck as fast as he could. When he rounded the back, all he could see was the other soldiers.

"Where is she!" he demanded of the desperately. "Where'd she go?"

The men looked befuddled for a moment, then one of them waved toward the paralleling gully. "If you're asking about the babe, sir, she went off that way."

Bjork noted the direction the soldier was indicating before he thundered, "My - !" He stopped himself - just barely.

Brimming with paternal fury, he marched up to the soldier, and placed his commanding self in the young man's face. "She is *not* - a 'babe', as you so unfortunately made the costly mistake of calling her," he seethed with deliberate care at the man. "Understood, soldier!"

"Yes... yes, sir!" was the young man's replied with a wide-eyed stare.

"Now get those fucking thoughts out of your head," he ordered the man, "and join up with the others."

He turned to the others. "All of you! Move out!"

His order was quickly followed, and in almost no time he was alone. He looked in the direction the soldier had indicated, and saw Hana not far off standing with her back to him. He thought her gesture fitting, considering how often he'd had to turn his back to her.

He missed her so.

"Fuck the rule," he muttered, and then he started walking toward her. He studied her tall form as he approached, scarcely believing that this goddess-like creature was his daughter. She'd always kept herself completely covered since she'd entered puberty, and now she looked so much like her mother.

She saw him coming, and quickly scrambled further down into the gully, out of sight.

"Hana!" he called to her when he was still some distance off. "Don't you run away from me!"

Hana had turned to face him as Bjork reached the rim of the old drainage. He could readily see the years of pain playing on her features, but there was also something else. His baby had seen the thick of battle. She had seen chaos, death and devastation. She had seen insanity, and madness. She had seen mortals at their worst.

"I was afraid I wouldn't reach you in time," Hana said haltingly as he began to slip and slide down the side of the gully to join her. "I was..." she said again, trying to smile, but couldn't manage it.

He was so sorry.

"Oh Daddy, I was so afraid!"

She fell against him, and he wrapped his arms tightly around her. He swore to God he would never let her go again. All the fears, the worries suddenly were released, and she shook in his arms, tears

running down her cheeks as she sobbed. He held her with all the strength he had, and he gave thanks to whatever gods there were to feel her strong arms hold him back.

"Hana," Bjork asked his only child as she clung to him, "what in God's name are you doing here? How did you get here?"

He felt her hold him tighter.

"An angel brought me to you," she confided as she rested her head on his shoulder.

Bjork frowned, and then he guided her back far enough so he could look at her. "Are you O.K.?"

She nodded as he quickly pulled his shirt off.

"Your mother's here too?" he asked as he handed her his shirt.

Hana laughed. "The invisible woman. Hardly."

"Then how..."

"You remember Sergeant York? Rob?"

"He... he brought you here?" Bjork asked, dumfounded.

"You told him to keep an eye on me. So he did."

"I'll see him in the goddamned stockade!" Bjork roared. "I'll see him court marshaled - stripped of rank - and his pension too! I trusted that son-of-a-... gun! He won't have an... a *buttocks* when I get through with him!"

Hana could help but smile as her father raged. Rob had been worried about this moment, but she just let her father go on, standing a few feet away, watching him rant, still holding the shirt he'd given her. It hung from her upraised hands between her breasts, the collar damp with his sweat poised beneath her nose.

He'd left her as a girl in the care of another man, and now both of them knew that she wasn't a girl anymore. She was a Valkyrie, and she had nothing to hide.

"Dad!" she finally told him. "Dad... mellow out. It's cool."

Her words brought a pause in his rant, and then silence, and then gradually acceptance of what he knew must be. He could see that Hana knew that as well, and they regarded one another as father, and child, for what would be the last time. He remembered. She remembered. Both knew what was at hand. She required but one thing more of him, and he gave it willingly with a smile, and a nod.

"Thank you. For coming."

Hana felt fulfilled. She'd wanted to say so many things to him, but now all her questions bore an answer, and her doubts were stilled. She held the shirt against herself - just as a little girl would do, then she approached, and then turned to walk past him, looking toward her future.

Bjork turned and watched her go. Her head held high, her chin thrust forth, Hana took the shirt by the sleeves, and swung it over her head behind her back. The father watched the shirt drift lower until it came to settle just below the dimples in her sacrum where Hana drew the sleeves together, and tied them in a knot across her hips.

"Alright, gentlemen," she officially addressed the soldiers as she approached them, "we need to get you out of here. I'm open to suggestions."

She definitely had their attention, being bare-breasted and all.

"Who in the hell are you?" one of the soldiers asked.

"One of those GenTechs," another answered.

"Right," Hana said, quickly improvising as she took his innocent cue.

She alone heard the sound of the approaching diesel. "And I'm not alone."

She turned her smiling eyes down the road. "And he should be coming over that ridge any minute."

"You sure it's him?" Bjork asked Hana as the turret of a Russian-made tank came into view.

He watched his daughter carefully, and saw Hana smile as she looked at Rob's tank.

"It's definitely him," she said.

Bjork set his jaw, finding that her enthusiasm grated on him.

He turned back to his men.

"Round up all the supplies you can find," he told them. "I'm going to rendezvous with our . . . *other* friendly."

Bjork walked rapidly toward the tank as the men set to work. Hana watched her dad go off to meet Rob, though the gruff tone he'd used to address the men did make her wonder.

"Uh, Miss?"

Hana turned to see a soldier at her side. He was trying very hard to focus on her eyes.

"I think we have some extra clothes . . . that is, if you'd care to . . . you know . . ."

"I'm fine, thank you," Hana told him simply.

He looked at her, and he could see the dignity beyond her beauty.

"Yes ma'am," he replied, his eyes finally wandering. "You most certainly are."

Though it was still mid-morning, the intense Mid-Eastern sun quickly had placed Hana's body out of its normally arctic comfort zone, and she was sweating profusely again.

She turned to the soldier. "You got any water?"

"Yeah..." he said, turning to unbuckle the canteen from his belt. He handed it to her.

She was about to hoist it to dump over her face when she saw the way the soldier was looking at her.

"You sure you can you spare this?"

The young man started awake as though he'd been lost in a trance. Hana frowned to observe a curious glaze in his eyes.

"Uh - yeah," the young man stammered, "sure . . ."

Hana smiled at him a bit self-consciously.

"Thanks," she said.

She took a long drought, then raised the canteen to play the flow of water over her face using her other hand to distribute it over her throat, and around her neck.

She paused in her refreshment when she felt his eyes on her. She frowned to observe the glaze in his eyes had become more pronounced.

"You're sure this is okay?" she asked again, tentatively rubbing the cool moisture over her chest.

The young man started again.

"Uh - yeah," he said, "sure . . . "

Hana's frown deepened as she began applying the water again, moving the flow from breast to breast.

"Are you alright?" she queried of the soldier. "You . . . seem to have a problem repeating yourself."

Her other hand made sure the water covered her everywhere.

"Uh," the young man said, "yeah . . . "

Weird, thought Hana.

"... sure..." the young man continued.

Hana considered him a moment longer, then shrugged, turned and walked away. She poured some water down her back as she went. Her other hand scratched an itch at the base of her spine, and then smoothed the flow of water over a cheek of her behind.

And here I'm thinkin' I'm freaky, she mused.

Chapter 23

Three hundred meters away, Rob brought his captured tank to a stop, and then accessed the vehicle's periscope to take a look outside. He felt an unexpected rush of pride at what he saw. Both trucks were stopped just over the rise. All of the Iranians he could see were lying on the ground unconscious, and the ones he couldn't see he imagined to be likewise. The hostages were standing in a loose group beside one of the trucks.

"You did it..." he sighed to himself, taking a moment to feel the warming sense of satisfaction. "I don't believe it, but . . . you did it."

He reset the visual focus on the periscope to see that all the men had turned to look his way, and then Hana stepped out from their midst, and waved at him.

"Aw, Jeez," he moaned, and then he had to marvel in amazement for what he knew had to be the umpteenth time as he admired her unaffected nudity. "If there's something to be said for having no shame," he mused, "you sure know how to say it, cutie."

His next look through the periscope showed Captain Bjork Nielson standing by Hana's side.

Rob smiled as he saw the way Hana seemed more comfortable walking around bare-breasted than she was bottomless. That made a strange kind of strange sense to Rob. Hana was a warrior now, and like all Valkyries; she'd expunged the last of her shame.

She was unconscious of his eyes on her as she turned her back to her father, and tied her hair up on her head before pouring a canteen of water over her shoulders and chest to cool off.

Rob zoomed the scope in until it framed Hana's upper body, watching in fascination as the water droplets found their way to her nipples, then dwelled there for a brief second before falling to the ground, a new drop replacing each one that fell. She took a final long drink from the canteen, turning to the side until her body was startlingly profiled against the distant mountains, her dramatic figure combining with her nudity and the water droplets to make her look stunning. His crosshairs, which tracked his eye movements, gradually shifted to settle on her breast.



He was reaching up to readjust the scope when Hana turned to give him a baleful look, seemingly able to sense his eyes on her despite the third-mile distance.

He quickly reduced the magnification, only to see the Captain stalking his way. He watched as Bjork stopped just in front of the tank.

Rob popped his head out the hatch, grinning, wanting nothing more than to shake the hand of Hana's father. He was bursting with pride that Hana had done what she'd set out to do.

"Top of the morning, Captain!" Rob greeted Bjork with a snappy salute.

Bjork mounted the tank, ignoring the salute.

"Just what the fuck do you think you're doing bringing my daughter into Iraq, Sergeant?"

Before Rob could answer, Bjork made a fist, which he promptly drove into the side of his jaw as hard as he could.

WHACK!

Rob fell against the back rim of the hatch. He lay there rubbing his jaw for a moment, orienting himself to his altered, and somewhat less than memorable, reality. At length, the stars faded from his vision, and he could see the captain again.

"What the fuck was *that* for?"

"For bringing my daughter into this god-forsaken hell. What did you think?"

“Excuse me, sir,” Rob said, his own anger bubbling over now, “but Hana came here to save your god-damned ass.” He paused for a moment, his own flare of temper fading. “And Valkyries and battlefields are a natural...”

Bjork waved his arm around the landscape that surrounded them. “Battlefield? This isn’t a fucking battlefield. This is madness. Insanity.”

“A madness she wanted to save you from.”

“So you exposed my daughter to the insanity of this war. You sent her running around naked like some kind of savage, killing men with her bare hands? Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to encourage a young Valkyrie to behave like a god-damned eighth-century Viking for Christ’s sake?”

“Look, I was just her ticket to get her to you so she could...”

Bjork reached out to grab the front of Rob’s khakis, shaking him, his teeth clenched even tighter in anger. “And how the fuck did you even know that she was a Valkyrie?”

“An accident... at my shop, she...”

“...saved your ass,” the Captain finished for him. He sagged, the anger seemingly flowing out of him in a long sigh. It was replaced by a look of sadness. “I’d prayed that Hana would at least pass her Aérie before getting involved in something like this. That I could prepare her better.”

“Not your fault, Captain. Orders. You had to go to war.”

Bjork’s eyes flashed angrily again. “Which is why I asked you to keep an eye on her. To keep her safe back in Okinawa.”

“But you didn’t level with me Captain. Hana is anything but what she pretended to be.”

“I couldn’t tell you her secret. You fucking know that.”

Rob nodded. “Wouldn’t have believed you anyway, Captain. But you told me to watch over her, and I did that. I gave her a job. But there was an accident in my shop and she saved my life. Which means that she’s...”

“Don’t you think I goddamn know how it works, Sergeant,” Bjork interrupted angrily, glaring at Rob again. “She thinks you’re her responsibility now, and you think you owe her your life. It’s the usual deal.”

“I don’t think there is anything remotely usual about it, Captain,” Rob said calmly. “Took me a fair bit to accept that the goddesses of the ancient Norse were still wandering around. In Okinawa no less.”

“That’s still no excuse for putting her in a situation where she had to kill men with her bare hands. She’s not trained to deal with the consequences.”

“Killing wasn’t in the plan, sir, and she tried to take as few lives as possible. But we had a few problems on the way in. I guess you’d say your daughter has a natural talent for killing tanks.” He grimaced at his own words, knowing he was playing a dangerous card: a father’s pride for his daughter.

It worked. Bjork’s frown faded, his sternness briefly replaced by a look of fatherly pride. He glanced down at Hana. She was standing back with the men, arms still crossed over her chest as she talked to one of the younger soldiers. She kept glancing toward the tank.

“I’m sure she was, Sergeant. There’s a lot of her mother in her. Something I’m seeing for the first time.” He closed his eyes for a long moment.

“You did the best you could, sir. And you asked me to help. Not many men would have done that, given the way people feel about your wife back on the base.”

“Her mother never did learn how to accept the limitations of living among mortals. I had hoped Hana would do better, but then she got into that Goth madness.”

“It was just a disguise, Captain. Don’t mean nothing to her.”

“Seems you know my daughter better than I do, Sergeant.”

Rob wasn’t going to comment on that.

“Speaking of home, sir, there’s a battalion of T98’s between us and the border of the Zone. They’re mad as wet hornets because we took some of them out.” He shrugged. “Actually, not we, but Hana. They’ll be coming after us, sure as rain.”

The Captain’s left eyebrow lifted. “Hana took out some T98’s?”

“Flipped one of ‘em on its back like an oversized turtle even. Most amazing thing I’ve fucking seen. Then she made a mess out of the muzzle of a T90. Kind if reduced the caliber, if you know what I mean. She’s got rather strong legs.”

“That’s an understatement,” Bjork said, pausing as they both watched Hana move over into the shade beside one of the trucks.

One of the men handed her a backpack. She rustled around in it before starting to change into some clothes that must have belonged to the female reporter: a pair of fashionable jeans and a yellow camisole, her gravity defying décolletage accented by a swatch of flat midriff, all underpinned by her tightly sculpted legs. Bjork looked back at Rob, eyes sparkling. “So she really likes to kill tanks, huh?”

Rob nodded, seeing the fatherly pride growing in his eyes. He was an Apache pilot. A tank killer by trade. And now his daughter was following in his footsteps. A strange father-daughter relationship to say the least, but Rob had already decided not to judge Hana or her family any further.

Bjork’s smile faded as he saw Rob glancing nervously toward the western horizon. “We got trouble out there, Sergeant?”

“Soon enough, sir. I figured we could maybe jam most of the hostages inside this tank, but not all. But if one of those T98’s targets us, inside or out, we’re dead.”

“You have a plan to avoid that?”

“Not much of one, sir. Only know that if we’re going to get out of here in one piece, your daughter is going to have to clear the way. That means an even more active role in taking out the bad guys than she had on the way in.”

Captain Bjork Nielsen glanced up at the sun before nodding. “Damn, it’s fucking hot out here.”

“39C in the shade, sir. And there isn’t much of that.”

“Well, if you’re right about the tanks, I don’t see a way out of here without a good offense.” Bjork looked off at eastern horizon for a long moment before reaching his hand out to Rob. “Sorry about the punch, Sergeant. Emotions run kind high when they involve my daughter.”

“Understand completely,” Rob said, his eyes looking levelly into Bjork’s. “No offense taken.”

“Then let me talk to Hana and see what we can do to get the men back safely.” Bjork climbed down to walk over and take his daughter by the arm, leading her around to the backside of one of the trucks so they could be alone.

Meanwhile, the crew chief and door-gunner from the Blackhawk joined Rob on top of the tank. He fired up the diesel and started to give them a crash course in feeding the autoloader on the main gun. Once he’d covered the basics, he called for the other hostages to join them, and jammed six of them into corners of the air-conditioned interior, leaving three other men plus Bjork and Hana to ride on the outside.

He climbed down and walked around the truck to find Bjork drawing a map in the sand for Hana. They both glanced up as Rob walked up, the two of them looking very much like father and daughter now, both of them bare-chested. Bjork was barrel-chested and powerful, while Hana's broad chest was dramatically feminine and, unknown to all but her father and Rob, vastly more powerful than her father's.

"O.K, Sergeant, listen up. I was just showing Hana the best way out of here. I need you to take this road that follows that old riverbed over there." He pointed to a line in the sand. "It passes south of the village you came through, and it might give you a chance to avoid the main body of Iranian armor. You'll leave the trucks and just take the T90. Better chance of being mistaken for a friendly."

"Figured on the last part. Where are you and Hana going to be?"

"We'll take the better of the trucks and head back toward Tuwella. With luck, we can create a diversion to give you some breathing room."

Rob glanced at Hana, seeing the admiring way she was looking at her father. "Might be safer if she went on her own, sir. The Iranians are shooting first and asking questions later. No time to react if you get a skin paint from someone's sight." He paused before saying unnecessarily. "Hana can take a beating and keep on ticking."

"Understood, Sergeant. But my decision stands." He smiled at Hana. "And it's about time we did something as a family."

"Got it, sir," Rob said, worrying now that Bjork wasn't thinking clearly. Taking on a battalion of tanks with a truck, Hana not withstanding? It was insanity. But the Captain outranked him, so he just shrugged. Bjork had seen more than his share of combat. "So where do we meet up?"

"Inside the Zone, town of Zugawdi. The village headman knows me. Ask for Mohammed Baqran."

"That's pretty close to where that nuke went off by in 2005, sir."

"Which is why there won't be any US troops there. Area's still too hot to spend much time in, but the crazy Iraqi's keep drifting back there even after we relocate them. Ancient tribal homes, all that jazz. I've been bringing supplies and medicine to Mohammed from time to time."

"Gotcha, sir. Good hunting." Rob turned and headed back to his tank, a sense of foreboding gnawing at his stomach again.

He'd taken but a couple of steps when he felt Hana's hand on his arm. He turned to look levelly into her blue eyes.

"I hate to leave you alone this way, Rob. But I think my dad's right about drawing the tanks away from you."

Rob rested his hands on her bare shoulders, and she instinctively reached out and hugged him, her lips nearly brushing his as she turned her head to rest it on his shoulder. Her warm breasts pressed softly against his chest, their hips touching. Her embrace was emphatically different than the way she'd hugged her father.

"Your father is right, Hana," he said after a long moment. "We'll slip under them. No big deal."

She leaned back to look at him. "Bullshit. Promise me this, Rob. If you get in trouble, call my name out on the Iranian's Guard channel. Number 19 if I remember right."

Rob ran his hands down her strong arms, their fingers interlacing for a brief moment. "Get out of here. We don't have much time."

She nodded, and turned to run after her father.

Rob turned and trudged slowly back toward his captured tank. His day was already long, but the worse was clearly yet to come.

Chapter 24

Rob felt a hollow sense of emptiness as he watched Hana drive off with her father, the two of them heading straight toward the pursuing Iranian contingent. He wasn't sure if they were incredibly brave or incredibly stupid. All he knew was that he was worried about Hana. But like a good soldier, he followed his orders.

He shifted the T90 into gear and rumbled down the dusty, southern road.

He'd traveled 20 kilometers when he slowed to stop at summit of a range of sun-blasted hills. He clicked the T90's periscope to maximum magnification, having found it was a surprisingly good instrument, and was shocked to see a line of tanks crossing the valley below. They were heading straight his way. A quick check to the north and south showed that the terrain was too rugged to go around them.

"That Arab son-of-a-bitch," Rob breathed as he climbed back on top to join the two chopper pilots. "He guessed we'd take this route, not the northern one, and he's neatly cut us off."

"Meanwhile, the Captain and that blonde are slipping around the north side to get away. Who the fuck is she anyway? And what's she doing in Iraq? She never even told us her name."

"Parents got kidnapped as I hear it," Rob lied. "She got away."

"That wasn't my question. She's gotta be one of those GenTech kids, based on the way she looks. Probably Swedish too. Athletic as hell for sure... probably fuck a man to death, but what a way to go."

Rob let the young officer fantasize what he wanted, stereotypes being what they were. He was embarrassed enough that the officer's last thought had already rattled around in his own head.

Just as clearly, the Lieutenant didn't have a clue about the realities of GenTech. Only the rich and famous had access to it, or the dark side of the CIA and their ilk. Rob had done his homework after learning about Hana. He'd learned that the GenTechers could modify the human genome to turn out beautiful, healthy people. Mostly designer children, where the wealthy parents picked attributes for their children from a catalog.

The first true GenTech child born, a girl, carried a mix of genes donated by the model Heidi Klum and the golfer Tiger Woods. A very strange combination, but that blonde haired, chocolate skinned girl was eight years old now, and she was already a golfing phenom. And a child model. Many other GenTech children had since been born, but their genetic makeup was a closely guarded secret.

Other than that radical in-vitro work, producing million dollar babies, most GenTech was used for cosmetic enhancement and reconstructive surgery. At its most radical fringe, total identity changes and athletic enhancement. The CIA was big into that.

Still, as far as physical strength went, there were limits to what you could do with human flesh. You could create a top athlete, a dancer, a pro-wrestler, a seven foot two basketball player, even a supermodel who was a top golfer. But they didn't have the raw material to create a bulletproof girl like Hana.

That required some magic from a distant star.

Rob sighed as he thought of Hana, wishing she were still here beside him. She could cut a hole through the line of tanks that confronted him and buy them time.

Truly frightened now, he turned back to look the way they'd just come, and saw a dust cloud on the horizon. More heavy vehicles were headed his way.

“I think we’re totally screwed, guys. We can run and fight, but odds are damn poor. Or we can sit tight and let them take us captive again and hope for another chance to make a run for it.”

“And lose our heads, one of us each day or so?” the senior of the chopper pilots said. “I’ll take my chances in a fight.”

Rob shook his head. “If a T98 targets us with that big gun of theirs, it’ll be over really fast. They have a new kind of combo round, a dual-stage penetrator. Active armor will defeat the first shot, but the second round hitting the same portion of our armor is guaranteed lethal. They’re trained to shoot at active armor dead spots.”

“Dead is dead,” the younger officer added. “One way or the other. Least our chances are better than zero if we go at ‘em, head on.”

“Not so sure about that,” Rob said grimly. “I need you to go below and broadcast the word ‘Hana’ on the Iranian’s radio system. Use channel 19 and speak in plain English. With luck, the Captain’s truck has a working radio.”

“What good can that do? His truck doesn’t have any weapons that can take on a tank. And is that the blonde’s name?”

“A code word, Lieutenant. If he got to the Zone, he can send some Apaches in.”

The chopper pilot shrugged before ducking down inside the tank, only to poke his head back up a moment later. “I’m going to send the other men up top. They should get a say in this. Their ass is on the line too.”

Rob nodded. The men came up, discussed and voted. The answer was no different. Fighting and dying was better than falling back into Iranian hands.

They all watched nervously as the dust clouds grew larger. Rob could see the turrets of the leading tanks whenever a gust of wind cleared a portion of the dust away. His heart sank when he saw T90’s and 98’s.

“O.K, men, there’s only one chance to get out of this. They haven’t got any air support and we’re pretty well hidden here. Maybe the tanks in front aren’t communicating with the ones behind. If so, there’s a slim chance that the guys in front of us will mistake us for part of the second group.”

He got some blank looks in return. These men were pilots, not grunts and certainly not armor. “Works like this. We wait in a ravine until the force from the east reaches the summit, and then start descending the west side of the hill along that smaller road over there. With any luck, they’ll think our T90 is part of the eastern force.”

Nobody liked that plan, but they didn’t have a better one, so Rob saddled the men back up, cramming all of them inside the crowded tank this time. They hardly had room to breathe in the hot air, foul with dust. The tank’s filters and AirCon were overloaded.

Even worse, the secondary road that descended to the west proved to be little more than a sheep trail down into a ravine. It would be hairy as hell to descend without rolling over, but he didn’t see any other way.

Meanwhile, the chopper pilot kept broadcasting that one word. The Iranians wouldn’t be able to make sense of that.

Rob positioned his tank and then waited anxiously until the eastern force was approaching the summit. When the first tank reached the top, he jammed his tank into gear and roared down the ravine. The soft dirt slid beneath the tracks as they kicked up a huge cloud of dust. Even with the engine at max RPM, his tracks spewing sand as they clawed for a grip on the loose dirt, it was he could do to keep from skidding sideways and rolling over. Twice he thought he’d lost it, the other men’s eyes opening wide in

fear as the tank tilted too far to one side. Then he was at the bottom, roaring out of the ravine and into the valley floor, the men screaming and yelling congratulations as they pounded him on the back.

Rob had no time to celebrate. The threat panel chirped and beeped as they were probed by radar and by laser range finders, but nobody fired at them. The eastern group of tanks was now descending single file on the main road, and the radio waves were full of men chattering in Arabic. Rob aimed straight between the two closest T90's on the eastern line, traveling as fast as he could.

He was beginning to think they were going to make it when the tank on the left suddenly tracked him with its turret and fired. The round hit the front left quarter of his turret, and the active armor blasted outward to deflect the deadly round.

Rob stomped on the right track brake and the tank swerved bow first into a shot fired from the second tank. It glanced off his heaviest armor. He swerved the other way, trying the same trick on the first T90, but wasn't as lucky this time. The Iranian tanker got a good shot in, catching the side of the turret to stress another section of the reactive armor to the max. The powerful impact filled the inside of the tank with choking dust and smoke, the explosion nearly deafening them.

Rob adjusted his goggles and kept going, rapidly closing the distance until the two tanks were aiming at each other as they tried to get a shot in on him. He zoomed between them, only to see their turrets swivel backward as they continued away from him. He barely saw the flash of light from the first tank's barrel before the interior of the tank was filled with sparks, the impact jamming his turret in its track. Several of the men screamed in panic. Rob stomped on the track brakes at random, hoping to blind the enemy tankers with the dust clouds of his skidding tracks. He squinted into the periscope, scanning it left and right, only to see the turret of a third tank slowly and carefully tracking him: a T98. He knew he had but seconds left to live.

He stomped one more time on the right track brake, slewing his tank to face the T98 with his heavy bow armor, and started to pray for a quick death. That was when he caught a glimpse of something small landing on the front of the enemy tank. He blinked, and lost sight of whatever it was when the main gun fired. Miraculously, the round flew high, ricocheting off the top of his turret with a resounding clang. Rob pushed his clouded goggles up and fitted his forehead tighter against the periscope mount. He was astounded to see Hana standing on the front of the firing T98, her shoulder wedged against the heavy barrel, bending it upward to throw off the gunner's bore sight. She quickly scrambled up to the top of the turret and began clawing at the hatch. He saw her open it and dive inside.

A cloud of dust from the T98's tracks obscured his view for a moment. When it cleared, her tank was swerving to the right, the turret turning in perfect reverse synchronization to fire directly into the side of the closest T90, exploding the engine compartment. Hana's turret swiveled again, and this time she fired on the second T90. The targeted tank reappeared out of the explosion, still moving.

Hana fired on another tank in their path, and the blocking T90 exploded, the turret blasting high into the air. Three shots. The autoloader on the T98 would give her six shots before it had to be manually reloaded from the magazine. He didn't think Hana knew how to do that.

The closest tanks trained their weapons on the rogue now, and began to fire away. Hana swerved and tried to return fire, but a one-woman crew couldn't match the firepower of two competently manned tanks for long. She turned and raced away from Rob's tank, drawing the other tank's fire after her.

Rob knew this was his only chance to save the hostages, so he angled away from the battle, dropping down into another gully that ran west along the valley floor, and ran toward the front lines, knowing he was leaving Hana to fend for herself. He reminded himself over and over as he ran that she was a Valkyrie's daughter and that she was invincible. A young goddess.

But down deep, he feared even that wasn't going to be enough this time.

Chapter 25

Rob stopped his stolen T90 a mile from the Zone, and the men got out of the Iranian tank to cover the last portion of the journey on foot. It didn't take a genius to know that roaring up to an American checkpoint in an enemy tank was a good way to get dead.

He found the Bjork waiting anxiously for him there as opposed to the agreed rendezvous point, his eyes dark with worry as he found that Hana wasn't with them. Rob took him aside.

"Last we saw her, Captain, she'd commandeered a T98 and was attacking a half dozen Iranians. She gave us a chance to break through the line."

"Damn it," the Captain cursed, "When we heard the call on the radio, she took off toward the south. I couldn't keep up with her with the truck, especially with no road going that way."

"Seems she made her own mind up, sir. Didn't give either of us any chance to try to talk her out of it. But she's tough. I'm sure she'll make it back."

The Captain leaned heavily against the side of a Bradley. "You don't understand. She told me she was due for her *dalvjra*. Maybe as early as tonight. Her strength will already be fading."

Rob just stared at him, feeling the hollowness in his stomach turn into a cold pit.

Bjork saw the crestfallen look in Rob's eyes. He'd mumbled those words without thinking, and it bothered him greatly that Hana had shared enough with this older man for him to know what a *dalvjra* was, let alone its implications. Only a lover should know such a thing. "So she told you everything, didn't she?"

Rob nodded as he looked off toward the darkening sky of the east, knowing there was a very special girl out there somewhere, fighting for her life.

A girl he owed his life to.