

THE FIGHT
FOR THE
PASS

MIKE ADAMS

The Fight For The Pass

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All characters and events in this book are fictitious.

Any resemblance to persons living or dead is strictly coincidental

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The Fight For The Pass

Book 6 of Fierce Girls at War

Other books by Mike Adams

Fierce Girls at War series

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Prologue

Recon Flight

September 10, 2126

Day -2

Ranger Barracks, Southport 1230

Lieutenant Felix Carvalho the senior platoon leader in the Brazilian detachment of Tiger Company walked into the cafeteria at the terminal that served the two Colonial Ranger companies stationed in the southern coastal settlement of Southport. He saw the person he was looking for dressed in blue Ranger shorts and t-shirt. She was talking to several other Rangers in his platoon and the lieutenant called out, "Staff Sergeant Oliveira!"

The 26-year-old NCO turned and looked at her platoon commander then walked over to him somewhat anxiously, "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Gather your squad and take them over to the terminal at 1300. There will be a shuttle waiting for you. The pilot will tell you what they need you for."

Alicia Oliveira blinked several times in surprise then protested, "But Lieutenant, this is supposed to be our off-duty day!"

Carvalho gave her a look of disapproval that promised to turn onto something worse. He said stiffly, "Staff Sergeant, do I need to tell you again?"

Oliveira sighed, "No, sir."

The Brazilian lieutenant nodded, "Bom. On your way then."

"How long should we prepare for, sir?"

The officer shrugged, "I expect you back later today, or perhaps tomorrow."

"I see." The young staff sergeant saluted and went to gather her squad considering just how many days' rations she should have her squad take with them; just in case."

###

The shuttle engineer Master Sergeant Mindy Taylor looked back over her left shoulder to see the squad leader who'd come up to sit in the observer seat behind the pilot, Lieutenant Daniel Beaufort (call-sign 'd'Artagnan'). They had lifted off from the Southport terminal five minutes earlier and were headed almost due south toward a chain of islands that the Ranger Regiment wanted investigated. A couple of unmanned recon drones and one of the colony's few, relatively

fragile, airplanes with its civilian pilot and a Ranger scout had disappeared in the area they were going. Taylor grinned at the Brazilian and asked, "So Alicia, how did you get picked for this little excursion?"

Oliveira gave Taylor a sour look and sighed, "This was supposed to be our off-duty day but Lieutenant Carvalho is mad at me so my whole squad gets it."

"Oh? Why? What did you do? Refuse to shine his shoes?" Taylor asked sarcastically. She was also acquainted with the Brazilian officer.

Oliveira rolled her eyes and snorted, "Wrong place, wrong time, couldn't keep my mouth shut. I heard him and Lieutenants Lopes and Henriques talking about Captain Zhang again. They can't stand her because she's smart and a better soldier than any of them. I heard them call her a 'puta', that's a 'whore' in my country. They were standing about 6 feet away from me when they said it. I couldn't help myself; I turned around and told them, 'You're being very disrespectful to a superior officer, Sirs! And right in front of some of your troopers! Captain Zhang saved at least one of you and your platoons in the mountains. You should respect her and listen to her!' And well, as you might think, they didn't take that very well, especially my wonderful platoon leader, Lieutenant Carvalho."

"Ouch! Was Lieutenant Mendes there?" asked Beaufort. Sondra Mendes was the vehicle platoon leader for the Brazilian detachment.

"No, she wasn't close enough to hear or she would have jumped all over them. I can tell you that they don't like her either these days!"

"Really? I've always been impressed by Lieutenant Mendes," said Beaufort.

"Yes, sir, I agree. She's become good friends, I think, with the Chinese officers who think the world of Captain Zhang. Carvalho and the others don't like that. As if she had to choose sides and she chose the other side! I really wish I were in her platoon instead of Carvalho's but that won't happen as long as she has the vehicle platoon. I don't think so anyway."

"Was it always like that?" Taylor asked.

"No, Master Sergeant. It wasn't. As far as I could tell all through Ranger training and over the six-month trip here I thought they all got along pretty well. Of course she might've been putting a good face on for the troops, you know? Things started to change after we got here and they put us in the same company with the Chinese Rangers under Captain Zhang. She's junior to Captain Vericiano so she had to take the second-in-command spot but I heard she's been here for over three years. She came here as a platoon leader and stayed on."

"That's right," said Taylor. "She told me she came here at the same time as Captain Woo in Alpha and Captain Bryant in Delta over in New Hope Town and Captain Rossi in Falcon Company over in New Cancun."

"Right, so she's got a lot of experience in the mountains while we just got here and the Chinese detachment was here more than six months before we arrived so they all have more experience. When we first went up into the mountains the battalion commander told Captain Vericiano to bring some of the Chinese along. He wanted us to learn from them but the Captain and Carvalho and those other two didn't want to listen. They just wanted to talk about the pretty

Chinese Rangers and their beautiful captain who probably slept with one of the senior officers on the regimental staff to get appointed as a detachment commander."

"You're kidding? No? Oh, those guys are idiots!" a shocked Mindy Taylor said. "Did Zhang hear about that?"

"I'm sure she did. They weren't exactly discreet about it, and it wasn't just one time either. There are Brazilian Rangers who do respect her who might have heard them and made sure she found out."

"What did she do when she heard that then?" Beaufort asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Oliveira grinned, "She's got too much class to let that get to her. Actually I think she figured out that ignoring them would get under their skin more than anything else. People respected her even more for it."

"Good for her," said Taylor.

"Sim, absolutamente! Then about a month into our first deployment season in the mountains Captain Zhang and one of her platoons was with Carvalho and our platoon and Lopes' platoon when a pack of demon wolves was spotted a couple of miles away. Right away the Chinese started getting ready but our fearless leader said the demon wolves were far away and we were just wasting time. When Zhang ordered him to get his platoon moving he tried to argue but she was firm and repeated her order. She didn't try to embarrass him or anything, I know, I was there, but he didn't like being contradicted. He finally complied but I could tell he was angry. It didn't help that just 10 minutes later three demon wolves came charging us out of the woods, testing us Captain Zhang said. They were on the Chinese side of the perimeter and they killed one and drove the other two away pretty quick. She was proved right and the whole platoon knew it. It went downhill from there and Captain Vericiano hasn't really done anything to make it better. I think part of it is that she is so pretty, and tall, you know, taller than Carvalho and Henriques, not that she's really that tall. She's about 5' 10" I'd say. She's had to correct their errors several times, things they shouldn't have had to be told, you know?"

"That's too bad," said Beaufort. "Eva Zhang is one of the best officers at the colony. She's been in combat in Africa, in Kenya, did you know that?"

"Really?" said Oliveira. "I didn't know that."

"Yes. Captain Woo told me about it a while back. Zhang was with her platoon of Chinese airborne troops camped out in the bush with some Kenyan soldiers when they were ambushed by several hundred militia fighters. Half her platoon was killed or wounded including herself but she kept her people fighting until help arrived. Earned a medal for that, I'm pretty sure. Captain Woo says her Night Ranger platoon was part of the relief force. That was the first time they met, about a year before they left Earth. She said they were both surprised to be in the same Ranger detachment."

"Santa Maria mãe de Deus! That must've been a nice reunion. I wish our officers knew about that, maybe they'd behave better."

"Maybe. She's not the kind to brag about herself," said Beaufort. "And Captain Woo only told me because we were overnighing with her detachment out in the mountains last summer and we got to talking around the campfire about what we did before we got here. Jing Woo, she's another special one; a Special Ops officer with the Night Rangers. They both came in as platoon leaders and now command detachments. And Major Stairs was their company commander with they first got here."

"Stairs? The one from Puma Company?"

Mindy Taylor replied, "Right. She had Puma for a while but Colonel Gupta chose her to be the XO for the new Second Battalion."

"Oh. I guess I heard that; I've never met her though."

"She's a really good officer, or Colonel Gupta wouldn't have picked her," said Beaufort.

"I suppose she must be."

###

Three hours later they were approaching their target, the first of a chain of islands 300 miles south of Southport. "That's a big fog bank ahead," said Mindy Taylor, "strange looking, too. See the way it shimmers?"

"Oui. And it's right over where those islands are supposed to be," said Daniel Beaufort.

"Go in or go around first?" Taylor asked her pilot.

The Frenchman considered their options, "We'll go around first then over the top, keeping well clear of it though. Let's see what we can see." He changed course to fly around the fog bank staying about 5 miles from it as they circled the island at 3,000 feet. The fog completely covered the island and seemed to extend over the horizon.

"How close are we to the nearest island?" asked Oliveira.

Taylor replied, "According to the coordinates we have the nearest island should be about 5 miles inside that whatever it is."

"Fog? Strange looking fog?" the squad leader asked.

"I don't think it's fog. Our radar is not getting anything through it. And normal fog should have burned off with this sun, there's not a cloud in the sky," Taylor said. "Looks more milky than normal fog; it looks thicker, and more solid. And that shimmer; it's like, oh I don't know, an electric field maybe."

"Could it be steam? From underwater vents?" the pilot speculated.

Taylor shook her head, "Steam would be hot; don't you think? We're not getting any heat readings from it at all. We're not getting *anything* from it at all."

They flew along the strange milky fog bank for several miles keeping their distance from it when Beaufort put the shuttle into a hover. "It seems to go on for a long way; well beyond this island and the next one too. These islands should be visible from here but they're not. Mindy, inform New Cancun that we're going in for a closer look. We'll fly over it until we reach the coordinates for the closest island then we'll descend and take a look."

"We're going to land?" asked the Brazilian Ranger.

“If we can find a good spot,” replied the Lieutenant. “That’s why you’re along for the ride, isn’t it?”

Oliveira pursed her lips, “I suppose so. I’ll get my squad ready then.” She headed back toward the middle of the aircraft where the other five members of her squad, three men and two women, were strapped into the bulkhead mounted pulldown seats that lined either side of the airframe. There were 18 seats on each side including the two observer seats behind the flight crew. They were looking over their shoulders in curiosity through the clear composite side windows at the strange field of white before them.

Beaufort brought the shuttle around and headed slowly towards the fog bank at 6,000 feet, more than high enough to pass over it. They had just cleared the edge of the obscured area when a flash of light passed directly in front of them from below.

The flight engineer cried out “What the...?” just as something hit the port wing. The 12-foot long wing snapped in half and the shuttle spun around to port.

“Status!” the pilot called out.

“Shit! Port engine is off-line!” shouted Taylor. “Grav cells at 80 percent and losing power fast. Switching to emergency power now!” She also opened a communications channel and called, “Mayday, Mayday, were being fired...” Another blast from below caught them at the rear of the aircraft just below the cargo door. The back end of the shuttle flipped up and over and the lights in the cabin went out. Out of control and without its grav cells operating to keep them aloft the aircraft lost altitude quickly while the desperate crew tried to regain some control and bring the grav cells back on line before they crashed into the sea below.

At 1000 feet they entered the 'milky fog' and just 500 feet above the ocean surface Taylor was able to get the emergency power going. It kicked in and slowed their descent just enough for Beaufort to pull the nose up before they hit the water. The nose of the shuttle plowed into a wave and they bounced hard several times before coming to a rest; the 36-foot long shuttle floated on the calm surface of the sea about 2 miles from the nearest island.

Quiet reigned for several moments then the moans began as the stunned and injured crew and their passengers started to regain consciousness. The first to move was Corporal Mateus Bosque. Blood streaming down his face from a bloody nose he released his safety harness then leaned forward and fell down to the floor of the cargo hold. He got to his knees shakily and started checking his squad mates. He was relieved to see that they were all still alive. Sergeant Ana Branco was awake and looking at him.

“Ugh, what happened?” she asked foggily.

“We crashed, Sergeant. Are you okay?”

She shook her head to clear it, “I think so. I ache all over but I can feel everything. What about the others?”

“They’re out but alive. I’m going forward to check on the crew,” he said as the Sergeant released her safety harness and put her hands on her ribs.

She told him, “There's a med kit underneath two seats up. Get something for your nose first.”

"Sim, yeah I will. You sure you're okay?"

"I may have cracked something in here," Branco replied. "Go ahead, I'll check on our guys."

After getting some gauze out of the med-kit for his nose the corporal tried to get to his feet but his head started to spin so he moved forward on his hands and knees until he reached the two crewmen. He shook Beaufort's shoulder and was rewarded with a moan, then he shook Taylor's arm but there was no response. He checked for a pulse and found one; it was steady. Both the pilot and the engineer were alive; unconscious, but alive.

Within an hour everyone was conscious and able to move around albeit stiffly and carefully as the shuttle rocked gently on the open sea. Thanks to the efforts of Taylor to get the emergency power online and Beaufort's getting enough control to keep them from plummeting into the ocean upside down or at too steep angle they'd all survived and the shuttle, as designed, had remained afloat in the thick milky haze. The two crewmen and the squad of Brazilians had been protected enough by their safety harnesses and flight or combat helmets that none received any serious injuries although they were lucky that no one had broken their neck. Sore necks and backs, mild concussions, a couple of cracked ribs, and some bloody noses and lips, were the extent of their injuries; nothing was life-threatening.

"I can't see a damn thing outside," said Lieutenant Beaufort as they tried to see through the forward windscreen.

"We're going to have to open the top hatch before we run out of air," the shuttle engineer Taylor said. "Hope that stuff is breathable because we don't have a choice."

"You're right, Mindy. Go ahead. Careful though. Whoever or whatever shot us out of the sky might be out there looking for us."

Taylor looked at him and nodded, "Right. I need to get a better look at the wings and the engines while I'm at it."

"Okay. Take somebody with you."

"You know it." She called back to Oliveira, "Alicia, I'm going to need to open the top hatch to let some air in then I'm going out to check on things. I'll probably be going for a swim. I could use some company to keep watch."

"Sim, yes, okay, Master Sergeant." She looked over her squad and chose two to assist Taylor. "Fernandes, Moreno, up you go. Keep a sharp eye out for anything moving out there and don't let the master sergeant get eaten by anything."

Corporal Daysi Fernandes and Private First Class Gustavo Moreno put their combat helmets back on and picked up their rifles while Mindy Taylor removed her boots and flight suit, she might have to go into the water to inspect the airframe and engines for damage.

The private grinned at the attractive engineer who had stripped down to her Ranger underwear and Fernandes said, "Be good Gustavo or she will squish you like a bug."

The Master Sergeant grinned at them both and said, "A boost up?"

Oliveira looked up at the hatch 3 feet above Taylor's head and told the private, "Make yourself useful, Moreno. Watch those hands though!"

“Sim, Sergeant.” The private bent over on hands and knees so that Taylor could step on his back with a hand from Fernandes to steady her then she put her bare feet on his shoulders. The 6’3” trooper straightened his arms and lifted her up high enough to unlatch the access ladder secured to the overhead. She twisted a handle and as the ladder swung down Taylor stepped off the Brazilian who quickly moved out of the way so it could be secured to the deck. The engineer then climbed up and un-dogged the top hatch cover and pushed it up; cool fresh air flowed into the shuttle.

Taylor stuck her head outside and looked around. She could barely make out the tail end of the aircraft in the dense fog. She called down, “It feels cool, no odor, just regular sea smells. Wait, there’s an ozone smell like just before it rains and I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. No sounds though, it’s really quiet. It feels like fog, really thick fog. Going out now.”

“Okay,” said Beaufort. The pilot nodded to Oliveira who motioned for the two Rangers to follow Taylor up and out onto the top of the aircraft. They would serve as lookouts and safety observers while the engineer inspected the shuttle’s exterior.

Ten minutes later Beaufort passed a towel up and Taylor said from above as she dried herself while the two Rangers kept their eyes on the sea, “The whole port wing is gone including the engine. The starboard wing tip is almost completely separated. The starboard engine looks okay from the outside. The anti-grav cells are a mess, we’re lucky we didn’t get hit closer to the power cell, we could’ve been blown to bits.”

“Small favors then.”

“Yeah, maybe. If I can get power to the starboard engine maybe we can move forward; not sure how we’d steer though. We might just go in circles.”

“We’ll figure something out if we get that far.” Taylor was taking her time and Daniel Beaufort asked, “Coming back down, Mindy?”

“In a minute. Would ya grab my flight bag and pull out some dry undies and send them up.”

Beaufort chuckled, “I think I’ll let the Staff Sergeant handle that.”

“Good choice, boss.”

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully. The Brazilians took turns keeping watch above while Beaufort and Taylor tried to get the comms up without any success, the system was completely fried. They took inventory of their supplies; they had enough food for at least a week between what the Brazilians had brought with them and the emergency rations stored in a compartment below the floor. They had enough water for a several days and a portable distillation kit in another storage cabinet for making drinking water from seawater.

It was an hour after darkness had closed in when the lookouts heard a sound that seemed to be coming towards them. The Rangers darkened all the lights inside the shuttle and waited anxiously, not sure if it was friend or foe headed their way.

Beaufort went up to look around and warned the lookouts to be silent. In the darkness he couldn’t see anything at all but the sound was definitely getting closer by the minute. Then they

heard a whirring sound like that of an electric motor. Seconds later a dark shadow passed them on the port side, small lights at intervals of a couple of yards provided some illumination, enough for them to see large shapes moving around. Then they heard the voices, guttural sounds somewhat muffled by the fog that were like no human language they'd ever heard. The ship passed quickly, seeming to not have noticed them in the dark. More ships passed to either side, not quite as close as the first, at least ten of them, and their passengers were definitely not human.

When the sun rose in the morning they found that they had drifted far enough away during the night in the strong current that the fog bank was now over the horizon; the seas were empty in every direction. There was no fog, no ships, no islands; just a warm sun in a cloudless sky and the ocean. They were on their own and hoping that help would find them since they couldn't call for help. They were aware that something bad was happening; those alien ships must be headed somewhere although they had no idea which direction they were headed. The nearest land was the coast near Southport so that seemed a likely destination but they had no way to give warning. They'd been about 300 miles south of Southport and the southern coast of the Alpha continent when they went down. They were drifting southeast and were getting further from land with every passing hour.

The Rangers on the drifting shuttle had no way to know that those ships were actually headed for one of the hidden islands to the west of their position. They were sailing to meet up with the rest of the fleet that would depart the next evening to invade the settlement of Southport with several thousand of the primitive 7-foot tall Andoval warriors and dozens of their smaller but more technologically advanced Rift officers.

Chapter 1

Gunnery Sergeant Molly Pickford

September 17, 2126

Day 5

Cargo Transport Lander *Cairo* crash site

After a brief and restless attempt to get a night's sleep Gunnery Sergeant Molly Pickford had been up for two hours roaming the quiet ship. Needing some time by herself to get her head clear while she still had an hour before the day's activities began she'd gone back up to the main deck after an early breakfast in the makeshift dining area set up in the cargo bay. She entered the crew cabin that had once belonged to the ship's Chief Engineer and was now hers. She had a package of camp wipes with her and she looked in the mirror above the cabin's small sink and wiped off some of the smudges of dirt and grease she had picked up earlier. The first two days had seemed like one unending nightmare yet they'd all come through it, those who'd survived the crash, that is. They'd made a lot of progress since then but it had taken a lot of hard physical work to do it. Things were more organized now and everyone had agreed that as the senior surviving officer Commander Rick Cassidy was in charge and that Molly was second-in-command, at least until

Captain Tomei recovered enough to return to duty. Gabriella Tomei had taken a blow to the head during the crash and was under observation in the transport's sickbay after undergoing surgery.

Now the task ahead of them seemed impossible. She thanked the stars, God, and whatever other supernatural spirits might or might not be watching over them that she had Rick Cassidy by her side. He was her best friend, her most trusted confidant, her partner in so many things, her adopted brother, her sometime lover, and she thought with an inner smile, her alleged superior officer. *And I know he's more than glad I'm here too, that's for damned sure!*

Molly brushed her long blonde hair back and re-fastened the clip that held it in a ponytail. She examined her face in the mirror, her green eyes were clear and her skin was smooth and unblemished, but the signs of strain were easy to see. She knew that she was pretty, even beautiful, something that had caused others to underestimate the 5-foot 9-inch tall, 140 pound Marine and for a long time she'd gone out of her way to play down her looks. Her attitude about that had begun to change only after she met Kelly Cassidy. Rick's mom had been forty-nine when Molly had first met her four years before, the mother of four, and the grandmother of Rick's daughter, the then 10-year-old Ciara McCord O'Brien. Kelly was a retired police Captain who was still a senior weapons trainer at the New York Police Academy, *and* she was absolutely *gorgeous*. Molly always thought of Kelly as mom now, the mom she hadn't had growing up. Kelly, and the rest of the women in Rick's family, had given her the confidence to be outwardly beautiful while still being extremely competent. They, and Rick, had taught her that she could be both beautiful and respected and to not take any shit from anyone. Anyone who just saw a pretty face and a great body would be sadly mistaken when dealing with Molly Pickford. Anyone putting their hands on her without an invitation was liable to get something broken as a result.

Her looks still drew unwanted attention at times but it was also part of her disguise as she hid in plain sight. Most of the pictures the public had seen of Staff Sergeant Susan Bennett showed a somewhat severe looking (Molly preferred to think of her expression as over-stressed) Marine with short, swept-back, less than collar length hair, and often with dark circles under her eyes (the more recent photos taken after her return from Africa and before they escaped to the colony, not the official photos in dress uniform that made her look like a peppy teenager in uniform). Thinking about that Molly snorted a laugh. *It's nice not to draw more than my fair share of the attention from the colony's majority male population. And Rick just loves all the women here.*

Molly and Rick had boarded the cargo transport lander (CTL) *Cairo* in New Hope Town six days earlier to escort a large shipment of new equipment and ammunition including all of the weapons and other gear that belonged to two Ranger companies that had arrived at the colony just a month earlier. The 850-foot long cargo ship carried hundreds of containers filled with material of all types plus scores of vehicles in the lower vehicle bay of the cargo deck. The transports like the *Cairo* carried up to 450 passengers in the four passenger cabins on the main and second decks. The CTLs were the main method of moving personnel and material throughout the colony where the settlements were often a thousand miles or more from the nearest town.

Cairo had left the southern coastal settlement of Southport for an early morning flight to the settlement of New Cancun on the eastern coast when it had flown directly over an alien invasion fleet of seagoing ships headed for the southern coast. Plasma bolts fired at the transport by energy cannon mounted on some of those ships had damaged much of *Cairo's* anti-grav plant and the loss of ninety percent of the power in the starboard grav cells caused the great ship to roll over on its side supported only by its port side grav cells as it fled north for safety.

Cairo's bad luck however had been good timing for the settlements about to be attacked. The ship's Japanese comm tech Corporal Miruku Nakamura had sent out a brief warning including a few seconds of video showing the alien vessels before all the comm satellites had been disabled. That warning had given the Rangers at Southport and New Cancun time to mount a defense long enough to evacuate the vast majority of the two settlements' thousands of civilian inhabitants.

Flying the ship on its side and slowly losing altitude *Cairo's* pilot Lieutenant Colonel Mark Janssen had had a very limited ability to maneuver his ship. Unable to return to Southport, that would have taken them back over the alien fleet, and too low to fly over the mountain ranges that stood between them and New Cancun to the east or New St Louis to the west, the pilot had little choice but to try for the northern settlement of Winter Haven, almost twelve hundred miles away.

Janssen and his flight crew had tried to get as far north as quickly as possible under emergency power while threading their way through the high mountains but eventually they'd lost too much altitude before they could reach the relatively open plain beyond the 700 miles of mountains that stood in their way. *Cairo* had gone nearly 500 miles before the pilot was forced to find a place to put the ship down. The ship's navigator Captain Tomei had spotted a four-mile long mountain valley that ran north-south with a lake at the southern end and a river running through it and she'd directed Janssen to it just in time. The valley was at an altitude of just over 6300 feet.

Molly had been in her crash couch half-asleep when the alien ships on the ocean surface four miles below fired on *Cairo*. Shouting from the Colonial Security officers in the forward passenger cabin brought her fully awake in seconds. She hadn't known what was happening at that very moment but she knew there was big trouble even before the transport flying at 22,000 feet had begun to turn over onto its starboard side. Besides Molly and Rick Cassidy there was a three-person Ranger medical team led by Major Maya Scott in the passenger compartment. Like Molly the doctor and her two medics had been safely strapped in their crash couches and resting. Rick however had been up in the flight cabin's observer seat. The only other passengers were a group from the New Hope Academy and not all of them had been secured when the disaster struck.

Perhaps as many as half of the 61 students and Academy staff members had been out of their seats when the starboard wing suddenly began to drop as the anti-grav cells on that side lost power. There was screaming everywhere and Molly had quickly unclipped her safety harness then rolled out on the now high side of her crash couch, landing in a crouch with her back partly

resting on the side of the 7-foot long capsule bed of her crash couch. She'd grabbed one wide-eyed girl she now knew to be Ingrid Petersen, one of two Swedish sisters in the group. Ingrid wasn't screaming but Molly could see the terror in her eyes as she held on for dear life to one of the shock-absorbing stanchions supporting the rear end of Molly's crash couch.

The ship had rapidly heeled over to starboard and many of those who'd been moving about in the cabin lost their footing as they tried desperately to grab on to something and keep from falling to the starboard side bulkhead that was now as much as seventy feet below them depending on where they'd been when the transport started to tip over. Molly pulled herself over to the scared 16-year-old and grabbed her arm. She pulled Ingrid to her and said, "Don't try to move. Just hang on here." Braced against the now higher side of the crash couch Ingrid didn't have to worry any longer about falling unless the ship flipped more than ninety degrees which wasn't likely unless the port side grav cells failed as well. If that happened they would be falling out of the sky and it probably wouldn't matter anymore to any of them.

The shaking girl nodded and Molly looked around as the ship continued its roll to starboard. Automatically she put her mind in fast-forward as if she was in the virtual reality trainer back at the Ranger base, mentally slowing things down so she could comprehend what she was seeing. She estimated that during the few seconds that had passed since this calamity had begun the starboard wing had tilted down about fifty degrees and it was still dropping. People were rolling or sliding down the deck unable to stop themselves when she heard a crash and a cry behind her. Her head whipped around and she saw the source of the cry then dove to her right and grabbed the ankle of a raven-haired girl who'd fallen from somewhere higher up and crashed into a crash couch support beam hard enough to break her left leg. The screaming teenager was sliding by out of control unable to grab onto anything that could stop her slide. "I've got you," Molly cried as the girl's weight pulled at her shoulder. The youngster pleaded with her not to let go and Molly told her urgently, "Calm down, I've got you. I promise I won't let you go." The girl was hyperventilating and Molly knew she needed to calm her down. "Look at me! Take a deep breath and hold it!" The girl did what she was told but the pain in her leg was causing her to shift around. "What's your name?" she asked.

"I'm Athena, Athena Milonos," the girl answered with a whimper of pain.

Molly looked her in the eyes and said, "Okay, Athena. I know you're scared but you need to stay still. I won't let go." The girl nodded and the tough Marine combat veteran had hung on to a stanchion with one hand while gripping the Greek girl's ankle with the other for the next forty minutes as the ship flew north at almost seventy degrees below level flight through the mountains at emergency speed of nearly 750 miles per hour while continuing to gradually lose altitude.

The normally quiet engine noise changed signaling a sharp reduction in their airspeed and when the ship suddenly leveled out Molly instinctively knew that time was almost up. With a surge of adrenaline that coursed through her body she lifted the girl up by her good leg and one arm, literally tossing her into a crash couch and pressing the activation button before turning her attention to the handful of others still hanging on for their lives. With the ship level those who

were close to an open crash couch like Ingrid Petersen were able to climb in by themselves but the ship was descending rapidly, they could all feel it, and Molly knew they had only seconds left before they ran out of altitude and hit something. She saw a tall young blonde sitting on the deck nearby holding her arm, it was obviously broken, and ran to her. She yanked the blonde up by her good arm, she was 18-year-old Chloe Capps one of the four interns with the group, and pushed her into an open crash couch then hit the activation button. She didn't know if there was any time left but she knew there were others still needing help and she went for one more, a bewildered looking young brunette who was clutching the stanchion of a nearby crash couch and not trying to get up.

Molly ran to the girl, grabbed her by the arm and yelled, "Let go and get up now!" The girl let go of the stanchion and was pulled to her feet. The Marine shoved the young Italian student Paola Bertalucci into a crash couch and jumped in after her, hitting its activation button. As soon as the canopy had lowered into place and sealed the capsule the crash gel foam began to fill it. Since she was in the wrong position the gel filled Molly's nose and mouth, and for a moment she couldn't breathe. In seconds the foam had solidified, just in time to keep them safe when *Cairo's* starboard wing hit the ground on the east side of the river that ran through the valley the flight crew had aimed for. The ship's armored hull slammed into the valley floor and the huge cargo transport began a mile long skid that ended when it ran into the granite wall of mountain rock ahead of them. Once they'd come to a sudden halt the crash gel foam began to liquefy and drain into the holding tank below the seat. Unharmed thanks to the foam, Molly spat out the sour-tasting liquid and was able to breathe again.

She and Rick had quickly taken charge of the group of 69 survivors that included 46 female students, 4 female interns and 7 staff members from the New Hope Academy along with the transport's 7 surviving crewmembers plus Major Maya Scott and her two medics. Since then it had been long gruesome hours of collecting the bodies and body parts of the 20 members of the crew and the 4 New Hope Academy teachers who'd been unable to get into crash couches and had died on impact. Some of them had sacrificed themselves to get the last of the students to safety and because of their heroic actions all of the young students and interns had survived. With only a half dozen uninjured adults available the girls had to do the awful and difficult physical work of carrying bodies from the flight deck and main deck passenger cabin all the way down to the makeshift morgue in a refrigerated storage area off the cargo bay. The ship's cargo crew had been at work in the cargo bay and only one, Corporal Damian Carter, had gotten to get to a crash couch barely in time. He was in a medical pod in sick bay with serious injuries. Moving the bodies, cleaning up the mess of blood and brain matter, tending to the many injured, trying to get the ship's power restored, getting the heat back on, and distributing food and bottled water had occupied most of the first 36 hours of their time since the crash. Since then it had been clearing debris, and trying to get into trapped cargo boxes filled with food and other things they needed

Molly sat there thinking *And that was the easy part. Those were all things that had to be done right away. Things that were inescapable and necessary, and mostly just required lot of*

physical effort and a strong stomach. It's what comes next that worries me. How do we survive here? And how do we get out of here? It's obvious these are some physically and mentally tough young women or they wouldn't have been able to do what they had to do. Rick is right, there really is no other way but to teach them how to survive and fight because we are on our own. It's unlikely that anyone will come for us if the aliens are attacking the settlements. I am so glad he's here. Doing this without him would be a lot harder, maybe too hard. Although, on the other hand, he would probably launch an unauthorized search and rescue mission as soon as he could, find us and get us home. Oy, he'll get a big head if I tell him that. God, my back aches. Well, he owes me a massage, and it's about time I collected!

Molly Pickford had been born Susan Mollison in Pickford, Arizona in 2098. Her parents and her maternal grandparents had all died in the viral pandemic of 2103 when she was just five years old. After that she'd lived with her paternal grandmother Casey Mollison, a former Marine NCO, for the next 15 years until Casey died in a hiking accident leaving Susan with no family to speak of other than some distant relations she'd never met. When Casey died Susan was twenty and finishing her second year at a local college. Soon after that she'd packed up everything she cared about and put them into long-term storage, gave away or sold off everything else, and invested what had been left to her by her parents and grandparents in a conservative stock portfolio. Then she packed two bags and left town, never to return. Two days later she took the oath and joined United States Marine Corps following in the footsteps of her grandmother. Casey had told Susan that it had been one of the best things she'd ever done. Sue Mollison was looking for a new home and a new family, and perhaps she would find it in the Corps.

A year later she met David Bennett, a fellow Marine who seemed to be able to bring out the best in the very attractive but somewhat reserved young woman who had a bright smile and a sometimes wicked sense of humor. Within a few months they were married and things went downhill from there. Known to her friends now as 'Molly' Bennett the young Marine was sent with her unit for a six-month deployment to South America and while she was gone she hardly heard from David and he rarely answered when she called. She suspected that he was seeing someone else but that bothered her less than the feeling of being abandoned, forgotten and unwanted.

When she returned home they had it out and for a while things got better until it was David's time to go on deployment. They fought a lot when they were both home but neither seemed to want to call it quits and things went on like that for the next year or so until Molly's unit was deployed to Africa for a year. After five years in the Corps she'd found a life that she loved and she'd come to the conclusion that her problems with David Bennett were better put behind her. The dangers she and her squad faced in Africa had forced her to focus on the job she loved and she intended to move on from David with no further regrets once her deployment was over. Despite her domestic issues, in her relatively brief time with the Marines Molly had become recognized an extremely competent professional and earned an early promotion to staff sergeant. She earned a spot in the elite Marine Force Recon Battalion where she'd risen to senior squad leader in her platoon and had been tabbed to move up to assistant platoon sergeant, and

eventually to platoon sergeant. She was a tough, experienced veteran and the only thing she thought might interfere with her progression to gunnery sergeant or even further was if she accepted the offer she'd been given to finish her degree and then be commissioned as an officer.

On the very morning that her recon squad had encountered the terrorist band led by two of the sons of Hassan Gul, the world's most wanted terrorist, Molly had found out that David Bennett had not simply finalized the divorce that she'd agreed to; he'd cleaned out her savings, two full years' worth of her Marine Corps salary. She'd naively put his name on her account when they first married and had never removed him. Fortunately David hadn't been able to touch her investment portfolio; she'd never given him access to it. She'd sat there thinking about which of his bones to break and in what order after she got home when the order to move out had come down from her company commander. All of that was going through her mind when she was told to move her squad out. A short few hours later her life had changed forever.

She'd gone forward with one of her squad to the top of a small bush covered hillock barely ten feet high to survey the Nigerian jungle ahead when a band of some 150 mercenaries on their way to attack a refugee camp a few miles away came into view. She reported the sighting and was told to stand fast and observe until the rest of her company was in position. She was still hidden from view and watching when a group of prisoners was brought into the clearing and pushed down to the ground at the base of the little hill directly below her position. The nine Norwegians and Canadians were survivors of a supply convoy that had been attacked two days earlier and whose whereabouts had been unknown. Molly stayed hidden as ordered until the two Gul brothers had ordered the Canadian officer among the prisoners be dragged out and executed in front of the others. Molly watched as the woman tried to scream through her bloody gag, her face beaten black and blue, her left eye swollen shut and her wrists bound behind her back as one of the guards dragged her by her now filthy reddish-brown hair over to where the two brothers were waiting. The captain was pulled to her knees and her head pulled forward baring her neck; the guards had been ordered to cut off her head with a machete as an example to the others.

Unable to watch any longer Molly killed the two Gul brothers while the Marine with her killed the two guards. Then she'd jumped down to the base of the hill exposing herself to deadly fire in order to protect the other captives and in the melee that followed she killed nearly a dozen of the terrorists, some of them in hand-to-hand combat. The video recordings of the entire incident from her helmet cam and that of her squad mate had made her an instant hero and earned her a Medal of Honor for her exceptional valor under fire, although at first her name was withheld from a public that had been able to watch the recording mere hours later when it was put out to all of the news agencies.

That event had directly led to the incident at the consulate in Cameroon where she'd first met Lieutenant Paul 'Rick' O'Brien, and soon after meeting and being adopted into his family. Then the remaining members of the Gul family began to hunt them. David Bennett and his current girlfriend, who'd been mistaken for Molly, had both been murdered. Eventually they had no choice but to have their deaths faked and go into hiding; they'd accomplished that with the assistance of some Navy Seals who'd come to their rescue. Then with the help of Naval

Intelligence and the prospective Ranger Regiment commander, then-Colonel Robert Black, they fled eight light years from Earth to the New Hope colony in March 2123. They'd made themselves at home and thrived as Gunnery Sergeant Molly Pickford and Lieutenant Commander, now Commander, Rick Cassidy.

Though she'd met and then married Australian Lieutenant Jason Ramsey early in 2126 she'd accepted that that relationship was coming to an end even before the alien invasion had started. Jason was a good man and she'd enjoyed her time with him but they had two irreconcilable differences. The first was that Jason wanted to go back to Earth now that the last of the Gul family had been killed and their network eliminated. While it should be safe to go home now Molly didn't want to go back there to live. She had a great life at the colony where she'd made many friends, was well-respected and had more than a little power and prestige. She'd never been happier. The other issue was Rick. Although Rick and Jason treated each other like brothers, Jason was looking forward to having Molly all to himself and he wanted her to cut ties with Rick and his family, something she adamantly refused to do. Rick's family *was her family*, they had taken her in heart and soul, and even though they'd only spent a short time physically together before they'd had to leave Earth Rick's mom Kelly, his daughter Ciara, and his younger sisters Bridget, Nicole, and Chloe O'Brien, and even Ciara's mom Melanie McCord, had all kept up an ongoing and loving correspondence with her over the last four years and she longed to see them again in person, especially her 'niece' Ciara who was now fourteen and getting ready to come to the colony to join her dad.

Molly loved Rick deeply and she knew the feeling was returned in full. They knew each other so well that they often didn't even have to speak to know what the other was thinking they were so in tune with each other. Rick had many girlfriends at the colony, and most of them were Molly's friends as well, some of them they'd known for almost as long as they'd been there. Molly's closest friends were Captain Jing Woo the executive officer of Jason's company, and Captain Zoey Bryant, commander of Delta Company. Both had been newly arrived platoon leaders when she'd first met them. There were many others who were nearly as close as those two but Jing and Zoey were both based in New Hope Town so she saw them much more frequently than many of her other friends.

Get it together girl she thought if you think of this as an impossible task that's what will become, impossible! Rick is absolutely right about that. People may think we're crazy because we're going to try to teach, no, we are going to teach these girls to fight demon wolves and aliens, but like we always say, this is good crazy since it is the only option therefore it's not really crazy at all. We just have to make these girls and the other Rangers believe that it can be done too. We will do it because we have to do it therefore we will get it done!

She shook her head and grinned at herself in the mirror *Get over the doom and gloom girl or Rick's apt to slap you upside of the head just like I do for him when he gets depressed. Molly laughed inwardly Better go find him, he probably could use one right now! And a cold beverage from his fridge! Then a back rub! Then it's time for some fun!*

Chapter 2

Getting Ready for Inspection

The Cairo 0830

In small groups of friends and classmates the 50 young interns and students made their way from the makeshift dining area in the cargo deck where they'd had a light breakfast of scrambled eggs, strawberries and fresh bread up to their sleeping areas on the second deck. It was time to put on their newly issued Ranger uniforms before heading back down to the cargo bay. Everyone had to be ready and back down there by 0900.

Fifteen-year-old Montana Hernandez had already put on her camouflage pants and over-blouse when her friends Ruby McCarthy and River Jacobs came back from the restroom at the rear of the passenger cabin. She was pulling on her right boot over her bare foot when Ruby asked, "Aren't you going to wear socks with your boots?"

Montana pulled on her left boot and stood up. She wiggled her toes, "Why? You know I don't like wearing socks and besides, these are really comfortable!"

Ruby shook her head, "Well, I'm going to wear mine. I don't want my feet getting all sweaty inside them."

"Suit yourself," Montana told her. "I'll betcha I'm not the only one who doesn't want to wear all this stuff."

###

"I really like the way this material feels on my skin," said 16-year-old Norwegian Vika Magnuson to her close friend Olivia St Just, a student from France and also sixteen. They had arrived together as 14-year-olds two years earlier on the colony transport ship *Amundsen*.

"Is that why you're not wearing anything underneath your shirt?" Olivia asked with a shake of her head.

Vika grinned, "That's right! And it's not like we're going anywhere. They just want to see how these uniforms fit."

Olivia shook her head, "I'm not so sure about that. You're not totally commando under there, are you?"

"Of course not. I've got those nice camo shorts on. They feel really good too. Almost silky against my skin even though they don't look like they're made of silk."

"Oui, they do feel good, don't they."

###

Fourteen-year-old Japanese student Fuka Hayakawa asked her Chinese friend 15-year-old Bailin Chow, "How does this look?" They were both gymnasts and they'd arrived together on the cargo supply ship *Australia* nine months earlier. Fuka had been the youngest student at the school when she'd first arrived but she was now just a few weeks from turning fifteen.

Bailin surveyed her friend's uniform and replied, "You look really good. Maybe you should ask Veronika to take in the over-blouse a little more. You're so skinny, like a pretzel with two little grains of salt stuck to it."

Fuka stuck out her tongue and shot back, "It's not like yours are any bigger!"

"I didn't say they were. So we're both pretzel sticks but we can do things with our bodies that nobody else can except for Liu Sun and Yu. And we're a lot stronger than we look!"

Fuka grinned, "That's right!"

Bailin looked at the Ranger clothing spread out on Fuka's crash couch and counted then asked, "Aren't you wearing your camo shorts under there?"

"Do you think I need to? They're a little big. I've got some pins that Miss Li gave me. She said she would take the shorts in later."

"What are you wearing then?"

"The pretty pink one with the flowers."

"That's nice but I'm going to wear the camo shorts. I may as well get used to them."

###

It was time to go down to the cargo bay as Nikola Dubrovski inspected the other Russian girls as well as her friends Winter Summerfield, Naomi Winston and Saki Hashimoto. Nikola had known the three fourth-year students for three years and she had no doubts that Rick Cassidy and Molly Pickford were expecting her to be fully and correctly dressed out for inspection and the others wanted her opinion on their efforts. "You all look good on the outside," Nikola told them. "I hope you have all the right clothes on underneath."

"Which all the right clothes?" asked Naomi.

Nikola looked at the young Briton and asked, "Seriously?"

Summerfield looked her best friend Winston and rolled her eyes, "It's too late now, don't cha think?"

"Da, too late is right. It's time to go."

While Nikola was looking away from them the wide-eyed 16-year-old twins Sasha and Anya Romanova glanced at each other anxiously; 17-year-old Saki Hashimoto noticed the look and smirked knowingly.

Chapter 3

The Bra and Panty Brigade

The Cairo

At 0900 Commander Rick Cassidy climbed down the access stairway to the cargo bay where Gunnery Sergeant Molly Pickford waited with Sergeant David Choo and Corporal Miruku Nakamura. Major Maya Scott sat on the stairway one level up where she would have a good place to view the scene from. Cassidy and the three Rangers were dressed in standard Ranger khaki shorts, dark blue t-shirts and Ranger combat boots. The girls and Academy staffers were waiting in a cluster in the rearmost corner of the cargo bay, on the port side near the cargo bay doors. All had on their newly issued Ranger camouflage blouses and pants along with their combat boots.

Australian visual arts teacher Leila Turner and her little crew of documentarians were with the main group of would-be Ranger trainees, with the exception of Athena Milonos who had carefully hobbled out onto the main deck to join Staff Sergeant Jillian Kelly on lookout duty. Four of the injured girls including Athena had been tasked with recording everything that happened while they were in the valley but the other three, Chloe Capps, Yu lee and Ruby McCarthy, had less serious injuries and weren't exempt from the morning's activities.

Kelly had broken her right leg and was standing, or rather sitting, most of the daytime lookout watches for now. Kelly along with Sergeant Choo and Corporal Gert Hammer, who was still confined to sickbay, were the three survivors of the ship's seven-person detachment of Colonial Security officers. One of the medics, Staff Sergeant Ian Ferguson, had been drafted into recording the proceedings in the cargo bay while Athena Milonos would be recording the morning's main deck activities. Excited chatter and laughter echoed in the huge space as Cassidy walked up to Pickford. "It's that time," he said. "Everybody here?"

"Looks like it," she replied.

"The display ready, Miru?" he asked Nakamura.

"Aye, sir," she replied with an amused smile. "Ready when you are."

"David," Cassidy said quietly to the Korean sergeant, "as soon as we get done here we'll send them up to the main deck. I want you out on deck with Jillian before we get up there. Double check the chain barriers while you're waiting. There's lots of room, but I don't want anybody walking or running off the roof." The previous evening they'd rigged the chain barriers normally used along the edges of the outer main deck whenever the transport lander was on the ground for more than a few hours, or if they were taking on or dropping off passengers.

"Aye, Sir. On my way," replied Choo, saluting quickly and heading back up to the main deck where Kelly was waiting.

"Let's get this party started, Molly," he said quietly to his pretty blonde gunnery sergeant. "Time for a little shock therapy."

"Aye, aye sir!" Molly Pickford replied with a wicked grin.

The Marine strode up to the giggling and chatting group, looked at them with her fiercest glare and yelled, “WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING? THIS IS NOT KINDERGARTEN! LINE UP OVER HERE NOW! FOUR LINES! NOW MOVE IT YOU STUPID BITCHES AND THAT INCLUDES YOU HERR LOESSER! STAND UP STRAIGHT, FEET TOGETHER, ARMS AT YOUR SIDES, CHIN UP, CHEST OUT! MOVE IT!”

“You can’t talk to us like that!” whined a voice with an American accent from the back of the crowd as they scurried to get into four lines.

Pickford spun around, “WHO SAID THAT? NO, DON’T TELL ME YOU LITTLE WHINER! ALL OF YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP AND GET IN LINE BEFORE I PUT YOU ON THE DECK!” Pickford yelled.

As the taken aback, wide-eyed group settled into some semblance of order Cassidy casually walked over to Pickford and loud enough to be heard by everyone asked, “Is everybody present, Gunnery Sergeant?”

Pickford nodded and said, “Aye, Commander.”

“Any problems?” he said.

Pickford turned to glare at the group and replied, “Not yet, Sir.”

“Very good.” Rick mounted the small raised platform that the ship’s senior engineering tech Master Sergeant Guy Gilbert had pulled out of one of the ship’s many storage compartments. He turned his attention to the assembled gaggle and noted with amusement that Manfred Loesser, the only male in the group, stood a little self-conscientiously at the back of the pack. He addressed the group with a smile saying, “Good morning, everyone. Good to see you all. Now starts day one of your modified Ranger boot camp. We’ll start with uniform inspection, and then you’ll receive your boot camp names. After that you’ll be issued your training packs and you’ll take them for a little run topside. Gunnery Sergeant Pickford, you may proceed!”

“Aye, aye, Sir!” Turning back to the quiet assembly of young women plus Loesser she growled, “ALRIGHT YOU BITCHES, TAKE OFF YOUR BOOTS!”

Most of the surprised group quickly removed their boots, but a few of the girls, and notably the Chinese dance and gymnastics teacher Meifeng Li, moved more slowly, apparently realizing they were about to garner unwanted attention from the gunny who saw the hesitation and yelled, “I SAID TAKE OFF YOUR BOOTS! NOW, YOU LAGGARDS!” Pickford surveyed the group, noting the miscreants when her attention was drawn to a particular set of feet. She stared at those feet as she walked up to the offending individual then slowly raised her eyes until she was looking at the flushed face of Montana Hernandez. The Marine moved closer until her face was only inches away from the girl from New Mexico, then asked in a voice that nearly knocked the 5-foot 6-inch brunette off her feet, “YOU! WHAT THE HELL DO YOU HAVE ON YOUR FEET?” When the girl hesitated to answer, Molly asked again even louder, “I SAID, ‘WHAT THE HELL DO YOU HAVE ON YOUR FEET?’”

The sweating teenager’s face had turned beet red and she swallowed hard before she finally answered, “Nothing, Sergeant.”

Pickford kept the pressure up and didn't back away even an inch, asking in a roar, "WHERE ARE YOUR REGULATION RANGER SOCKS, YOU STUPID LITTLE DUMBASS?"

"I didn't know I had to wear them, Gunnery Sergeant," she replied in a trembling whine.

The Marine NCO looked at Hernandez in disbelief and said, "YOU DIDN'T KNOW? YOU SAY YOU DIDN'T KNOW?" Molly moved away from the now shaking girl and went over to the podium and picked up a small trash bag from the floor and handed it to the waiting Nakamura.

The corporal walked back to the silent group and started pointing at the other offending feet saying in a booming voice that belied her small stature, "YOU AND YOU AND YOU AND YOU AND THE REST OF YOU IDIOTS NOT WEARING REGULATION RANGER SOCKS! TAKE OFF THOSE PRETTY BABY GIRL FOOTIES AND PUT THEM IN THIS BAG! DO IT NOW, YOU IDIOTS!"

Cassidy had remained on the podium during this exchange, trying hard to keep a serious face on. He turned and looked up at Major Scott who was having a hard time suppressing a laugh and rolled his eyes. He waited until the corporal had finished collecting the girlie socks then stepped down and joined the gunny and the corporal. He said evenly but loud enough to be heard by all, "Looks like a bit of a uniform malfunction going around. Gunnery Sergeant, Corporal, do you think that's the extent of the problem? If it is, perhaps you might give them a little slack on their first day. What do you think, Corporal Nakamura?" he asked.

Miruku Nakamura replied, "I think it's just the tip of the iceberg, Commander. Just the tip of the proverbial iceberg!" It was an expression that Molly had coached her to use.

Pickford nodded in agreement saying, "I'm afraid that I must concur with the corporal's assessment, Sir. There's no way socks are the only malfunction, Commander."

Cassidy nodded at her then sighed in resignation and said, "I see. Very well, carry on then, Gunnery Sergeant."

"Aye, aye Sir." Molly Pickford turned back to face the group and bellowed, "ALRIGHT YOU DUMBASS FASHIONPLATES, STRIP THOSE OVERBLOUSES AND PANTS OFF! DOWN TO YOUR SKIVVIES! THAT MEANS YOUR REGULATION RANGER ISSUE SHORTS AND TEE SHIRTS FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND ENGLISH! DO IT FAST OR I'LL DO IT FOR YOU!"

Those who had the right gear on under their cammies quickly did as they were told. The ones who didn't moved much slower, nervously looking around and up at the commander, who casually surveyed the scene. The Japanese Ranger groaned, "Whoa, Gunny, look at this. Look at the pretty little panties on these whores! Designer slingshots too! And a couple who decided that today was a good day to go commando above the waist." Several hands moved to cover bare breasts and Nakamura yelled mercilessly, "HANDS DOWN YOU BRAINLESS WONDERS AND STAND AT ATTENTION." Everyone complied, some more hesitantly than others.

Molly shook her head and said to Nakamura, "Looks like they're trying out for Victoria's Secret's 150-year anniversary catalogue! I think we'll see some funny goose bumps when we send them outside like that!"

Cassidy remounted the platform and surveyed the group. He looked directly at Veronika Tchachenko. The tall blonde Russian woman had been the school's Assistant Director for Student Travel and Transportation and had been in overall charge of the group from the New Hope Academy before the crash. Cassidy had appointed her the company quartermaster two days before. He asked her, "Supply Officer Tchachenko, were these other wannabes issued a full set of regulation Ranger clothing?"

Veronika replied quickly, "Yaz, Commander. Two sets each pluz extra socks an undervear."

Cassidy nodded and said, "Very good, Ms. Tchachenko. And were they told to be completely dressed out for this morning?" he asked.

"Dey vere, Sir!" she replied.

"I see. Thank you, Supply Officer Tchachenko," he said. He looked at the group with a shake of his head and sighed dramatically in disappointment.

Pickford moved over to Cassidy and said loudly, "Commander, request permission to proceed to the naming ceremony and then head topside with this bunch as they are, Sir!" A soft groan rose from the group at that.

Cassidy looked at the group once more before answering, "To the naming ceremony it is then, Gunnery Sergeant. *However*, since this *is* their first day I think we should give them one chance to make good. But just this once. Got that, Gunnery Sergeant? They need to be dressed properly when they receive their boot camp names. They are pretty though, I must say!"

"Aye, sir," she replied with visible reluctance. Molly Pickford turned and growled again at the group of fidgeting young women who had no choice but to become Ranger trainees, "YOU HEARD THE COMMANDER! HE MUST REALLY LIKE YOU LITTLE TWITS! I DON'T SEE IT MYSELF. YOU SHOW UP LIKE THIS AT RANGER TRAINING AND YOU'D BE RUNNIN' BARE-ASSED IN THE SNOW!" Molly motioned to Nakamura to come over and ordered, "Corporal, please escort the panty and bra brigade and their sockless sisters to their living quarters and make sure they come back here properly dressed out. Have them take their boots with them. Back here in 10 minutes, not a second more!"

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant!" Nakamura obeyed then shouted, "LET'S GO YOU WHINEY HINEYS! LEAVE YOUR GEAR AND MOVE IT! THE REST OF YOU STAND FAST!"

"NEXT TIME I WILL RIP THOSE PRETTY PANTIES OFF YOUR ASSES AND MAKE YOU WEAR THEM AS HATS!" Pickford yelled at their backs. "THE REST OF YOU CAN SIT DOWN UNTIL THEY COME BACK!" she said with a glare. "AND NO TALKING!"