

Delia Hunter stepped off the tarmac into the dim, noisy terminal. The twenty-five degree temperature dip shocked her senses. She never understood the need to make buildings cold when it was hot outside, slightly lowering the temperature and removing any humidity seemed more sensible to her. As her eyes adjusted to the indoor lighting she sorted out the noises of soldiers and their families waiting in chairs for their chance to fly and several Airmen dealing with the details of getting people and equipment from point A to point B. Several armed guards were stationed about the terminal for protection.

Delia consulted her itinerary although she had it pretty much memorized. Devil's flight, if all went right, should arrive in half an hour. A staff sergeant sat at the nearby information desk haggling with someone on the phone. Delia lounged nearby so she would not appear to be impatient. When he finally slammed down the phone she approached respectfully.

"Hi, I'm sorry to bother you. I was hoping you could confirm that a passenger was able to get on flight Charlie-zero-niner from Virginia."

The rather frazzled looking clerk frowned up at her for a minute, and then turned back to his computer. "Name?"

"Devlin Knight, his father is..."

The clerk's fingers flew across his keyboard faster than Delia could speak. "...no need. The Major General's son was allowed to board. His flight should be here within the half hour."

Delia grinned, barely surprised that Devil's father was known; Devil had a lot in common with his dear old dad. "Great. Can I wait for him, or do I need to exit through security to get my duffel right away?" Delia wasn't familiar with all the security regulations for military transport in the post-9/11 world.

Petty Sergeant Willis focused his eyes back on the young woman in front of him and frowned. "Who are you?"

Delia shifted her pack more comfortably on her shoulders. "Delia Hunter. General Knight made the arrangements for me to fly so Devi...Devlin and I could meet up here."

Keys on Willis's computer started clicking again; he glanced down at the screen. "That checks out. It says here you have special dispensation to fly military transport until further notice from the Major General." He looked back up at her with a quizzical expression. "I guess it would be all right for you to wait since it won't be long."

Delia nodded. "Thanks, I'll just sit quietly over there." She pointed to the chairs behind her.

The phone on Willis's desk rang then, he nodded as he grabbed the receiver.

Delia pivoted on her heel with military precision and strode back to the chairs, picking up a recent copy of "Stars and Stripes" to peruse. Even seated and reading, her bearing screamed military to the casual and not-so-casual observer.

Green Bean and Grey stood at the security checkpoint looking into the terminal room watching her.

“She doesn’t look much different” Green Bean observed “except for the hair.”

Grey frowned, “looks can be deceiving. She’s had a rough one.”

“So you want us to treat her differently? Go easy or something?”

Twisting his head to the side, Grey pinned his companion with a look. “God no! She’d hate that with a fiery passion. Treat her exactly the same. She’s not going to be any easier on you. Give her as good you as you get.”

Green Bean nodded. “Well that’s easily done. Should we not talk about it?”

Grey turned his gaze back to where Delia was seated. “I’m not sure yet. I’ll get back to you on that one.”

“Are we going to stand out here and spy on her forever like love-struck fools?”

Grey started at this friend’s words. He held his response while a flight was announced. “No. They just announced Devil’s flight. They’ll both be out in a couple minutes. Why don’t you go get the car to meet them?”

“What are you going to do?” Green Bean asked wiggling his brows.

Grey gestured to the baggage claim area with his head; only a few duffels were still awaiting pickup. “I’m going to get the bags.”

Green Bean saluted and turned on his heel, but as he walked away Grey could swear he heard a soft sing-song of “Grey and Delia sitting in a tree....” He thought about commenting, but he figured Delia would be happy to rip the offender’s head off for such insinuations if they were to come to her attention during camp. Grey smiled at the thought and turned back to watch her standing at the window watching the tarmac expectantly. He thought to himself what a great summer this was going to be.



Finding Delia

By Jill Irving

Special Journal, Boot Camp, Summer of 2004, Camp Pendleton, CA

Day 1: Camp officially started today, though I arrived in California yesterday. Green Bean, Grey, and Devil all met me at the Air Base. We caught up with Casper at this park in L.A.; he had picked up a picnic lunch for all of us. Casper and Green Bean

figured the rest of us would be dying to get in motion after the cramped cross-continental flights. They weren't wrong. After eating, we started a mock football game, which ended in Devil and me wrestling for about ten minutes. Surprisingly I won. I figured with his plan to train harder and his significant bulk advantage that he'd beat me, at least at wrestling. I'll always kick his butt in martial arts though; I use it far more than he ever will.

We were allowed to check into the barracks early, about seven last night, so that we wouldn't have to stay in a hotel or something. I slept like a log after finding a good place to do my penitence meditation. This morning I got up with revelry to exercise. Green Bean joined me for about a six mile run. He told me that he'd run another marathon this spring. I told him I'd been a bit busy with all the death that was surrounding me. He did the whole condolences and how are you now bit. Then we got down to some serious running.

Ten o'clock in the morning, the group was standing at attention in chalk lines. In addition to the 'Barstow' group, there were seven others in the chalk, including two other girls. Standing at attention, Delia could pick up faint whispers that one of them shouldn't be there. In fact, some whispers were suggesting that she shouldn't be there either, so Delia ignored them at first.

A Marine Corporal named Chuck Waters was introduced as the leader. This was his third assignment as team leader at Camp Pendleton. He'd had a six-month rotation in Iraq shortly before Jack Hunter was deployed. After what he saw there, he was really enjoying working with kids. He regularly volunteered at a Youth Center as a "Project Adventure" leader in his free time.

Tom Wellington was the oldest member of the chalk. He was bucking for command. He was also the one who was spreading, to anyone that would listen, that Delia had been let in under "special circumstances" and really shouldn't be there. It was discovered later that Tom had absolutely no idea what the special conditions were; only that General Knight had pulled some strings. Tom clearly didn't care what the circumstances were, he simply wanted Delia discounted, and Devil with her. Grey said Tom felt threatened.

Craig Lake was Tom's sidekick and doormat. Craig was doomed to life as a private if he actually made it into the Marines. Whatever Tom said was God's Own Truth to him. He was in good shape physically and looked like he could do the job, but his mind was as firm as an overripe tomato.

Gabe Bogart was another of the older boys. His name fit his personality perfectly. Not only was he a completely insulting, insensitive jerk, he was a pervert. He shared Tom's belief that the girls didn't belong there, unless it was under him. Fortunately, Gabe was a bit intimidated by Delia and/or didn't find her attractive enough. Either way, he was bad news for the other girls.

Debra was in her third year of boot camp here at Pendleton. She was seventeen, and like T.J., projected the toughness needed to survive at camp even if she wasn't as big as the guys. At 5'7" she was shorter than all the boys, but not by much. Since Tom and Deb had been there together last year, she was the one female he didn't question.

Sari, rumor has it, was at her first camp. She was only sixteen and probably should have been put in the third chalk despite her age. She stood only 5'3" and looked like she weighed one hundred soaking wet. She was kitteny soft and cute, not chalk 4 material; really not Marine material at all. Tom and Gabe zeroed in on that immediately. According to Tom, she only got into our group because her Uncle, who just got custody of her, was a Brigadier General.

Tad Werner and Gary Fitzhugh rounded out the group. They were about 5'8" or 5'9", sixteen and good grunts. They took their queues from Tom unless Devil spoke against him, then they wavered.

Despite Devil's easy charm and usual devil-may-care attitude, within minutes of sizing up the tone of the chalk, he transformed himself into a serious leadership threat to Tom. There were several possible reasons as to why he did it; it could have to help Delia, or because he was getting smeared in the campaign against her, but the gang quietly agreed it was because Sari was his type. The rest of 'Barstow' group fell in line quickly enough behind Devil stating there was strength in numbers.

When they broke from the Chalk group, they headed back to the barracks. When Delia had arrived the night before, they'd explained there were only a few girls, so they were put in rooms (officer quarters) in the barracks. Delia took the smaller space which was outfitted with only one bunk. Sari and Deb would share the larger room at the other end of the hall. All three of them would share the officer's shower which had private stalls. The boy's in the chalk all stayed in the main barrack room. The door between the officer's hall and the barracks room was locked. The only allowed entrance was at the end of the hall near her bedroom. Boys were not allowed in that area, and the girls were not allowed in the main barracks room. Chuck was in one of the officer rooms in the Chalk Three barracks just across the way from them.

The first unit exercise was a four mile run around the periphery of the base. Green Bean and Delia took the immediate lead and kept it through the run. While running, Grey took the opportunity to talk to Tad and Gary about Delia, to tell them enough about her experience to quell the rumors that she didn't deserve to be there. They were convinced and passed on the Intel to Tom, stopping the spread of that particular rumor within a few days. After that he just glared at Delia and kept silent.

Sari, on the other hand, had to sit down due to cramping after two miles. She caught up with the chalk later after "finishing up her run". But things weren't looking good for her. The thing about Chalk Four that is different than all the previous groups is that all the participants were supposed to have the skills to succeed at more complex tasks with less supervision. Sari clearly brought down the level. She should have been placed with the younger kids where they could deal with different levels, but politics had overruled sense.

Grey learned that Chuck had tried to get her reassigned without success. He was forced to find ways to use her in a unit well beyond her abilities. It wasn't long before Sari's name sounded a lot like the apology she frequently offered. Craig would whine "Sorry...can you carry your own pack for a while?" or Tad would entreat "Sorry...you can climb that wall, just try." The Barstow group did not join in that teasing even though they were frustrated with the situation.

At night the kids were allowed an hour of leisure before lights out. There was a common room off of the dining room where everyone could meet as a group to watch some television or play games. However, after the first day, the Barstow group felt the need for someplace more private to hang out. The gym was nearly empty at that hour so, as so frequently would happen with Devil and Delia around, they ended up hanging there, exercising and talking about their thoughts. Devil was unusually quiet about the Sari situation.

Journal Day 5

Did my penitence meditation this morning before revelry. I had some trouble sleeping. I think I heard Sari crying in the bathroom last night. I didn't know how to approach that so I just let her be. Maybe I should have done more, but I couldn't think of anything good to tell her that wouldn't be a lie. She may not deserve all the crap she is taking, particularly from Gabe, but she doesn't belong in the group. Does that make me heartless? I wondered about it all night.

The rug that I picked up in L.A. with the pentagram in a circle is very useful. Don't worry, Maryann, it isn't making me lax about my protection. I see it as a way to make them more precise. And it's so much easier to shake salt off the rug than to have to sweep or vacuum it up; not to mention easier to handle the candle wax drippings. I don't have a lot of time to call my own, this way I can spend more time listening and less time cleaning up from it.

Translation of the Age Of book is slow and tedious. I used to think I was good at Latin. I'm not sure if I want to drop it or double my efforts.

I took some time afterwards to write some emails before we started our exercises for the day.

To: "Trim Falucci" <trim_the_magnificent@lycos.com>

Subject: Apologies

Hi,

I wanted to send you a quick note to apologize for that last scene before I left. I never meant to get so passionate in my point that I would yell and call you names.

I know we don't see eye to eye on what happened. I hope you realize that I only get upset because you are my friend and I worry. God, do I sound like Raine? Please give some thought to what your Grans and I have said about the dark magic and what it does to your soul. I know you say you don't feel it now. But I can't shake the idea that you'll pay for it later. I believe I really believe that you are a good person who's picked up some bad habits from his father. But I KNOW that you aren't really like him. Nobody wants that, especially not you.

Please keep in touch over the summer. I will miss you.

Deal

To: "Zoe Zinni"

Subject: Request

Hi Zoe,

I have a big request for you. I promised everyone that I'd send nice newsy letters along about what was going to Jacqueline for all of you to share. And I'm in the process of getting one ready to go, but we all know the real news is going to be there. I was hoping I could beg you to send me details of stuff that happens there.

With Raine on the disabled list, Wylie is going to have a tough summer. But where I'm so far away, she'll figure I can't do anything so she doesn't need to pass on details unless they are relevant. Jacqueline tends towards the same rationality. I don't see Trim or Kate being big detail providers for this kind of stuff. I was hoping I could impose on you to keep me up to date.

I realize you will all be fine without me and maybe I don't have to know everything. But I care and I'd like to know what's going on....would you mind helping me out?

Email is fine with me. I'll be checking it fairly regularly.

Please let me know your thoughts. Thanks so much!
Deal

In the middle of 'trust' exercises, an altercation arose. Devil pulled Gabe aside from the group and gave him a dressing down. From the distance, not even Delia's hearing could pick up much more than a few words, but the hand gestures and body language said that Gabe had tried something with Sari. Devil was still steaming when he rejoined the group. He looked worked up enough to hit someone.

Deb, Tad and Gary pulled together to stay out of the "factions" that were developing between Devil and Tom. Chuck told the group he wasn't immediately declaring an official leader of the group; he wanted us all to prove our worth. Although the 'Barstow' crew assumed he was leaning toward Devil, Devil's show of temper might have worked against him. What was amazing to the Barstow group was that Devil had a temper.

Later the same day, Chuck divided the chalk into three teams for a project. Grey, Sari, and Gabe were in Delia's group. Devil had Craig, Deb, and Gary. The final group was Tom, Green Bean, Casper and Tad. Delia was startled to find she had a chance at command when the groupings were named, Grey and Green Bean simply smiled secretly.

The project was a "search and rescue" scenario. The whole chalk headed into the camp woodlands, a large, fairly hilly area. While there, one group had to disappear and keep radio silence. Another group acted as "command central" for the rescue, while the final group was the search team. Chuck explained the procedures during the trip out. Each team took a turn in each role. During the first rotation, Delia's group was command central. Delia found herself censuring Gabe for disobeying orders, but he kept in line after that. Sari stayed close to Delia from that point on, following all her directions dutifully. Grey simply grinned and went with the flow. The group did very well; Chuck evaluated them well in each rotation, although there was a note about Gabe needing discipline.

When the 'Barstow' group met at the gym during free hour, Green Bean and Casper regaled everyone with Tom's attempts at being a hotshot leader. They loved the fact that they didn't have to be deliberately difficult because Tom hemmed himself into a corner more than once with his own decisions. Their last rotation was as searchers, by then Tad

and Green Bean were deferring to Casper instead of Tom. Tom was livid. Apparently Chuck's evaluation struck at the heart of the problem, Tom's ego.

To The Super Friends, Day 6

Hi Jacqueline, please share this with the whole gang.

Hi Raine, Wylie, Kate, Trim, Zoe, Duncan, and Dare,

Things have been busy and interesting. I've never been involved in a Chalk that was so filled with dissension. This older guy, Tom, wants to be leader, but hasn't got the juice for it. With Devil around, that spells trouble.

It's really been good seeing my Barstow friends again. I'm sure you'll all be shocked to know I haven't been making too many more friends here. I could blame it on the factions that are developing, but you all know me too well...

I miss you guys, believe it or not. Unlike our Slayer team, I think this Chalk will fall apart when the chips are down, not pull it together and win. Big surprise, I like to win.

There are two other girls in my unit. I think I have their grudging respect, but they don't particularly like me and I don't spend much time with them. Mostly I hang with the gang from Barstow in what little free time I have. In the mornings I get up early to meditate, work on my translation, run six miles with Green Bean and work out with Devil. In the evenings, Devil's been running with me and the whole gang meets in the gym and does some exercising.

Between our project scenarios, things like "search and rescue" or "outnumbered defenses" or "escape" we do a lot of trust exercises and climbing etc. We do lots of running too. Trim, you'd absolutely hate it, but I so love it! We've also been taking some classes on tactics.

Still, I feel guilty not being there, especially with Raine hurt. How's the recovery coming? I hope things are going well, not too crazy for you. Please write back and let me know what's up and how you are all doing. I have my cell phone with me at all times, so if there's anything I can do remotely...well you know.

Be Well,

Deal

Journal Day 15

I heard Sari crying again last night. She's tried her hardest, and while I still don't think she belongs, I felt the need to check on her. She was embarrassed that I'd found out. She seemed pretty sure I would never cry. When I asked why, all she said was Gabe. He's apparently been grabbing her and making inappropriate comments right from the beginning. She's been afraid to say anything, especially after Devil got so angry the time he found out. She didn't want Devil to get in trouble. She said she liked it when I was around because Gabe didn't bother her. I actually heard myself say to her to stick with me. What was I thinking? She's like the weakest link, why would I want her on my team? Ugh! She cheered up and went to bed though.

Meditation came really easily this morning. It's funny how much better it works when my conscience isn't bothering me. No answers yet, but I'm definitely starting to "hear" something.

Chuck announced his permanent group leaders that day. Devil and Delia were made co-leaders, when another leader was required to break up into 3 teams, Casper would be the third. Tom was livid! Delia called Chuck aside to ask him to assign Sari to her team permanently. She suggested that with Gabe and Devil's apparent interest, it was the best call. Chuck seemed surprised at the request, but agreed.

The first official team exercises were to have a small team outnumbered by a larger one, and to develop a defense strategy. Naturally, the teams didn't fight it out completely, but they were evaluated on the strategies and implementation. During the height of the action, Tom tried to take Delia out with a sucker move. Instead she rammed him and sent him flying backwards. He wasn't really hurt, but very shocked.

The whole Barstow gang found it very satisfying. Casper did a great imitation of him later on during free time. They all laughed their heads off.

Journal Day 20

I've really come to look forward to my morning meditation. It seems to be the only time I really get to think of myself. I spend the rest of the day thinking about my team and not screwing up. I don't always hear anything, but I'm definitely able to close down my conscious mind for a while.

Sari has become a pretty good trouper. She still has a long way to go on the skills, but she works with me to improve whenever I'll let her. Stuff is still hard for her, but she never gives up, although that has landed her in the med center a couple times. She stays close and follows orders. I still can't tell if something is going on between her and Devil though. Grey says he can't tell either, but I'm not sure if that means he doesn't know or if he was sworn to secrecy.

Translation is still going slowly. I'm thinking of double Latin lessons next year! I haven't learned much more than there have been different people across the years who have been "Protectors". They seem to have some special skills or powers. They are like me in some ways, but have powers that I don't.

Chuck called the groups together to explain the day's exercises. "Every soldier's duty when captured is to try to escape. The purpose of today's exercises is to learn to work together in finding an escape route."

"Every prisoner's duty is also to not give any information, even under the duress of torture. Will we be trained in that too?" Tad asked.

Chuck glared at Tad for a moment. "No. There will be no torture. Since there are other times when being able to escape can be useful, such as in a hostage situation or in some sort of building collapse, this is deemed helpful. It is also a team building exercise." He

looked around the group. “You will break into your usual teams for this exercise. There are two scenarios. Each group will act as the prisoners for one and the captors for the other. I will be strictly monitoring behavior. Any shenanigans will be dealt with immediately and firmly!”

Several covert glances headed toward Gabe during this discussion. Sari took a quick step closer to Delia.

“For the first scenario, Delia, your team will be prisoners. Devil, lead your prisoners to outbuilding C, and remember your rules governing treatment of prisoners are much more restrictive than those of the Geneva Convention.”

Devil saluted Chuck before giving each of his team members a “behave yourselves” look. As he moved behind Delia to grab her, figuring her for the biggest threat, he heard her whisper. “Keep Gabe in line.”

He squeezed her arm briefly in acceptance, but announced aloud, “Silence, prisoner, or you’ll find yourself in solitary.”

All weapons and tools were confiscated from the prisoners, while the captors picked up their paint guns. Despite his threat, as they reached the prison room, Devil shoved Delia into the same cell that Sari was in. The other team members were forced into different cells. “Don’t get any ideas about escaping. There will be guards around the building.” He announced. As his team followed him outside, he set shifts for guards, switching off every hour. He set Tom and Green Bean on the first watch. The rest of the team took up positions further from the Outbuilding.

Inside the cells, Sari sat near the back wall while Delia listened for the watch orders. She motioned everyone to the point where they were closest to each other. “Okay, sounds like there are two on watch now. Suggestions?”

She watched Casper and Craig try the cell bars. “Seems like pretty sturdy construction.”

Grey observed the floor, “Maybe we can pull up some of these floorboards.”

“Try it. Quietly!” Delia suggested as she started checking the bars in her cell.

An hour later, Grey had pulled up one of the floor boards to find packed dirt beneath. The boys were taking turns digging. Delia heard the changing of the guards and warned Grey to put the board in place moments before Gary poked his head in to check on them.

While Gary was inspecting, Delia and Grey watched out the windows to see exactly where Tom and Green Bean headed. As Gary left, they moved back to the close point in the cells.

“Green Bean headed over the North ridge. They probably have a perimeter guard set there.” Grey whispered.

“That jives; I overheard Deb telling one of them to head over to the perimeter guard position. Tom headed southeast towards the barracks, that’s probably HQ.” Delia shared. “Sari will keep watch that way to see if we see any other movement from that area. Tad, watch out that way, I want to know where all the guards are.” Sari nodded and took a position near their window.

“What’s your plan?” Grey asked her.

“I don’t have one” Delia responded cryptically holding a hand near her ear and then pointing towards the door she winked.

A half hour later, Delia walked back to the corner of her cell. She had determined earlier that the weakest point in her cell was there. After listening carefully, she grasped a bar in both hands, and pushing her foot against the bar next to it she pulled with all her might. The bar slowly bent towards her forming a space big enough for a child, or one very small female to pass through. When no one came to the door immediately, she signaled to Sari.

Sari glanced at Delia, and then at the bars. She carefully bent down and slipped through the cell bars. Once on the other side, she whispered to Delia, “What now?”

“Wait by the door until whoever comes is inside the door and push them toward the cell.” Delia attempted to push the bars back into shape as Sari crouched down behind the door.

“Hey, whoever is out there, get your butt in here!” Delia ordered loudly. “We’re in need of water.”

Deb opened the door. “It’s only been an hour.”

“It’s hot out. You’ve probably had water several times, while we’re in here sweating!” Delia continued with the ruse.

Deb stepped in with her canteen. “Fine. Here.” She took another step into the room to reach the canteen to Delia.

Delia admired Deb’s plan of getting only close enough for her to reach the outstretched canteen, not the hand. Unfortunately, Sari quietly stood up and shoved Deb towards the cell. Delia’s long arms grabbed Deb and pulled her against the bars, pinning her while Sari grabbed the keys.

“It would have worked” Delia explained to Deb as she held her silent. Sari unlocked Grey’s cell first. Grey put Deb into a sleeper hold while Delia was released. Deb was then divested of her radio and other equipment.

Sari grinned as she lifted the radio and said in a very good Deb impression, “Gary, bring your canteen, the prisoner’s are thirsty.” Delia positioned herself at the door. As Gary opened the door, she grabbed him. Within moments, both captors were secured in cells.

“So what constitutes a successful escape?” Tad asked.

“I’d say we’re more than half-way there. Let’s get past their sentries.” Delia led them outside and indicated their direction by hand signal.

One mile out from their prison, they started a circle around to the left, keeping to the tree line. When they reached the barracks area, Delia knocked on Corporal Waters’s office door.

“Come in.” He looked up as the door opened.

Delia grinned at Chuck. “I think the exercise is over.”

Chuck lifted his radio. “Knight, your prisoners have escaped. Collect your team.”

Journal Supplement Day 20

Sari saved the day. Her size made her the only person who could slip out of the bars. But it wasn't just that, she was quiet and she disabled Deb quickly without alerting Gary. Without her, we'd still be digging an escape tunnel. Even Tom had to admit she did well. Gabe was the only one who never congratulated her.

Devil started teasing that I like Sari now. Somewhere along the line someone twisted it into me "liking" her. The biggest problem about not being girlie is that people, even friends, start thinking that maybe I'm lesbian. I don't know if they were being funny or if they really think it. I guess that is why it sticks with me, but I can handle it. I don't have to explain myself to anyone!

Journal Day 35

I meditated for nearly forty-five minutes this morning. I was almost late for chalk line-up. Should I be losing track of time like that?

We had climbing practice today; Chuck took us out into the hill region of the base today where there are a few good rock formations. We worked on the smallest, closest, of them. Sari had never done any climbing before, so I spent nearly an hour educating her and getting her ready. All indications are that our next project will involve climbing so I'll have to arrange some time on the weekend to work with her more.

There were a lot of comments and insults about her inability to climb. I told them to back off after a while, but too much protection would just make it worse for her. Mostly I just kept advising her to ignore them and listen to my instructions.

I didn't meet with the gang in the evening. I took Sari over to a climbing wall setup in camp and had her practice until she couldn't climb any more. I told her my arms were tired from the belaying to make her feel better, but honestly, she's so little it takes no effort.... My conscience didn't bother me for that white lie though.

Delia was in the bathroom during the night. She heard voices in the hallway. She had started listening to recognize them when she heard her name. One of the voices was definitely Gabe's. Boys weren't supposed to be in the girl's hallway just like the girls were never supposed to go into the main barracks room. The locked door to the main room was nearly opposite the bathroom. Delia had left the bathroom light off when she went in so her eyes wouldn't get used to light.

The voices headed down the hall towards the girl's room. Delia heard Gabe say something about "teaching her a lesson". In Gabe-Speak, she knew that could mean anything, but nothing good. Delia rushed to get out of the bathroom.

As she ran down the hall, there was no screaming or yelling. Delia sprinted into the girl's room. Craig was hovering over Deb's bed holding her down. Tom was standing about two feet inside the door, his usual expression shifted to one of dawning horror. Glimpsing past him, she saw Gabe holding Sari down on her bed, the blankets thrown off and her legs pushed wide open.

“WHAT THE HELL?” Delia yelled loudly enough that the guys in the barracks could hear.

Delia pushed Tom, who slid to the ground blubbering incoherently. Craig let go of Deb and started towards Delia, but stopped in his tracks when she swung her angry gaze his way.

Sari was crying and shaking her head back and forth while Gabe fussed with his pants. Delia grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and yanked him away from the smaller girl. Sari pulled herself into a protective ball instinctively.

“This is RAPE!” She yelled at Gabe. She pushed him away as she glared at the other perpetrators. They blathered about not knowing what Gabe’s full plan was.

Devil and Grey were in the room with the others in moments. It took three guys to keep Devil from jumping Gabe. Delia assumed a defensive position in front of Sari, while Deb crossed the room to comfort the girl. When Devil started towards them, Deb simply shook her head and stopped him.

Casper had gone for Chuck, who arrived several awkward moments later with Sergeant Toomey. All three boys were led away to the Camp offices by MPs. Delia kicked all the guys out of the room and checked on the other girls. Neither wanted to be there for the talk with Gabe, they asked Delia to represent them.

Sergeant Coombs took her statement, but told her to go back to bed afterwards. He said Tom, Craig and Gabe would be held in custody until their parent’s arrived the following morning to discuss punishment.

Both Deb and Sari were still nervous when she returned so Delia grabbed her blankets to camp on their floor for the rest of the night.

To The Super Friends, Day 36

Hi Gang,

Three members of our chalk were escorted off base today after nearly raping one of the girls. I never imagined something like this would happen, even with what I thought of some of them. We’re all kind of in a state of shock here.

I’m having trouble finding perspective, I’d be glad to hear some of yours...

And then there were eight! On the positive side, all the dissent within the group is gone.

Be Well,

Deal

In the office the next morning, it was determined that the fault mostly lay with Gabe. He engineered the whole scheme and convinced Tom and Craig to go along to get even with the little girl who was “messing up our unit”. Although Sergeant Coombs believed that Craig and Tom really weren’t thinking he meant raping her, whatever it was they were thinking, they knew what they were doing was wrong. Since Craig continued to hold down Deb so she couldn’t help and Tom just sat there doing nothing, both received

suspensions. They were both told they would have to complete counseling and prove themselves to ever get back into anything in the military.

Gabe was blackballed for good. Sari and her Uncle had yet to decide whether to charge him in court. In the meantime, he pulled her out of camp too. Although it was probably for the best, the Barstow gang couldn't help but think that Sari was getting punished for being the victim.

There was a really awkward moment when the chalk was waiting Sergeant Toomey's and Colonel Peter's decision. The look on Gabe's face said that he still believed he'd done nothing wrong, that girls were inferior.

He turned to Sari "Bitch, this is all you fault."

Sari's expression suggested that she was thinking it might be true.

As everyone stood deciding how to handle the situation, Grey whispered something to one of the MPs that were in the area. Suddenly the MPs became very interested in the building behind them.

Devil got in Gabe's face, "You think you are a big man? You think girls are weak? Prove it!"

While he was talking other chalks had come up around us forming a ring. Devil gestured to the center where Casper pushed Delia.

Suddenly Gabe was coming at Delia, swearing at her. "You're not so tough. You're just another worthless girl."

Although his remarks weren't bothering Delia, she was angry enough about what he did to Sari that she decided to accept the fight that apparently everyone wanted. Delia looked over to where Sari was watching and decided the girl needed to see girls can win.

Delia let him take the first couple swings, she stopped his blows easily. She only hit him once, but it was hard enough to hurt. He clearly needed and deserved a bit of pain...nothing that would show in a couple days though. Then she shifted her weight and took him down quickly.

Chuck, the MPs and the Sergeant all showed up when Gabe was on the ground. They took him and the other boys away.

As they left Sari approached Delia, "Before I go I want to thank you." She looked around the dispersing ring, "for everything."

"I know I was tough on you..."

"Please don't! You helped me. You taught me and you never participated in the really bad stuff. I've got to go." Sari turned with military precision, something she'd learned from Delia, and walked off to her Uncle.

Journal Day 45

Things have been rather uneventful since Gabe, Tom and Craig left. It's been much like it was at Barstow last year. Devil is official leader of the unit now, but when we break into teams, only two now, I lead the other group. We've been doing very few small

group activities anyway. Chuck wants to get a sense of the new group dynamic and find the 'right' smaller groups. It's looking like I'll end up with Grey, Green Bean and Casper. The others have fallen right in behind Devil without issue, so things will likely stay like that. We've got to get back into those activities soon, time is running out.

I found myself wondering this morning after meditation how Trim was doing. I thought about writing to him again, but I wasn't sure that was such a good idea all things considered. If you get a chance, Maryann, please write to me about how things are going. I expect to send out my last week's worth of journal entries this afternoon, so hopefully you can get back to me next week. I'd like to know how things are there before I get home.

Journal Day 50

I had a flash this morning during meditation. I could see myself sitting in my meditation circle, but there were more candles and other things in front of me. I couldn't see them clearly, but I think my salvation is within reach. I truly believe now that cleansing will be possible. I just need a little more time to find the way. It's coming!

Chuck gave each team the opportunity to choose their own activity for the weekend. Grey, Green Bean and Casper convinced Delia that they should go for an overnight climb in the hills on base. Chuck agreed as long as they kept radio contact.

"So you guys are really taking off overnight without me?" Devil complained to his boon companions as they packed their things.

"We really are, bro." Grey patted his shoulder.

"But we'll sure miss you." Casper promised unconvincingly.

Green Bean turned back the Devil. "What's your crew doing?"

Devil sighed and shook his head. "Deb's dad made arrangements for us to go for a ride along with a Hornet squad on practice maneuvers from here to Fallon. We are going to have dinner with Deb's father and spend the night in the barracks there. We're scheduled to do some maneuvers with a chalk there before flying back on a transport. Tad and Gary were all excited about the opportunity."

"You don't sound so thrilled." Casper observed.

"I'm much more a do it kind of person. This is like site-seeing and that isn't what I signed up for. But they all want to do it, and we were supposed to agree on how we spent some downtime, so..."

"Too bad you can't come with us." Green Bean added.

"I'd like that, but as the leader, not going would be fishy."

"Sorry, bro." Grey patted him on the back again. "We've got to fly. Delia wanted to swing by Chalk 1 field exercises to see how they are doing."

"And still it sounds better than our plan." Devil complained.

Casper said “I’d like to fly in a Hornet.”

Devil shrugged. “It is cool, but dad’s arranged for me to ride in one twice before. It’s no big!”

“It must be rough being you!” Grey stated cheekily, hefting his pack. “Later, bro.”

Devil remained in the bunkroom sulking as the boys left to meet Delia.

As they caught up with Chalk 1, chaos appeared to be reigning. Delia walked straight up to the Corporal in charge.

“Sir, Delia Hunter, Chalk 4. Is there a problem that we can offer assistance with?”

“Hunter, I’ve heard of you.” He turned to the tall young woman. “We’ve got two missing chalk members. Report to Lieutenant Davis over that rise, he may have something for you to do. I need to get control of this crew.” He waved his hand vaguely towards the hill as he reached for a bullhorn.

“Yes, sir.” Delia saluted to his turned back before motioning for the team to follow her over the hill.

At the top of the hill, they could see several soldiers fanned out with kids, while three seemed to examine a spot on the ground below a tree. Delia walked straight to the foot of the tree to report in.

“Lieutenant Davis?” She asked and saluted as he stood.

“I’m sorry I don’t have time for you right now.”

“No sir, I’m hear to offer the assistance of Chalk 4, or at least half of it.”

Davis looked up and glanced at the group, sizing them up. “In that case, what does it look like here?” He pointed to a spot on the ground in front of him.

Delia and the others stepped closer and examined the area. “Two sets of prints walk up to this spot, they appear to deepen at this point, and then they disappear.” Grey observed.

“There appears to be some sort of black pitch or tar at the spot.” Delia reached out with a stick and dipped it into the substance then sniffed it. “Not tar” she coughed out the disgusting scent.

“Cox here” Davis pointed to a private standing a few feet away, “was at the top of the rise and saw the boys, Hardy and Jones, standing here. She looked back towards our command station for the exercise on the other side of the hill. When she glanced back again no more than a minute later, the boys were gone. There are no prints leading away.”

“I don’t believe they could have run that fast. Neither boy was particularly fast.” Cox added. “They had neither the time nor the experience to cover their tracks this well.”

Delia glanced at the tree branches above her head. “Could they have gone into the tree?”

Another marine standing with Cox spoke up, “There’s no sign of bark displacement on the trunk and one boy standing on the other would not give them enough height to reach

the first branch.” He pointed to the height of the first branch a good twelve feet up. “It would take two people of your height to get there without rope or climbing.”

“So what do you suppose happened?” Casper asked.

“We don’t know.” Davis shook his head. “If someone snatched them, we still have the minute for them to do it and no prints...” He scratched his head. “We’re forming search parties for standard search pattern, but...”

Delia nodded as she saw a truck arrive with a dozen marines to form the search squad. “It looks like your troops are here.”

“Yes, excuse me for a minute. I’ll let you know what you can do when I’ve seen to this.”

“Sure, we’ll just look around here.” Delia added reaching into her bag.

As the marines walked away she pulled out a rope, and threw it up to loop over the first branch. “Grey?”

Grey stepped forward and grabbed the rope. “I think the top of the hill gives plenty of perspective.

“Not of that branch and the ichor on the ground. I want to see what’s up there.”

Grey shrugged, “Climb On.”

Delia quickly reached the branch in question and immediately saw more of the ichor on the branch. “There’s more of it up here.” She examined some scoring on the branch. “There are marks up here that look like a claw prints from a bird.”

“That’s hardly unusual or useful.” Casper commented.

“It wouldn’t be if they weren’t huge.” Delia responded.

“So it was a big bird.” Green Bean suggested.

“A bird that is larger than me. The talons of this ‘bird’ are half again the size of my hands, at least.”

“That’s a pretty big bird.” Grey commented warily.

“Like Sesame Street sized.” Green Bean added.

“Since, I’m pretty sure Big Bird is fictional, I think we’re probably dealing with something a little more insidious.” Delia remarked as she jumped down from the branch.

Casper looked at her strangely. “You didn’t feel like climbing down?”

“I didn’t want to waste time.” Delia explained motioning them away from the tree. She looked at Casper and Green Bean. “There’s stuff I haven’t told you two, but you need to know what we may find.”

Casper looked at her as if she’d lost her mind. “What are you talking about?”

“Grey, you want to take a stab at it while I make a phone call?” Delia asked him.

“Oh sure, that sounds like tons of fun.” He glared at her for a moment. “Maybe later I can stick my wet hand into a power socket.”

Delia grinned, “Well if you really want...”

Delia pulled her cell phone out and hit speed dial. Delia rolled her eyes as she got connected into voicemail. Hanging up, she hit a different speed dial number, to the same conclusion. “Damn it, isn’t anyone answering their phone?” She tried again, on the second ring, she hit pay dirt.

“Zoe, its Deal. I’m in the field and I need research. Can you help me out?” Her voice plainly conveyed the urgency she felt.

“Um...yeah...what kind of research?” Zoe asked, her fingers aching for her keyboard.

“It may be Jacqueline type, I’m not sure. I need to know what has talons nearly twice the size of my hands and leaves behind a black ichor that smells like rotting garbage. I suspect it flies. Oh, and it can steal two good-sized boys away in less than a minute.”

“Are you telling something like this stole away two of the boys from camp?” Zoe demanded.

“We’ve got two boys who went missing in ‘a minute’ and I see large claw marks and black ichor in the tree above their last known location. There are no foot prints leaving the spot.”

“I’ll get right on it. I was on my way to Jacqueline’s anyway, if the computer can’t find it, we’ll hit the books. Keep your phone on.”

“Because I planned on switching to radio-silence? Just get back to me as quickly as possible.” Delia started to hang, but stopped. “Oh, and thank you!”

Zoe couldn’t help but laugh at Delia’s last minute thought to thank her. Sometimes Delia remembered her manners at the strangest moments. Zoe picked up her pace on the way to Jacqueline’s.

Delia hung up and looked over at Grey. “Where are we?”

“Not too far. I was just getting to the cemetery part of the story.”

“Too slow!” She turned to Casper and Green Bean. “You guys know there are monsters in the world, right?” She watched them nod. “Well, not all of them are human.” She watched their eyes shift towards each other. “I’ve seen some really nasty, ugly things that bear very little resemblance to humans. Devil and Grey saw some when they visited me. I don’t have time for long tales, because if I’m right, something not human has those boys and we need to find them. The military is not completely ready or able to deal with the type of nastys that I’m talking about. I need you guys to listen to me, trust me and when things get ugly stay the hell out of my way. Because even with everything you’ve trained for, you aren’t ready for what’s really out there.”

Casper’s incredulous expression had spread to Green Bean by the end of her monologue. “So what, we can’t take care of ourselves?” He demanded.

Delia glanced at Grey. “Tell them.”

“When Devil and I first saw the...monsters...neither of us faired very well. Delia was...” he shook his head as he remembered “amazing. If she hadn’t been there we both would have suffered far worse than the bite that Devil took.”

“The first time I saw one” Delia added “I ran away. All my fighting training; and still I ran scared. You just can’t know what it’s like to suddenly realize all your worse nightmares, the monsters under the bed, are all real. You can take care of yourselves against things you expect. You just don’t know what to expect.”

“Devil didn’t do well?” Green Bean looked to Grey for confirmation. Grey nodded his head.

Casper turned back to Delia. “So follow you if we want to live?”

“Something like that.” Delia turned her attention back to Lieutenant Davis, who was making his way towards them.

“Hunter.” He greeted her. “I’ve got plenty of marines to help with the search. You might as well go back to your original assignment.”

Delia nodded. “We were headed into the hills. We’ll keeping calling and watching for the boys, just in case it was a bit more than a minute that Cox was looking away.” She indicated the radio at her shoulder. “We’ll keep in touch.”

“Fine” Davis turned and walked away again without waiting for her salute.

Delia clicked talk on her radio. “Hunter to base”

“This is base” Chuck answered immediately.

“I expect you’ve heard of the boy hunt?” Delia asked.

“I’ve been following it.” Chuck turned to the sound of Devil entering the room.

“They’ve got enough troops for a full search pattern. I’ve volunteered us to keep an eye out further in the hills.” Delia paused a moment.

“I’m sure that will be too far for them to have gone.” Chuck responded watching Devil.

Delia waited for a moment. “Sir, I have a feeling that they may have gotten farther than Davis is expecting.”

Chuck raised his eyebrow. Devil added. “Delia’s got a good instinct about some stuff, sir. If she’s right...”

Chuck watched the young man for a moment. “You were just about to tell me your group is leaving, weren’t you?”

Devil nodded in agreement.

“But you would much prefer to go help with the search?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And your unit?”

“With all due respect sir, they are going to be with Deb’s father. I’d be no more than a figure head at best.”

“Fine. Catch a ride out there with Thompkins. Take some extra flares and blankets, just in case.”

Devil grinned. “Yes, sir!” He booked out the door to update his team and catch the ride with the Sergeant just packing up gear to join the search.

“Hunter. I’m sending reinforcement. Check in every hour.”

“Yes, sir.” Delia grinned back at Grey. “Devil’s coming.”

“He didn’t say that.” Casper stated.

Grey smiled, “He didn’t have to. Who else would rather come with us to hunt for the lost boys than ride in a Hornet?”

Devil leaped out of the jeep before it had stopped. His pack was half again the size of any of the others. He saluted Delia as he approached. “Permission to join the search, sir?”

“Permission granted.” Delia responded.

Devil pulled out several flare guns and passed them around. “Chuck wanted us each to have one, in case we find the boys.”

“These could be more useful than you know.” Delia tucked it in her belt.

“Where are we heading, boss?” Devil asked cheekily.

Delia rolled her eyes at Devil’s obvious statement of ‘who’s in charge’. “We’re waiting for some research. No point to moving in the wrong direction...though my instinct is telling me to head into the hills.”

The group sat and watched the search pattern expand to no avail. Delia could hear the sound of increased anxiety in the voices on the radio. Her discomfort increased by the minute. Finally the sound of Taps split the air, making the unit jump.

Delia answered her phone after the first ring. “It’s Deal.”

“Really? I thought I was calling Santa Claus.” Zoe replied facetiously. “Okay, I know, this is a bad time for jokes. Kate’s here with me, this is what we found. A Roc Demon.”

“I’ve heard of a Roc.” Delia supplied. “It had something to do with Sinbad as I recall.”

“We can go into mythology later if you feel the need. They like hills, as high as possible. They are big and can carry huge things, and yes they fly. They smell bad and will leave behind an ichor when they are molting.”

“Okay, it sounds like a fit. Tell me what they are doing with the boys.”

“Here’s the good news, bad news. The boys are probably food.”

“...and the good news is what?”

Zoe continued. “It looks like they would have killed immediately and feasted unless they were needed for nesting. When nesting, they pull together large bits of anything to form their nest. They also fly off and bring back live food to nibble on as they get hungry while they are keeping their eggs warm.”

“So they are probably being held as munchies.” Delia finished.

“That means they may not be harmed right away. You are probably dealing with a mated pair, and they will be protecting their young.”

“That will make them more vicious.” Delia observed. “How do we kill them?” She watched the boys’ eyebrows lift.

“The usual methods should work; fire, pointy things, bludgeoning, and electricity.”

“All the tried and trues. Okay. So we’re heading up to the highest peak.”

“Delia, be careful. You aren’t a Slayer.” Zoe warned.

Delia smiled sadly. “And I don’t have one I can call to help out.” She glanced at the guys in her group. “Fortunately, I do have the marines.”

“Hopefully that’ll be enough. Keep in touch!”

“Will do. Bye.” Delia hung up. “Damn, should have trusted my instinct. We need to double time it to that peak.” She pointed to the highest peak.

“Lead the way.” Devil agreed hefting his pack.

Casper and Grey were winded when they got to the foot of the highest peak. Although both ran regularly, neither tended to go for the ten plus mile hauls. Delia and Green Bean were both long distance runners; while Devil’s newly refocused training regime included longer runs. He did stop to hand off some of the extra weight in his pack to others half-way through the run.

“It’s going to be dark before we get up there.” Devil observed looking at his watch.

Delia nodded. “Do you really want to leave those boys to their fate overnight?”

“NO” all the boys responded.

“I thought not.” Delia replied. “We’ll be safe and smart. Devil is the best climber. He and I will take the anchor positions and get Grey and Casper up there quickly. Devil can get Green Bean up on the second trip, while Grey acts as my anchor for the climb. I’ll anchor Devil for the last leg; it will mostly be dark then.”

“Works for me. Let’s get started.”

“I think I see a cave up there near the top.” Casper offered.

Delia nodded, “Let’s go around the back, the last thing we need is for them to dive bomb someone as they’re climbing.”

Grey looked up carefully. “There looks to be a slight ledge up there just above the cave, we should be able to climb around the side and jump into the mouth. We might end up with a bit of the surprise effect too.”

“Devil, get your lead line up there.” Delia ordered as she prepped for her climber.

“Devil I have an extra light you can hook to your hat so you can see where you are climbing.”

“Of course you do! Just in case you get caught in a mine collapse, I’m sure.” Devil grinned at her.

“I’ll collapse you, if you don’t get your butt in gear.” She promised.

Devil shook his head, “always with the promises...but do I ever get a good spanking? I think not.” He winked at her as he threw his last lead line and yanked it into place.

“When are you going to stop being such a tease?”

Delia became very intent on her own lead lines and let the topic drop without comment. Grey stepped between the two to give Delia a chance to recover from her embarrassment. He took the lead line she offered. “Are you sure you want me instead of Devil?” She asked him.

“I trust you with my life.” He replied very seriously.

Delia just looked at him for a moment before she set her stance.

“On Belay” Grey stated.

“Belay On.”

“Climbing”

“Climb on” Delia advised as he reached for his first hand hold. Beside them, Devil and Casper went through the same ritual.

The temperature had dropped several degrees with the sunset. The team slipped on their dark jackets while resting against the cliff wall. Grey’s ledge was no more than nine inches wide making passage across it difficult. Delia moved to lead position to test the ledge’s ability to bear weight. A lead line was hooked at her waist; each of the guys had a hand on and their carabiner connected to it with Devil acting as anchor. He was fastened to one of the belay lines with a carabiner as well.

Delia slid her right foot out along the ledge and adjusted her weight to that foot slowly. She slid along slowly foot by foot until Grey was forced to follow along beside her. A couple times a small piece of the ledge broke away; she would stop and mark the wall with fluorescent chalk so the boys would know where the problem spots were before she moved beyond it.

Near the mouth of the cave Delia felt the segment she had stepped on start to crumble after she’d shifted her weight. Grey reached out a hand to steady her at the same moment she shifted back to her left foot. Her left hand flailed out and grabbed Grey’s hand before she settled back and marked the wall. Catching her breath, she squeezed Grey’s hand and resumed her slow course to the cave mouth.

Just above the cave mouth, she stopped to listen to the sounds within. With her keen hearing she was able to sort out the rumbling, scratching noises of the boys finishing their trip along the ledge from the fainter scratching and breathing within the cave. She thought she heard the faint sounds of a young boy whimpering in fear. She quietly made her last report in to her commanding officer reporting approximate position and that they were going to explore a cave where she thought she heard sounds of a child.

Signaling Grey, Delia used her line to him to swing down quietly onto the cave's floor. Grey used an auto-mounting bracket to tie off his line for a quick escape route if needed. He then slid down the line beside her, setting another mount. As the other's joined them, they all pulled out their Ka-bars and flare guns.

Devil dropped to the cave floor last, and threw his end of the line over the edge to be ready for a quick descent. Nodding at them all, Delia signaled walking orders to the others before starting into the cave. Every few feet in, Delia stopped to acclimate herself to the way the cave was resonating. Finally, she was sure their quarry was just around a bend in the cave. Once again signaling orders by light of a single glow stick; she took a deep breath and then dived into a roll that sent her well beyond the curve of the wall.

As Delia came out of her crouch, in front of two Roc Demons, several glow sticks hit the wall splattering light across the walls with startling brightness. Delia's flare hit the first Roc to rise squarely between the eyes. The brightness in the room was stunning to the Rocs, but the team was ready with sunglasses already donned. As Grey's flare hit the other Roc in the chest Delia had swept in with her Ka-bar and was slicing the demon through the chest region.

Devil fired his flare and joined in the fracas with Delia and Grey. Green Bean and Casper stood for a couple moments shocked at the freakish creatures they were seeing. Momentarily, Green Bean came to his senses and went to break the boys out of the sticky goo that was holding them in the cave. Casper provided him cover with the last two flares.

Delia's opponent fell first, having barely landed two blows on her in its surprise. Devil and Grey were having a harder time with the beast which hadn't been blinded by the initial assault. Delia launched herself into a two-footed kick that shoved the second Roc out of the nest, up against the cave wall.

"Casper, now!" She yelled allowing her momentum to take her to the floor.

Casper fired the last two flares into the chest of the creature. It shrieked in its anger and pain. Grey threw his ka-bar and embedded it into the beast's chest finally causing it to fall.

As he removed his knife and cleaned it, Delia dug out a hair spray canister and lighter.

"Feel the need to straighten out your hair?" Devil asked observing her.

Delia smirked at him for a moment before turning back to her task. She lit the lighter and sent a steady stream of aerosol hair spray through it. A steady flame erupted from her can. "Devil, get everyone out of here, the air's going to leave quickly." She started with the eggs making sure they were toasted as well as possible before trying to incinerate the bodies completely.

When her canister stopped spitting fire, she ran back to the cave mouth. Her eyes and lungs were burning when she got there. Grey caught her as she started to slide to the floor and passed her a canteen. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just needed to make it look...different." She coughed some more and took another sip of water. "Let's get back down there."

"Are you going to be able to climb down?" Casper asked her.

“By the time it’s my turn, I’ll be fine.” She gasped out, her lungs still screaming.

Devil grinned his toothy ain’t-I-smart smile and announced “No worries. I’ll set up a zip line. It’ll get everyone down much faster and easier.” He winked at Grey before starting down the line they’d set before going into the cave.

Grey grabbed the belay line as a precaution, but he knew Devil wouldn’t need it. Twenty minutes later, Devil radioed them to send down Green Bean. Green Bean set his carabiner, slipped on his gloves and started down the zip line.

When he reached the bottom safely, he recommended a slight repositioning to Devil before calling to the next person.

Grey refused to let Delia go last. She still looked peaked from her close call with the fire in the cave. After pushing her down the zip line, Grey took one last look at the damage they’d done before heading down. Delia was reporting in to Corporal Waters as he arrived. She then called in the stand down notice to Lieutenant Davis.

“The boys are scared, but fine. We’ll walk them back onto base in the morning.”

“I’ll send in a recovery team.” Davis told her.

“Sir, the trees are very heavy here and we’ve already gotten to the ground. We’ve got food, tents and a med kit. We’ll be fine.”

“Hunter, are you telling me what to do?”

“I’m telling you that we have at least an hour’s walk to the nearest point you can get a vehicle in and the boys are tired, hungry, and cold. Devil’s just gotten a nice fire going and Casper has a tent up. The boys are wrapped in the spare blankets that Chuck had Devil bring. Green Bean’s already started mixing up some nice hot grub for them, looks like chicken and biscuits. Yum.”

“Okay, you’ve made your point. The truck will meet you at o’eight hundred.”

“We’ll be waiting with bells on.”

Davis responded to her humor, “Skip the bells, just be there on time.”

“Yes, sir.” Delia tucked her radio in her bag.

“I smell a disciplinary action coming.” Devil warned

“We needed the time to get our story straight.” Delia replied looking at the two boys huddled in blankets in front of the roaring fire. “Besides, everything I said was true.”

“It would be standard procedure to get them back.”

“Do they look ready for the walk?” Delia held up her hand. “Do we really look ready to carry them?”

Grey stepped in. “We support your decision. Let’s get these kids some food and figure out the wisest course of explanation for the morning.”

Journal Day 51

The flash came again this morning, but it was clear. All the items were visibly arrayed before me. I just know if I work the ritual I saw in my vision, my gift will be clean.

I find myself wondering if now that I feel like I'm competent without it again, if I can use it freely. I'd lost confidence in my abilities without the magic and then the magic became a problem. Now I'm thinking that if I trust my abilities, if I trust myself, I can trust the magic again too. Maybe that was the real breakthrough, and maybe it was rescuing the boys and running the mission successfully that did it.

Anyway, Maryann, I'll write down all the items I saw and send it to you. A few were herbs that you've already taught me and some were obvious, but there were some you'll need to help me with. And just so I don't forget, I really appreciate all your help with this and with teaching me.

In the early morning light, Green Bean and Delia found a second cave entrance closer to ground level. With a little assistance from a very sleepy Zoe, they were able to develop the more plausible explanation of bears that they scared off with their flare guns. They constructed some tracks to prove their story to anyone who might check it out more closely.

The younger boys gave similar stories to the more elaborate one that the Barstow gang gave. Delia's decision to stay over night was supported by Chuck and all concerns of disciplinary action disappeared. A commendation was discussed for the team.

In the last days of Boot Camp Delia visited the young boys, Steve Jones and Tommy Hardy, to make sure they were recovering from their trauma. Within a day or so, they had convinced themselves the Bear story was real. Delia was amazed at the ability of children to cope with the bad stuff.

Meanwhile the team was discussing plans for after Boot Camp. Green Bean and Casper suggested the rest of the gang should come stay with them in L.A. for a couple days R&R and discussion about what Delia had really been doing for the last few months. Devil's father was able to re-arrange their flights without issue and the invitation was accepted.

“Hunter, may I see you in my office?” Chuck called to her as she was getting ready to leave.

“Sure.” She followed him into the building.

“You've had an eventful session. Grey explained to me the how's and why's of the string pulling to get you in.” He pulled some paper work from his desk. “I've taken the liberty of pre-arranging things for you next year. You'll be welcome here at Pendleton, or probably any other camp across the country.”

Delia smiled as she took it. “Thank you. I didn't expect anything like this.”

Chuck looked back at the confident young woman before him. “I believe you have it in you to be a fine officer. I’d like you to have the same opportunities that Devil and Casper will.”

Delia smiled, “I appreciate this more than I can express.”

Chuck slapped her on the back. “Just keep doing as well as you did here, and it’ll be worth it.”

“I want to thank you for being so great to us. As much as we got out of Barstow, we didn’t have a good leader. This was so much better. Thank you for everything.” She reached out her hand to shake his.

“Now, get out of here and have fun in L.A.” Chuck shooed her out the door. He watched as Delia met up with the rest of the group from Barstow at a small car, the group seemed to be having a passionate discussion about seating arrangements. Chuck smiled as he closed the door and headed back to work; he had a request to write for re-assignment to the camp for the following year. What was left of the group promised to develop into military company par excellence.