



Fertile Ground

By
tanaquific

Fertile Ground

by Tanaqui

Cover art by KnowMeFirst

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it nor was any infringement of copyright intended

Jake snuck a look at the man sitting stiffly across from him at the Richmonds' kitchen table. The stilted small talk they'd been making about the latest intelligence from the patrols and how soon the first crops could be harvested had petered out five minutes before. Now Beck was staring off into the middle distance, a slight frown on his face.

Jake cleared his throat. "You don't have to be here, you know."

Beck stirred and turned to look at Jake, his eyes focusing as if he'd had to drag his thoughts back from a long way off. His gaze met Jake's for a moment and then slid away. "I know." He gave a slight shrug of the shoulder. "I just thought you could use the company while Stanley and Mimi are at the clinic."

Jake didn't think Beck was exactly proving much company but—

He had to admit it felt a little less lonely to have Beck around. Though a regular hum drifted up from the camp at the bottom of the hill where Beck's troops were quartered, there was something about being out here at the farm on his own, in quarantine, that made Jake feel like the last man on earth. Last woman: it was a week since he and Stanley had found and accidentally triggered the device sent by the Cheyenne government. A week since they'd been... transformed.

Jake took another look down at himself: at the breasts whose shapes were clearly visible even through the loose T-shirt he wore, lifting the material in ways that still made him do a double take every time he glanced down. And below that, there was an alarming lack of what should be there. Jake's cock and balls had vanished entirely, replaced by... other bits. The female ones. And while Jake might forget about having boobs a lot of the time, he was constantly aware of the absence of anything between his legs: not just when he had to take a piss, but walking or sitting or lying down. It was just *wrong*, like losing an arm. There'd been other changes, too, but they hadn't been quite so dramatic—or quite so unnerving—as the change of equipment.

What he'd lost had been pretty obvious from the outset, of course. However, Kenchy had only been able to confirm exactly what Jake had gained—apparently everything needed to have a baby—once Jake had finally let him carry out an internal exam. The doc had suggested one the first day, when an initial ultrasound had indicated Jake probably now had a uterus and ovaries, but Jake's face must have clearly communicated his horror at the thought of having anything stuck up there *right now*. He'd finally conceded that it was necessary during the course of the previous day, which he'd spent at the Med Center being gently prodded and poked as Kenchy ran more tests that would help him figure out what was going on and if it would wear off on its own. Or if they'd be stuck this way permanently.

Today was Stanley's turn. Mimi had gone along as well, so Kenchy could draw some blood from her. Although the doctor had determined that neither Jake nor Stanley appeared to be able to transmit the condition—it seemed to require direct and fairly immediate exposure to

the agent in Cheyenne's device—Mimi had been in much closer contact with Stanley than anyone else.

Beck had turned up with the humvee sent to take Stanley and Mimi to the Med Center, and invited himself in.

Jake took another covert look at Beck as the major sipped the coffee Jake had made for them. Over the past week, he'd been slowly forced to agree with Heather that, for all Beck had done some terrible things, he was a good man at heart. He'd done his best to give Jake and Stanley privacy and dignity: when he'd noticed how uncomfortable the two of them were with the behavior of the soldiers assigned to enforce the quarantine—they either ogled them openly or refused to look at them at all—he'd moved the guard units further away from the farm. He'd also assigned one of his female officers, Lieutenant McCoy, to liaise with them.

Once Beck had gotten over his own initial shock, he'd also spoken to the two of them as if they were just the same as always, making eye contact and making sure his gaze didn't wander. Though, Jake reflected, draining his own coffee cup, Beck seemed to be having a few problems with that today.

"You want some more coffee?" Jake gestured with his cup toward the thermos into which he'd decanted the rest of the pot of coffee he'd brewed.

"Yes, but—please. Stay where you are. Let me." Beck was on his feet and moving toward the kitchen counter and the thermos before Jake had a chance to do more than blink. Jake shook his head, wondering at Beck's solicitousness. Surely Beck would expect to be waited on rather than be the one fetching coffee? Though now Jake thought about it, he remembered a few occasions when he'd seen Beck settle Heather in the office that he sometimes used at City Hall and then be the one to head off and bring them back coffee. He guessed Beck had a particular—and deeply ingrained—way of dealing with civilian women: a kind of old-fashioned chivalry. And, right now, it seemed like Jake looked enough like a woman that Beck's conditioning was kicking in.

Beck was back with the flask, unscrewing the lid. Jake held out his mug, not looking at him but muttering an embarrassed thanks.

Beck put the lid of the flask down on the table and reached out to steady the mug. His fingertips grazed over Jake's—and a tingle of electricity passed between them. Jake looked up, startled, and met Beck's eyes, wide-eyed with equal surprise. Then another jolt of electricity came as Beck tightened his grip on the mug and his fingers brushed against Jake's again.

Swallowing hard, Jake wrenched his gaze away. As he did so, he heard Beck exhale. He felt like his own breathing had stopped, light-headed as he was with the sudden sense of Beck standing close to him: the strong, hardened body under the fatigues; Beck's fresh, musky

scent underlying the harsh carbolic notes of soap; his fingers lightly touching Jake's....

What the—?

Jake finally remembered to breathe as Beck finished filling the cup and let go of it, stepping away to replenish his own mug. Jake put the cup down and stared at it, careful not to look up and risk catching Beck's eye again. It was this damn body and whatever the hell had been in that powder he and Stanley had gotten a faceful of, wasn't it? It had to be. Kenchy had told him his hormones were all over the place, so this was probably just another side-effect: cause more chaos by turning the victims into lust-crazed idiots. Because, *Beck? Really?*

Jake risked another glance at the other man. He was over at the sink, taking his time rinsing out the now-empty flask. He reckoned Beck had felt the spark between them too and wasn't any happier about it than Jake.

Turning his mind back, Jake realized there'd been other moments in the past week when he'd found himself noticing— before he'd quickly clamped down on the thought—that Beck was... attractive. But this was the first time the two of them had spent more than quarter of an hour in each other's company since Jake's transformation, so probably they hadn't been together long enough previously for this thing to build the way it had today. Probably they should make sure they didn't spend this long together again. And Jake was very certain shouldn't spend any more time with each other right now.

Casting about for an excuse to head outside—there was always some chore needed doing on a farm—Jake got to his feet. "I should—."

Beck had finished cleaning the flask and taken a step away from the sink. He and Jake were close, Jake looking down at him, just like he'd been looking up at him a few minutes earlier. And then—.

Jake never knew quite how it happened, except one minute they were standing there and the next they were in each other's arms. Beck was kissing him and he was kissing Beck back, aware of just how good he tasted. Beck's hands were twined in Jake's hair, drawing Jake's mouth down onto his, and Jake's hands were on Beck's hips, pulling the shorter man fiercely against him. Feeling him harden against where Jake had that emptiness, that lack. That was aching now for Beck to fill it. Needing Beck to fill it. Needing *now, god, yes, now....*

oOo

A hair tickling Beck's nose brought him half-awake. *Alondra*, he thought, pulling the woman spooned against him closer with the arm wrapped around her. Then something in his brain registered that she didn't feel right or smell right, that it wasn't his wife he was lying in bed with. His eyes shot open and he pulled away, a soft, horrified, "No!" escaping his lips.

The woman stirred, clearly disturbed by the movement, and rolled onto her back so he could

see her face. His horror increased as the full memory of the previous few hours flooded back and he realized exactly who he was in bed with.

“Oh crap.” Though the words were pitched in feminine tones, the expression in them was unmistakably all Jake.

Beck pulled away further, scuttling across the bed as he backed off from Jake, until he was able to turn away and, swinging his legs round, sit up. He snatched at a handful of sheet as he did so, pulling it across his lap, as he realized he was completely naked. His clothes, he saw, were scattered untidily across the floor in a trail that stretched to the door leading to the living room. He dimly remembered Jake helping him shed them as they’d frenziedly pulled each other towards the bed. He put his head in his hands and groaned. What had he *done*?

From behind him, he heard Jake snort before he said, sounding mildly bemused. “Well, that was... kinda dumb.”

Beck squeezed his eyes shut, trying to make sense of what had happened. What *had* he done? He was supposed to have been helping Jake and instead... They’d ended up in bed together. How could he have let that happen? Even if he’d had feelings for Jake the way Jake was now—and he had, hadn’t he? He’d been perfectly aware of them, though he’d done his best to ignore them. Even so: how could he have let himself act on that? How could he have lost control like that? “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, shaking his head. “I’m so sorry. I should never—.” He took a deep breath and tried again. “I’m sorry. What I did was... inexcusable. I should have... I shouldn’t have let this happen. I should never have lost control like that.”

“Hey.” Beck felt the bed shift as Jake sat up. “Don’t beat yourself up. Kenchy says I’m pumping out all kinds of weird stuff. If this is anyone’s fault, it’s mine.”

Beck turned his head to look at Jake, ready to deny it. Jake couldn’t help what he’d been turned into or what he’d done while under the influence of Cheyenne’s bioweapon, whereas Beck... He was a grown man who should surely be able to exercise a little self-control. The apology died on his lips as he looked at Jake. He was propped up on one elbow, the sheet snaking across his hips, and above that... Beck found his gaze drawn in unwilling fascination to Jake’s breasts, which were neither large nor small but had, he remembered, fitted perfectly into the palm of his hand as he’d cupped them. Remembered, too, how the nipples had hardened as he’d brushed his thumbs over them and how Jake had moaned as he’d bent his head to tease them with his lips. How—.

Beck closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “Do you think we could put some clothes on? Please?”

“What?” Jake sounded surprised. Then he huffed a wry laugh. “Uh, yeah. Sorry. Not exactly used to needing to....”

The bed lifted as Jake got out of it on the far side. Beck kept his eyes closed as he heard the other man move around the room for a couple of minutes. Eventually, he felt Jake stop in front of him. "It's okay. You can look now. I'm respectable again." Beck cautiously opened his eyes. Jake had scooted back into his jeans and T-shirt and was holding out Beck's clothes that he must have collected up. "Here."

"Thanks." Beck took the bundle of clothes and awkwardly began to put them on, while Jake retreated to the far side of the bed and sat down with his back to Beck.

He felt a little better once he was properly dressed again, more like himself and less like the animal who'd practically ripped Jake's clothes off in his desperation to have sex with him. But he was still that animal, wasn't he? Because if he'd lost control, then that meant—. He swallowed hard. *I'm a rapist*, he forced himself to think.

He looked down at his hands in his lap, wondering how he'd become capable of the things he'd done. How, apparently not content with torture, he'd decided to add rape to his list of crimes. Whether this darkness had always been inside him. And though Jake might have told him not to beat himself up, that didn't mean he didn't owe Jake an apology. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice hoarse. "I'm sorry that I forced myself on you like that."

"You...?" Jake sounded startled. There was a moment's silence, before he spoke again. "I don't remember you *forcing* me to do *anything*. In fact," he snorted. "I think it was pretty much the other way around."

Beck supposed Jake had a point. He had seemed just as frantic at the time: Beck remembered now that he'd been the one to drag them into the bedroom and that he'd seemed just as eager to help Beck out of his shirt and pants as Beck had been to shed them. That still didn't make what Beck had done right.

They sat in silence, Beck trying to figure out what to say next. Since Jake seemed so determined to deny Beck had done anything wrong—and maybe that was what he needed to think, for his own peace of mind—but it wasn't something Beck could or would agree with.

At last, Jake heaved a sigh. "Look—." Twisting, Beck saw Jake was sitting with his head bent, his eyes turned down to where his fingers were splayed on the crumpled bedsheets. Jake's long lashes were dark against his lightly tanned skin and Beck couldn't help thinking, again, that he made a good-looking woman; he bit down on the urge to go sit next to him and put his arm around him and pull his head into the crook of his neck and tell him everything would be all right.

Jake was still talking and Beck focused on his words, trying to catch up. "Look, I'm not saying what we did wasn't a bad idea. But I wasn't saying no to it at the time, okay? I wanted it as much as you did. Which is to say, I reckon we both got whammied." He gave a slight shrug. "Kenchy said I'm completely overloaded with hormones, female hormones, and that's

probably making me a little crazy. And I'm probably pumping out a bunch of, whatdyoumacallits, pheromones. So they're making you a little crazy as well. And, well—" He shot a sideways glance at Beck. "—it's not as if you'd exactly be my first choice to, you know...." He gestured at the bed between them.

Beck's mouth went dry and his heart started beating a little faster as he held Jake's gaze for a moment, before he dragged his eyes away, angry with himself. *Dammit.* "Pheromones," he muttered, licking his lips. "Right. That's still no excuse for—."

He squeezed his eyes closed again, trying to block out the memory of how, once the first frenzy was over and they'd collapsed against each other, his craving for the other man hadn't ended. How he'd begun slowly exploring Jake's body with his mouth and hands, and how Jake had responded eagerly to his lips and fingertips. There would have been plenty of opportunity for Jake to say *no, stop*, and for Beck to respect that, so maybe Jake was right, and it hadn't been rape. No, Beck thought, shivering, it had been the two of them together discovering what felt good for Jake until—. Beck shook his head sharply, not sure he much liked where that train of thought was going either. That maybe a frenzy of hormones and pheromones couldn't explain *that* part.

Clearing his throat, he said firmly, "Well, whatever happened, we need to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Amen to that." Jake laughed wryly. "And I'm guessing neither of us wants to file a report about this?"

Beck gave a sharp nod and said curtly, "I don't think that will be necessary, no. But I think it would be wise for me not make any more unchaperoned visits in future."

"Uh-huh." Out of the corner of his eye, Beck could see Jake nodding.

There didn't seem to be anything more to say. Feeling like it would be a mistake to linger, Beck got to his feet and headed for the door, not risking a look back at Jake.

He was reaching for the door handle when Jake spoke his name. He waited, his hand poised, for whatever the other man wanted to say. He seemed to be struggling to find the right words but at last he said quietly, "Look, it was a bad idea but... it wasn't bad, okay? Don't... don't give yourself a hard time about that part."

Beck gave another a quick nod of acknowledgment and then wrenched the door open. He wasn't sure whether Jake had just made things better or worse.

oOo

Perched on a stool in the small path lab at the Medical Center, Kenchy made another mark on the chart in front of him, recording the latest results from Jake's blood work-up. The place

didn't have much in the way of facilities—and it wasn't as if pathology was his specialty anyway—but in the first week or so after Jake and Stanley had been transformed, he'd managed to cobble together the means to carry out a few key tests. Enough that he'd felt he could get some kind of handle on what was going on.

Well, as much as any doctor could when faced with patients who'd appeared to completely change sex over the course of just a few hours, right down to developing an entire female reproductive system. And then, four weeks later, begun to change back again just as spontaneously, if rather more slowly. Much to everyone's relief, and especially Kenchy's, as he hadn't made any real progress towards finding a "cure" in the intervening month.

With any luck, he'd told himself, the whole thing would be over soon and they could all pretend it had never happened.

Right....

Sitting up and stretching his aching back, he flicked his gaze between Stanley's chart, spread out on the workbench to his left, and Jake's, lying in front of him. Stanley's chart showed his blood chemistry returning to something like normal, just like his body: the lines tracking various hormones sloped steadily downward, before leveling off. Jake's chart, on the other hand....

Kenchy closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his fingertips as he tried to make sense of the data. Sure, Stanley had begun transforming back first. Maybe because he'd received a lower dose of Cheyenne's drug or maybe because his metabolism had processed it more quickly. But Jake had only been a day or so behind. Yet the lines on Jake's chart marched steadily across the page, showing no real change. This week's results continued the trend, remaining stubbornly high.

It was almost as if Jake's body had some reason to go on producing estrogen and progesterone. Almost as if....

Kenchy shook his head, dismissing the possibility. Once the two men had begun transforming back, he'd carried out physical exams at least twice a day for several days, including a daily ultrasound. He'd been able to see their ovaries slowly descending and reshaping themselves back into testicles, while their uteruses had shrunk and their flesh had reformed itself into penises. All the physical changes the two men had experienced had been reversed: Jake and Stanley had both reassured him that, as far as they could tell, everything looked much the same as it had before. And yet....

Kenchy opened his eyes and took another look at Jake's chart. The idea *was* preposterous, of course, but it would be easy enough to find out one way or the other—and negligent not to run the test.

Levering himself to his feet, he headed into the pharmacy next door and searched along the shelves until he found what he was looking for. Picking up one of the boxes and turning it over in his hands, he decided there was no need to let Jake know what he was testing for in advance, even if that might put him on ethically shaky ground. No need to worry Jake unnecessarily. He just needed to eliminate the possibility for his own peace of mind, before getting down to figuring out what was really going on.

oOo

Jake sat on the edge of the gurney, waiting for Kenchy to finish running tests on the urine sample he'd just provided. Provided in the way he'd done all his life, except for that month or so during which he'd been transformed—a month that was now starting to seem like a distant bad dream.

Still, giving the sample had reminded Jake how very glad he was to be back in his own body again. How glad he'd been to be able to get back to the routine of patrols and smuggling runs and clandestine meetings with agents from Texas. He hadn't even minded the jokes he and Stanley had gotten from the other Rangers once Kenchy had finally given them the all-clear and released them from quarantine. He'd just been relieved to be himself again.

A sigh from Kenchy made Jake look up. The doc had his back to him and was staring down at something on the workbench in front of him. As Jake watched, he gave another heavy sigh and shook his head, before reaching for a packet wrapped in white plastic and ripping it open. Jake guessed he didn't like the test results and was either repeating the test or trying something different.

Jake's gut clenched. He'd known for more than a week that Kenchy was worried about him—more than Stanley—despite his repeated assurances to the doc that he felt just fine. Still, Kenchy hadn't seemed *that* worried, prepared to take a wait-and-see approach. If the doc did have any theories about what was going on, he'd kept them to himself.

Whatever the second test was, it didn't take long. Jake was still wondering whether he should say something when Kenchy, with a sharp nod of the head, turned away from the workbench.

"Everything okay?" Jake was pretty sure it wasn't by the way Kenchy wouldn't meet his eye. His insides twisted again.

"I—." Kenchy cleared his throat. "I'd like to carry out another abdominal ultrasound. So if you could just take off your jeans and hop up to the bed..." His tone was a shade too casual for comfort.

Jake raised his eyebrows. He really didn't like where this was going at all. "An ultrasound? I thought you said our insides were back to normal."

"I did." Kenchy was wheeling the ultrasound cart over from the corner. Something about the way he answered told Jake that Kenchy was now pretty sure he was wrong about that. A trickle of cold fear ran down Jake's spine, holding him where he was.

Kenchy still hadn't made eye contact with Jake but he'd obviously noticed Jake wasn't doing as he'd asked. "Please." He gestured toward the gurney.

Jake hesitated for a moment longer and then, feeling like he was moving through molasses, complied, stripping off his jeans and settling back against the raised up end of the gurney. From where he lay, he couldn't see the screen on the ultrasound.

He flinched at the chill of the gel on his skin as Kenchy coated his stomach with it and then began to work the scanner methodically down from just below Jake's ribs, peering intently at the screen as he went. Jake thought about asking him what he was looking for, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer, so he kept silent.

Kenchy was about half way down Jake's abdomen when he froze. After a moment, he shifted the scanner a little—and then froze again. Jake saw his eyes were wide with shock.

"Doc?"

Kenchy didn't respond, just went on staring at the screen. Jake wasn't even sure he'd heard him. His breath caught in his throat as he tried to imagine what could have startled the doctor like this, after all he'd seen. "Doc?" he tried again, his voice hoarse. "Kenchy? What is it?"

When Kenchy still didn't reply, Jake reached out a hand and swung the ultrasound cart round so he could see the screen himself. It didn't help: all he saw was a blur of gray and white shapes. He glanced up at Kenchy. "What am I looking at?"

Moving the cart seemed to have shaken the other man out of his trance. Meeting Jake's gaze, he swallowed. Then he leaned forward so he could see the screen again. He must have moved the hand with the scanner without meaning to, because he took a moment to reposition it before pointing with his free hand. "There."

Jake saw a rough crescent shape inside a larger dark oval. Part of the crescent seemed to be pulsating rapidly. He still wasn't sure he understood. He wasn't sure he *wanted* to understand. "What—?"

"I'm sorry, Jake." Kenchy hesitated for a moment and that was clue enough to let Jake to know what he was going to say an instant before he said it. "You're pregnant."

oOo

"You're *what*?" Stanley stared disbelievingly at Jake where he sat on the couch, hunched over

with his head in his hands. When he'd turned up at the farmhouse a few minutes earlier, looking like he'd seen a ghost and saying he needed to talk, this was the last thing Stanley had expected to hear.

"Pregnant," Jake repeated, slightly more loudly but still sounding like he could barely get the word out. Which Stanley could understand.

"How?" Stanley glanced across at Mimi for a second and saw her expression mirrored his own incredulity.

"You know." Jake scrubbed his hands across his face wearily. "The usual way."

Stanley scratched the back of his neck, trying to figure out what he meant. "Uh, Jake, you're a guy....."

"Yes, but—" With a heavy sigh Jake, Jake let his hands drop, resting his arms on his knees. He kept his head bent, so Stanley still couldn't see his face properly. "—for a while there I wasn't, remember? And then.... There was some sex...." The last came out barely audible.

"What?" Stanley couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could Jake have been so stupid? He shot another quick look at Mimi. Sure, when *he'd* been changed, he and Mimi had... well, you know. But that had been *Mimi*—and it wasn't as if there'd been any chance of long-lasting consequences.

Jake lifted his head and glared at Stanley. "I had sex," he repeated, a little more loudly than was strictly necessary. "While I was a woman. And now I'm pregnant."

"Who? *When?*" Stanley managed to bite back the *Why?* Because he didn't think he wanted to know the answer to that.

Jake's gaze slid away. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it m—." Stanley broke off at a touch on the arm from Mimi. She shook her head at him, telling him she'd handle things. Taking a seat in the armchair, she reached out and put her hand over Jake's

"Jake?" She tilted her head, trying to catch his eye. "Did someone, you know...? Did they... make you?"

Stanley didn't quite understand what Mimi was asking, but apparently Jake did. He'd been looking down at Mimi's hand lying on top of his, but now he swung his head up, a startled expression on his face. "What? No!" He shook his head. "No, it wasn't like that. It wasn't.... That wasn't what happened."

Mimi held Jake's gaze, her expression doubtful. "Because, you know, that wouldn't be your fault. Sometimes—."

Stanley suddenly caught up with what Mimi and Jake were talking about. He took a step closer to the two of them. "Hang on a minute. Are you saying some bastard *raped* Jake?"

Jake's "No!" mingled with Mimi's "Stanley, please—!"

"Because when I find the bastard," Stanley swung away, heading for the kitchen and the shotgun stored on top of the china cabinet, "I'm gonna—."

"Stanley!" Mimi's furious exclamation stopped him short. He looked back at her. "Will you just shut up and *listen*?"

Reluctantly, Stanley turned around to face them again, looking between them. Jake gave a slightly apologetic shrug. "I wasn't raped. That stuff Cheyenne sprayed us with just made me and.... Just made the both of us a little crazy for a while. Pheromones and crap, you know? It wasn't something either of us really wanted to do, but... neither of us made the other do anything we didn't want to, okay?"

"Okay." Stanley folded his arms, still not entirely sure he believed Jake. And he still thought whoever had gotten Jake knocked up had a lot to answer for.

Mimi turned back to Jake. "And now you're pregnant?" she asked softly.

Jake nodded at her.

Mimi gave a slight shrug and waved a hand at him. "How is that even possible? I mean, aren't you all turned back?"

Jake sat back, pulling his hands out from under Mimi's and scrubbing them through his hair. "I don't really know. Kenchy thinks that when I changed back, my body somehow knew I was pregnant and left what was needed for the baby to grow. Because of the different DNA, maybe." He dropped his hands to rest them across his stomach, looking from Mimi to Stanley and back again.

Something about the gesture—a dim memory of his mom sitting like that when she was pregnant with Bonnie—finally brought home to Stanley that there was a whole separate life inside Jake. Weird as that was. "Is it—?" He swallowed, not wanting to voice the question because the answer suddenly mattered more than he would have expected. "Will it be able to survive?"

Jake looked down at his hands where they were clasped together over his stomach. "I don't

know," he said quietly. "Kenchy seems to think maybe it can, if it's gotten this far along. That... where it's growing, how it's growing.... Seems like it's figured out a way that'll work for both of us."

"Wait, this could kill *you*?" Stanley folded his arms, swallowing down a sudden wave of nausea.

"Stanley...." Mimi was looking up at him with a pitying expression on her face. "Any pregnancy carries a risk. I mean, April...." She broke off and turned back to Jake, exchanging a grim look with him. After a moment, she leaned forward and asked quietly, "Even if you can, do you *want* to keep the baby?"

Jake shrugged. "I don't know." He gave a slight shake of the head, dropping his gaze back down to his stomach again. "I need to think about that. Haven't gotten it straight in my own head yet. I just... needed to tell someone."

Mimi reached out and touched his knee. "Uh-huh. If you want to talk...."

He looked up at her and gave her a nod, his mouth curving into a tight smile. "I know. Thanks. But, right now, I think I just need to think about things for a while...."

A few minutes later, Stanley stood on the porch, his arm around Mimi, watching Jake ride away down the track. "You think he's gonna be okay?"

"Physically?" Mimi lifted a hand to shade her eyes. "Probably. Kenchy's a good doctor. Emotionally? God knows. Not that things wouldn't be screwed up enough even if the father wasn't—." She broke off, dropping her hand down to cover her mouth.

"Wasn't what?" Stanley turned to look down at her. A suspicion formed in his mind. He narrowed his eyes at her. "You know who it is?"

She wrapped her arms around herself, still looking after Jake, who was now a small dot approaching the point where the heavily-worn dirt track branched off toward Beck's camp. "Maybe."

"Who?" Stanley turned her to face him. Because, no matter how this turned out, Stanley still wanted to have words with the guy.

Mimi reached up and brushed his hair back from his forehead. "It's only a guess, okay? And it's for Jake to say. If he wants to. Let's just wait and see what he decides."

oOo

Jake filled a cup with not-quite boiling water from the kettle, glad his grandfather had

steadfastly refused to replace the wood-fired kitchen range he and grandma had purchased when they'd first moved out to the ranch. He added a handful of the herb tea that had been part of his food ration this week, an attempt to give the drink some flavor. Not exactly what he'd have chosen, but he hadn't seen coffee in nearly a month. Besides, he huffed to himself, he probably shouldn't be drinking coffee, not while he was—.

He shook his head, cutting off the thought. Picking up the cup, he headed outside and took a seat on the porch. It was almost dark, but he could still just about make out the shapes of the two horses standing half-asleep at the far end of the paddock.

Trouble was, he couldn't not think about *that*, could he? About the fact he was pregnant and needed to decide what to do about it.

He wrapped his hands around the cup, not really needing the warmth but finding it comforting. The thing was, it should have been an easy decision: he was a guy and guys didn't get pregnant. Kenchy had said he thought an operation probably wouldn't be difficult, not this early, if that was what Jake wanted. No more complicated or risky than taking out his appendix or cutting out a benign tumor.

But it wasn't the only option he'd offered Jake, after he'd spent some more time using the ultrasound to try and understand a little better what was going on. Though he'd hedged his words with lots of caveats, he seemed to think the fact Jake's body had made accommodations to keep the fetus alive this long and apparently thriving—constructing tendons and muscles to support and protect the amniotic sac, and providing it with a blood supply—meant the pregnancy stood a good chance of going to full term.

Jake had noticed that Kenchy had been careful, as he'd explained the situation, to use the word "fetus". Careful not to use the word "baby". But that's what it was. A baby that Jake was responsible for creating, even if he'd not really been himself at the time.

Even if he *could* get rid of it as easily as having his appendix out—should he?

Jake took a sip of his drink and let the corner of his mouth twist up in a wry grin. Funny thing was, even though he'd never really thought about it much, he'd always seen kids somewhere in his future. For all his sarcasm, Mitch hadn't been so far off the mark when he'd asked Jake if he'd come back to settle down, raise a family, do a little farming. All of his years away from Jericho, there'd been a part of Jake that had envied his brother and coveted what his parents had.

Of course, he'd expected to have kids in the normal way, with a wife who'd be the one to get pregnant and give birth. Not like this—he unconsciously dropped a hand to cover his stomach—and not with *Beck* of all people. While his visceral hatred for the major had faded over time, and he even understood now why people like Heather and Eric could respect him, Beck was still pretty much the last person in the vicinity that Jake would have chosen to have a

baby with. Though, Jake had to admit, he'd been pleasantly surprised by what Beck had been like in bed: more adventurous and more generous than Jake would ever have expected, apparently interested in making sure Jake felt as good as he did.

Jake shivered at the memory of Beck's mouth exploring the parts of him that had changed: his lips and tongue wickedly and relentlessly working on Jake as he moaned helplessly at the sensations coursing through him. For a brief moment, Jake wondered what it would feel like to have Beck go down on him again, now—.

He dismissed the thought sharply. He wasn't particularly bothered by the notion of being with another man, though it was slightly startling to discover he wasn't repulsed by the idea either, but the thought that he might want to be with *Beck* again when he wasn't doped up on hormones was too uncomfortable to contemplate.

Dragging his mind away from the memory of their morning together, Jake turned his attention back to the current issue. Whatever had gone on between them, the truth was that this wasn't just Jake's baby. It was Beck's as well. Did Jake even have the right to make this decision on his own?

Jake tried to imagine how the conversation would go if he broke the news to Beck. He grimaced. For all Beck wasn't the monster Jake had once considered him, he still had a tendency to take charge and to act like he thought he knew best—even when he wasn't the one who'd have to live with the consequences. Jake could easily imagine his own wishes being swept aside by Beck setting off on some righteous crusade.

Of course, if he decided to get rid of the baby, no one else need know, not even Beck. But if he tried to keep it, it would be hard to hide the pregnancy—and people would want to know who the father was. They might be too afraid to ask Jake directly, but they'd gossip and speculate. Was it fair to expose Beck to that, when he'd really been no more to blame than Jake for those couple of hours of insanity they'd shared?

The questions were all muddled together: to keep the baby or not; to tell Beck or not; to tell anyone else who the father was. Draining the last of his drink, Jake put the mug down and got up and began to pace, trying to untangle his thoughts and make some decisions.

It was well past dawn by the time he thought he'd gotten the answers straight in his own head, though he reckoned he needed to talk to Kenchy again before he made his final choice. Wearily, he crawled into bed, hoping to snatch a few hours sleep before he was due on patrol again.

oOo

Beck ordered his driver to wait on the concrete apron at the entrance to the Greens' ranch on Route 6 and trudged the last hundred yards through the dust to the house. Jake had caught him that morning as he was leaving the daily meeting with Gray, Eric and Heather and said

they needed to talk: "in private." When Beck suggested they step into the interview room he sometimes used as an office while at City Hall, Jake shook his head, glancing down at the people milling around in the entrance hall below. "Not here. The ranch. Whenever...."

Beck had nodded, his gut clenching. He and Jake hadn't been alone together since—since that time at the Richmond farm. And while Beck hadn't felt a flicker of attraction toward Jake since the other man had transformed back, he still didn't feel comfortable around him. The memories were too disturbing. Besides, what did they have to say to each other that hadn't already been said?

Jake must have been watching out for him from the house, because he appeared on the porch as Beck crossed the yard. With a quick look over Beck's shoulder to the waiting humvee, Jake ushered him inside and shut the door.

Beck took a few paces into the main room and turned to face Jake. The other man had his back to him, his hand still on the door and his head bent. After a moment, he straightened and turned to face Beck.

"What—?" The look on Jake's face made the question die on Beck's lips. He knew Jake was about to deliver bad news of some kind. Unconsciously, he drew himself to attention.

Jake hesitated for a moment longer, swallowing, before he blurted out, "I'm pregnant."

"I beg your pardon?" Beck thought he must have something in his ears, because Jake couldn't possibly have just said what he thought he'd just said. Could he?

"I'm pregnant." Jake spoke slowly and carefully. "About two months along."

No mistake, then. "Is it—?" Beck bit back the *mine*, because that was never the way to ask that. A baby belonged, at the very least, to two people. Besides, Jake wouldn't be telling him this unless he had a reason to. "I'm the father?" It was only half a question.

Jake nodded. "There wasn't anyone else. When I was... different."

Beck forced himself to stand at ease, drawing in a deep breath. He wanted to ask Jake how he could possibly still be pregnant, but he guessed that whatever weird science had transformed Jake in the first place had been able to make this happen as well. Probably another gift from whichever morally bankrupt government scientist had thought the thing up in the first place.

Jake cleared his throat and Beck realized he'd been lost in thought for the past minute. He wasn't sure what Jake wanted him to say. He was still trying to comprehend that Jake was pregnant, that he was going to be a father again, that he'd fathered a child with Jake, that—.

He saw Jake was looking at him a little quizzically. Still lost for words, Beck settled for catching his eye and raising his eyebrows, inviting the other man to go on if he had more to say. Which he surely did.

Jake scrubbed a hand through his hair, his gaze sliding away from Beck. "I, uh, I'm planning on keeping the baby. If my body lets me." He lifted his eyes back up to Beck's face, his expression confrontational. "You don't get a say in that."

Beck dipped his head. "I understand." He didn't, really, except he rather thought Jake wanted to argue with him, or at least was expecting an argument. But it wasn't his place to say what Jake did, was it? For all—he dropped his gaze to Jake's stomach and his breath caught in his throat as he remembered Alondra pregnant with Isa, remembered the letter that had come from the Red Cross less than a month ago telling him he had neither wife nor daughter now. He swallowed hard as he completed the thought: for all it was his flesh and blood there, inside Jake.

Jake was going on speaking and Beck dragged his mind back from the past to the present. "But it's up to you if I tell anyone who the father is. And it's up to you if you want to be involved in bringing up the baby. I'll understand if you don't want any part of this."

Beck went on looking at him, his mind too much in turmoil to frame an answer, though deep down he knew what it was. Went on looking for so long that Jake eventually hunched his shoulders and shoved his hands into his pockets. "It's—," he started to say.

Something about the gesture finally galvanized Beck into action. Jake looked so lost and lonely and afraid, even more than he had done as the traumatized and grief-stricken man Beck had first met less than six months before. A meeting, Beck recalled with bitter amusement, that had also taken place in the kitchen at the Richmond farmhouse.

"Of course I want to be involved," he interrupted sharply. "And of course I'll acknowledge the child. This is my responsibility just as much as yours." He hesitated, suddenly unsure if that was the answer Jake wanted to hear. "If that's what you want?"

Jake seemed unsure too. Maybe he hadn't thought as far as Beck's answer, only that he should give him the choice. Then he nodded. "Yes. If I were you... if the shoe was on the other foot, I'd want that too. It's only fair...." He suddenly gave a wry laugh, the corner of his mouth turning up in a crooked grin. "Now we just have to tell everyone else."

oOo

Jake walked briskly toward the Med Center, heading for his regular weekly checkup with Kenchy. He nodded at the few people he passed, noticing most of them no longer stared at him—or his stomach—the way they had the first weeks after news of his pregnancy had spread. He was still a freak, but one they'd gotten used to.

Those first few weeks, though.... Jake winced at the memory. After he and Beck had decided what they were going to do about the baby, they'd sat down and figured out what they were going to do about everyone else. Jake had been oddly disconcerted at how well he and Beck had worked together as they'd developed their plans: Beck had been willing to listen and take advice, and made his own points through argument rather than by overruling Jake. Jake guessed the major had learned a few things about how to deal with other people during his weeks of working alongside Gray and Eric and Heather.

They'd agreed that letting the news trickle out and rumors develop—and a pregnancy wasn't something you could hide forever—would only confuse and distract both the town and Beck's soldiers from the task of resisting Cheyenne's siege. It would be better to be upfront. They'd each start by telling those closest to them, and then a wider circle, and then, finally, everyone else. Jake had been the one to suggest the news should be broken to the troops by Mack Davies, the Texan colonel who'd accompanied Jake on his return to Jericho and who was now acting as liaison between Jericho and the Texan authorities. The soldiers seemed to respect him and the fact he outranked Beck, even if he wasn't his commanding officer, would give some legitimacy to Beck's continued leadership. When Beck had suggested, in turn, that Eric be the one to tell the town, if he was willing, Jake had puffed out a breath and agreed. He hadn't been looking forward to standing up in front of everyone and telling them that not only had he been stupid enough to have unprotected sex while transformed into a woman but that it had been with Beck of all people.

Not that telling his family in the first place had been exactly easy or comfortable. He'd gathered his mom, Eric and Mary, along with Stanley and Mimi, at his mom's house in town. As he'd stood in front of the fireplace, looking around at the ring of faces gazing up at him expectantly, he'd caught Stanley's eye and received a nod of encouragement. Taking a deep breath and choking down his fear and embarrassment, he'd broken the news.

There was a long silence when he finished. He'd half-expected that kind of reaction after he'd made the first bald statement that he was pregnant. So he'd gone on talking, explaining the technicalities of how he was managing to carry the baby and his decision to keep it, giving the big news time to sink in. He suspected he'd have to explain some of the medical stuff again, later, when people were less shellshocked. But he hadn't quite expected, when he'd finished, for his mom and Eric and Mary to simply sit there staring back up at him wordlessly.

He glanced across at Stanley and got another nod, letting him know that his friend was okay with the situation. Of course, none of this was really news to Stanley or Mimi, but he guessed they wanted to let his family speak first. Jake looked back at his mom. "Uh—." He scrubbed a hand through his hair, unsure what else to say. Maybe he needed to go through it all again?

His mom lifted her gaze to his face. Then she took a deep breath and smiled at him: a forced smile, but a smile none the less. "Oh, honey." She got to her feet and held out her arms to him. He stepped forward and let her hug him. To his surprise and relief, she held him close for a long time, and he slowly felt the tension go out of her. When she stepped back and looked up at him, her smile was genuine. "So I'm going to be a grandmother?"

Jake nodded. "I hope so. If everything goes okay." He pulled her close again for another hug, unexpectedly touched by the genuine delight in her voice now she had, apparently, gotten over her shock. He wondered what he'd done to deserve so much love and forgiveness from her after all the hurt he'd caused her over the years.

"Hey, brother." Eric had gotten to his feet as well, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Not quite how I expected this kind of thing to go, but... congratulations." His mother took a pace away, letting Eric embrace him.

"Thanks." Over Eric's shoulder, Jake caught Mary's eye and the little dip of the head that said she was fine with it too, even if it was all a little strange.

When Eric stepped back, Jake put out a hand to keep him at his side. "There's something else. I didn't get pregnant all on my own. The father, the other father, knows and we decided that we should tell everyone. People are going to want to know and they're going to gossip, so it's best to make it all public." He turned to look at Eric. "I was hoping to have your help with that."

Eric hesitated, a twitch of his mouth betraying that the idea didn't appeal to him. Jake couldn't blame him for that. But, to his relief, Eric nodded his agreement. "Okay." He raised his eyebrows. "So, who—?"

Jake swallowed hard, wishing yet again that there was some way this wasn't the truth, that there was some other name he could give. His voice hoarse, he managed to get out, "Major Beck."

There was another stunned silence for a moment and then Stanley leaped to his feet. "The bastard." He took a stride toward Jake, his hands half raised and curled into fists. "After everything he did to this town? After everything he did to *you*? Now this? It wasn't enough he had to *torture* you? He had to rape you as well?"

"Stanley." Mimi was struggling to get to her feet, but Stanley had already turned and was heading for the door. Jake wasn't exactly sure what he was planning to do, but he suspected it involved finding Beck and exacting revenge for whatever crimes he imagined Beck had committed.

"Stanley!" Jake hurried after him and caught his arm, swinging him round. "I told you before. It wasn't like that." He gave Stanley's arm a squeeze, trying to reassure him, trying to convince him. "It was a mistake, but Beck didn't do anything wrong."

Stanley glared at Jake for a few seconds more, his expression mulish, before he slumped, the anger going out of him. "Yeah, well," he muttered, "should've kept it in his pants."

Jake huffed a wry laugh as he let go of Stanley. "Yeah, well, so should I."

He turned back to his mother and brother, still grouped by the fireplace. He caught a look on his mom's face that might be doubt or might be worry, he wasn't sure which. Then her expression softened and she smiled one of her slow, warm smiles. "Well, if Major Beck is the father of my grandchild, I guess that makes him part of this family." She tilted her head a little. "Maybe you should invite him for dinner."

Jake laughed, as much with relief as amusement, and stepped forward and hugged her again. "Thanks, Mom." Another thought struck him and he pulled back to look at her. "You know we're... not a couple or anything like that, right?"

She laughed softly and patted his cheek. "I know. But he still has a place at our table. He's family now. You—."

"Wait a minute." Jake turned at the interruption to see his brother rubbing the back of his neck, an irritated look on his face. "Did I hear right? You want *me* to be the one to tell the town you got yourself knocked up while you were Cheyenne's science experiment by—what was it you said about him? Someone you couldn't trust as far as you could spit and no one else should either? I'm the one who has to convince them you weren't a complete idiot who was not only dumb enough to sleep with a guy while you were a woman but who also decided that if you were gonna screw around, to pick someone you can't stand? Which, you know, complete idiot doesn't even begin to cover it, in my book."

"Umm." Jake took a pace away from his mother and gave an apologetic shrug. He couldn't deny the truth of what Eric was saying. "I was sort of hoping that if you told them, they'd accept it better. You know, if they knew you were okay with it...." He faltered at the expression on his brother's face. "Which, I guess you're not...."

"Eric, honey," his mother started to protest gently.

Eric shook his head, cutting her off. "You still think nothing bad's ever gonna happen to you, don't you, Jake? That whatever you do will have no consequences." His gaze dropped to Jake's stomach. "Do you know how much harder you just made it to keep Jericho safe? People are gonna think what Stanley thought." He stuck his hand out in Stanley's direction. "They're going to be mad at Beck. Beck's troops are going to be mad at you and the town. Half the people out there are going to be scared something like this could happen to them, after we put all that effort into keeping this quiet. They're—."

"I know." Jake spoke quietly, and perhaps it was the very way he didn't try to argue back that silenced Eric. He dipped his head in his brother's direction. "You're right. I did something stupid and now the town's going to pay for it. That's why I wanted your help. To tell people properly. Look, I'm sorry I put you in this position and I can understand if you don't—."

"Oh for Pete's sake!" Eric let out an exasperated sigh. "Of course I'm going to help. Just— don't blame me if it all goes wrong. This is not like trying to find an excuse for setting fire to

Dad's office carpet!"

As Jake climbed the steps to the Med Center two months later, he recalled how it had taken a moment for him to wrap his head around his brother's sudden change of heart and mood. Then he'd snorted with laughter at the comparison. "Thanks, bro." He'd held out his hand. As Eric had clasped it and pulled him closer for a half hug, Jake had thought with wry amusement that his brother was growing more and more like Dad every day. Jake could have expected the same kind of tongue-lashing followed by the same kind of unconditional support from Dad. And that he didn't mind at all that Eric was turning out that way.

oOo

Beck hurried across the Med Center parking lot, wondering if he was late. But no, there was Jake, just starting up the steps. Beck had to call his name twice, though, before he looked up and paused to allow Beck to catch up with him.

"Everything okay?" Beck asked as he reached Jake's side.

"Uh-huh." Jake gave Beck a slightly distracted nod, confirming Beck's impression that he'd been deep in thought, and held the door open for him. As he let the door swing closed behind them and they set off up the hall towards the treatment rooms, he gave Beck an odd look and added, "I can go see Kenchy on my own, you know. You don't have to come along every time."

"I know." Seeing Jake's frown deepen, Beck added hastily, "If you'd rather I didn't...."

Jake strode along for a few more paces before he shot Beck another sideways look and shrugged. "No. It's okay. It's just, if you don't want to—."

"Jake." Beck put a hand on the other man's arm, lightly but enough to make him stop and turn. "I want to be here. This is my baby, too, and my responsibility. I want to support you. In whatever way you need me to."

"Okay." Jake still seemed doubtful. Then the corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked grin. He jerked his head down the hall. "Come on. Kenchy's gonna be waiting."

Following Jake as he headed off with a spring in his step, Beck allowed himself a half smile. He was glad Jake didn't mind him being around, after all that had happened between them. In fact, he was rather sorry they couldn't spend more time together. He'd discovered, when Mrs Green had invited him to dinner, that Jake could be good company when he wasn't angry, grief-stricken or bent on revenge. Though he'd already known that, hadn't he? There'd been that brief time, just after Jake had accepted the role of Sheriff and before Constantino and Goetz had conspired to put them at loggerheads, when Beck had seen that side of Jake. It had been good to see it again.

Still, Beck thought regretfully, as he greeted Kenchy and then stepped out of the way so Kenchy could examine Jake, it was best to confine their contacts to these clinic visits and to the normal business of keeping them all safe from the ASA troops that still encircled them. They'd had a hard enough time as it was trying to get the troops to accept what had happened and to be comfortable with it: while no one had said anything to his face, Beck was aware there'd been plenty of speculation around the camp over the past few weeks about whether this meant their commanding officer really liked guys and what did *that* mean. Best not to add fuel to the fire.

Even his officers had been initially uncertain after Colonel Davies had broken the news. When, mustache bristling, the colonel had ended his explanation with, "Any questions?", there'd been a long silence during which the officers had looked at each other. Then Lieutenant Hammond had gotten to his feet.

"Sir? Permission to speak freely?"

"Permission granted." Davies had dipped his head.

"Sir. Are you saying that when Major Beck, that when—?" Hammond had shot a look toward Beck, where he stood to one side of the room. "That the major just... forgot? That... Mr Green wasn't really a girl."

"Hell, Hammond." Lieutenant McCoy spoke up before Davies could reply. "*I* forgot half the time I was talking to him. He made a damn convincing woman." McCoy also glanced over at Beck, before adding with a quirk of the brows. "Pretty good looking one too." Apparently catching a look of disbelief not only on Hammond's face but on the faces of some of the other officers, she spread her hands. "Hey, I'm not saying I don't prefer the male version myself, but if I looked like Jake Green did as a woman, I wouldn't be complaining. And neither would any of you guys." She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms, glaring at Hammond and daring him to argue back.

Beck had felt a rush of gratitude, smiling his thanks at her even as he'd stepped forward to confess that yes, he had forgotten, they both had. That placing themselves in a position where an event like this could happen was inexcusable. That—.

"Major?" Kenchy, wheeling the ultrasound cart over to where Jake sat on the gurney, pulled Beck away from memories that were still painful to recall.

He moved to where he'd be able to see the screen, while Jake pulled his hoodie and T-shirt over his head and lay back on the gurney. Glancing across, Beck was startled to see how much Jake had thickened around the middle even in the two weeks since the last scan. He found himself unable to look away from the distinct bump as Kenchy began smearing gel over it.

"Ow." Jake flinched.

"Cold?" Kenchy asked absently as he finished applying the gel and reached for the scanner.
"Sorry."

Jake shook his head. "No. Baby's kicking." He grimaced again. "Seems pretty restless today." He'd mentioned he'd started feeling the baby move at the last appointment but one. But both then and the next time, he'd said it wasn't really moving around right at the moment. Kenchy had suggested it was probably sleeping. Today, however, it seemed, the baby was awake.

Beck took a step forward. "May I—?" He left the question unfinished, not wanting to put any pressure on Jake, not wanting to assume that he had any right to touch him just because the two of them had once shared a few hours of intimacy. But wanting badly, so very badly, to feel the flutter of life under his hand.

Jake turned from looking at the screen and met Beck's gaze. Beck held his breath, willing Jake to say yes, surprised by the strength of his own feelings. In the past two months, ever since he'd found out about the baby, he'd tried to remain detached. Tried to remember it was Jake's baby more than his. That it wasn't a replacement for the daughter he'd lost. That he would likely only be a small part of the child's life, and maybe that would be for the best, given the way he'd failed Isa. And yet he wanted—.

"Good, strong heartbeat." Kenchy's unexpected interruption made Jake swing his head back to look at the screen again, leaving the question unanswered. Beck guessed he was glad of the doctor's intervention, spared the awkwardness of having to say no, though Kenchy had sounded like he was speaking half to himself, apparently unaware of the exchange between the other two men.

Squashing down his disappointment, Beck transferred his own attention back to the screen, where a rapidly pulsing area that he knew from previous scans was the baby's heart was clearly visible among the mostly indistinct black and gray and white shapes. Kenchy shifted the scanner, changing the image. "See, there's an arm and—whoa, he is a lively one, isn't he?" Beck didn't need Kenchy to explain that the long white blob moving jerkily on the screen was a small leg flailing about.

Jake chuckled. "Told you!"

Kenchy was still moving the scanner, still engaged in checking the baby over. "Guess this must be all old hat to you, eh, Major?"

"What?" Beck looked across at him in surprise, before he remembered that he'd previously told Kenchy he'd already had a child, when the doctor had quizzed him about his own medical history. He guessed he'd buried the memory of that conversation because it had also involved explaining the still raw news that both his daughter and his wife were now dead. Kenchy had

most likely forgotten that part: Alondra and Isa were just two more statistics to him, and he had living patients to worry about.

Kenchy confirmed what Beck was thinking when he simply shrugged and, with a wave of his hand at the ultrasound screen, elaborated, "You must have seen all this before?"

"Not really, no." Beck tried not to sound too curt as he turned his attention back to the screen. The baby was still wriggling, but—Beck leaned a little closer to get a better view—was it... was it *sucking its thumb* in there? He stared at the screen, caught between fascination and awe as he watched the baby, suddenly real in a way it hadn't quite been before. He added absently, "I was in Somalia most of the time my wife was pregnant with my daughter." He went on examining the images, not really noticing the silence that had settled on the room at his words.

At last Kenchy finished the examination, declaring everything seemed to be progressing satisfactorily, and handed Jake a paper towel to clean himself up. Beck stepped back to give Kenchy room to wheel the cart away, but Jake caught his arm, stopping him from moving further off. He looked for a moment like he was going to say something, and then simply shook his head. A moment later, he had pulled Beck's hand down onto his stomach. "Here."

Beck almost snatched his hand back, startled by the gesture. He'd assumed his chance had gone after Kenchy had cut short their conversation earlier. But now.... Blinking against a sudden stinging behind his eyes, he breathed in deeply, forcing himself to relax as he spread his fingers and pressed his palm against Jake's skin, trying to feel whatever it was Jake was feeling.

"There?" Jake arched his eyebrows.

Beck shook his head. "I don't—."

"It can take a while longer to feel it from the outside." Kenchy offered from the other side of the room, sounding a little impatient but not unkind. "Now, time for some more blood. I'm afraid." He lifted the tray with the needle and vial he was holding, to emphasize the point.

"Maybe next week?" Jake suggested to Beck, with a conciliatory smile, as Beck took his hand away. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the gurney, and then swayed, making a grab for Beck's shoulder to steady himself. "Wow. Little dizzy there."

"Postural hypotension." Kenchy set the tray down next to Jake and took his arm. He went on talking as he swabbed Jake's arm, inserted a needle into a vein and began drawing the blood. "Your cardiovascular system takes longer to react now, so you can get a little dizzy if you move too quickly. But your blood pressure was well within normal range, so as long as you don't overdo things, you should be fine. There." He removed the needle and covered the puncture wound with another cotton-wool ball.

Jake, used to the procedure, automatically put his fingers over the swab to hold it in place. "Are we done?"

Kenchy glanced up at him as he screwed the top on the sample bottle. "For now, yes. Gentlemen." With a nod in their direction, he bustled out of the room, taking the sample with him.

"Great!" Jake dropped the swab in the tray Kenchy had left behind and began pulling his clothes back on. "I'm due on patrol in an hour and I need to grab something to eat at Bailey's first."

Beck, who'd half turned his back on Jake as he dressed, swung back again. He hadn't realized Jake was still going out on night-time patrols with the Rangers. "Should you still be doing that?" Though the patrols didn't run into trouble very often—neither side had enough troops to exert complete control over the area—there had been at least a handful of incidents where they'd tangled with the ASA.

"What?" The question was muffled as Jake dragged his hoodie back on. "Eating at Bailey's?"

"No. Going on patrol." Without noticing what he was doing, Beck clasped his hands in front of him and tilted his head slightly, giving Jake a concerned smile.

Jake lifted his gaze to meet Beck's and froze, one hand still raised to flatten down his hair, which had gotten mussed up while he was dressing. Then he carefully and deliberately completed the gesture. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Well..." Beck cleared his throat. "In your condition..." He gestured toward Jake's stomach.

Again, Jake paused for a moment, before grabbing his jacket and sliding off the gurney. "I'm pregnant. I'm not sick." His tone carried a clear warning that Beck should leave well alone. But after the way Jake had almost passed out a few moments back, Beck didn't care what Jake thought he should do. He reached out and grabbed Jake's arm as the other man made to stalk past him.

"Yes, I know. But if you're getting dizzy, maybe you should—."

"Maybe you should just mind your own damn business." Jake wrenched his arm out of Beck's grip.

"Jake, I...",

Beck didn't get a chance to remonstrate further. Jake spun around to face him, his eyes glittering with anger. "What? You think me carrying your baby makes me some kind of

delicate little flower? That I need wrapping up in cotton wool for the duration? You wouldn't be treating me like this if I was a woman, would you?"

"Yes. I would." Beck took a step forward, feeling his own temper rise and trying to keep it in check. He'd forgotten how difficult dealing with Jake could be. How frustrating. "If you were under my command and I found out you were pregnant, it would be standard operating procedure to arrange for you to be transferred to duties suited to your physical condition. If —."

Jake didn't let him finish. "Well I'm not under your command," he spat. "Thank God. So you can keep your rules and regulations to yourself and let me get on with looking after my town and my baby." Not waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Beck was almost surprised when he didn't slam the door behind him.

Taking a deep breath, Beck pinched the bridge of his nose. He guessed he could have handled that a little better. Maybe he should have talked to Eric instead, asked him to be the one to suggest the change of assignment to Jake. Or Kenchy. No, Eric first. But he should probably leave it a day or two, give Jake some time to calm down.

Settling his cap on his head, Beck headed out into the hall. He hadn't really expected having a child with Jake to be all plain sailing, had he?

oOo

Jake thought about that conversation a few weeks later as, keeping his head low, he scurried along a muddy ditch that ran down one side of a field rotten with sharp-edged grasses and straggling weeds. Somewhere to his right and a little to the rear, he could hear the clatter of a helicopter patrolling the no-man's land that lay between Beck's ring of troops protecting the main routes into Jericho and the net of patrols and checkpoints that Hoffman had set up to circle the town. The helicopter's searchlight would no doubt be sweeping the ground below, looking for movement in the rain-sodden fields.

Right behind him, Carl was almost treading on his heels. Jake heard him mutter, "Come on, man, move it." but he was too breathless to reply.

At last, after what seemed like an eternity of running, they reached the shelter of a stand of trees. Jake sank to his knees, his hands on his thighs, sucking in air.

Chavez, who'd been bringing up the rear of the group of four, knelt down in front of him. "You okay, man?" He held out a canteen but Jake waved it away. He'd only have to pee. Again.

"Just need to catch my breath." He dragged in another deep breath and hitched a laugh. "Guess I'm not as fit as I was."

Chavez stowed the canteen away. "Uh-huh. Carrying an extra ten pounds'll do that." Jake sensed him turning to Carl and Gary, who were crouched nearby. "We'll take five."

"I'm okay." Jake started to struggle to his feet, but Chavez's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"No, you're not." Chavez gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Look, we've got another dash like that one and then we'll be back into the woods for a while and we can take it easy for a mile or so. But we can't have you getting a side stitch or having a dizzy spell halfway across the next field."

Jake pressed his lips together, resisting the urge to protest that he was fine. But he could feel his heart racing, and his chest was still tight. Reluctantly, he gave Chavez a nod. "Okay."

Settling himself back against a tree, he curved his hands over his stomach. It had gotten noticeably larger in the last month: Chavez had been pretty much spot on about the extra ten pounds. "Guess Beck was right," Jake muttered half to himself.

"How's that?" Chavez was checking the contents of his pack, probably making sure the map and notebook in which they'd marked down the details of the smaller ASA checkpoints they'd been surveying was still well-wrapped against the night's persistent light drizzle. He sounded amused. Jake guessed he had a point: it wasn't often he and Beck agreed on much, even now.

"Said I wasn't fit enough to go on patrol." Beck hadn't mentioned it again since they'd argued about it at the clinic almost a month ago, though the way he looked at Jake every time the patrols were discussed made it clear he hadn't forgotten or changed his mind.

"Uh-huh." Chavez snapped the clasps closed on his rucksack. "You know, I heard they could really do with someone who knows the area better than Darcy Hawkins and Mimi Clark to man the radio at City Hall."

Jake lifted his head and gave Chavez a sharp look, though he couldn't see much in the gloom. "You've all talked about this between you, haven't you?"

"It was just a matter of time, Jake." Chavez sounded unrepentant. "And they do need someone." He got up and held out his hand. "Come on. Time to move on."

With a snort, Jake accepted Chavez's hand and let the other man pull him to his feet. Chavez was right. It was time to move on. Time to accept that having this baby, taking care of it, would mean he had to start thinking about things differently.

Following Carl and Gary through the trees, with Chavez just behind him, he realized he'd thought he was ready to be a father, that he'd understood what that meant, but he hadn't.

Not really. It meant putting someone else first, always. It meant accepting there were certain things you couldn't do any more. It meant doing the best you could to help someone grow up and grow right and stand on their own two feet.

Jake snorted quietly to himself. And it probably meant being put through the kind of heartbreak and trouble he'd caused his own father. Preparing to dash across the next field, he decided that if he could do half as good a job as Dad had done, he'd have done okay.

oOo

Beck tried to ignore the headache that had crept up on him during a meeting with Eric that had seemed to last forever. It had, he found, apparently lasted quite long enough for the main office in the Sheriff's department to be transformed by the time he stepped back out into it. Christmas decorations—mostly slightly battered looking paper chains—had been strung along the front of the reception desk and around the windows and doors. Even the radio Jake had been manning when Beck had gone in to see Eric now carried a strand of tattered tinsel twined across the top of it.

Despite the poverty of the decorations, there was something about the effort that made Beck smile. He should talk to Heather about doing something out at the camp: Christmas decorations hadn't exactly been on the list of supplies he and his men had brought with them back in the spring.

Jake was now standing in the middle of the main office, wrapping a scarf around his neck and pulling on his coat. He'd been busy with a call when Beck had come in, so they hadn't spoken. But it looked like he'd just finished his shift: Darcy Hawkins had taken his place on the stool.

"Jake. Darcy." Beck nodded at them both, before turning to Jake. "How are you doing?" He'd missed Jake's last appointment at the clinic: the uneasy stalemate with Hoffman's troops had been temporarily broken when one of Dale's smuggling teams had run into an ASA patrol. Beck hadn't felt able to leave the camp until he was sure the situation had fully calmed down and the ASA wouldn't take it as an excuse to launch an attack.

"I'm fine. Kenchy said everything's normal. Well," Jake huffed a laugh, "as normal as can be." He rested his hands on his stomach for a moment, drawing Beck's attention there.

The bump was quite noticeable now, even under the thick sweater Jake wore. This time next year, Beck thought wonderingly, he wouldn't be worrying about Christmas decorations for the camp but about how he was going to celebrate Christmas with the baby....

Assuming, there *is* a baby, a dark little voice in his head reminded him. Assuming we're all still alive. He drew in a sharp breath, clamping down on the thought. *No!* he told himself firmly. *We've gotten this far. God wants this baby to be.* He smiled to himself. *I want this baby to be.*

Coming out of his thoughts, he realized Jake was still talking. "Darcy was suggesting I try some lemon balm tea to help me sleep."

Darcy nodded in confirmation. "Worked with my two and we had some growing in our garden." She chuckled. "I didn't know a thing about growing herbs when I moved here, but Mrs Frederickson ran some classes in the summer and helped me figure out what we had."

Beck crinkled his eyes at her. "I think we've all learned a thing or two this year."

Jake snorted quietly as he finished zipping up his coat. "One or two." He sounded wryly amused.

Beck turned back to him. "Are you heading back to the ranch?" He was remembering the sharp wind that had chased him into City Hall earlier, along with a scattering of snowflakes

"Uh-huh." Jake stifled a yawn as he pulled his gloves out of his coat pocket. "Don't think I'll have trouble sleeping tonight, though."

"I'll have my driver run you out there." The offer was out of Beck's mouth before he had a chance to think about it, but he didn't regret it. Jake would be chilled and exhausted by the time he'd walked home.

Jake hesitated. "I don't want to put you out."

Beck looked away. "You're not," he lied, his voice gruff. "I was planning a visit to the checkpoint out on Route 6. So it's on my way." Well, it was true he'd been planning to swing by one of the checkpoints on his way back to camp. Just not that particular one.

Jake hesitated again before he nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

Once they got outside into the parking lot at the rear of City Hall, Beck hurried ahead of Jake. The wind was even crueller than it had been earlier as he crossed to where his humvee was parked. "Corporal." He nodded at the driver, who'd gotten out of the cab where he'd been sheltering. "I'm going to be visiting Checkpoint Zero. We'll be dropping Mr Green off at his home on the way."

The corporal's gaze slid over Beck's shoulder to where Jake was approaching more slowly. "Yes, sir." Though the response was correct enough, Beck thought he caught a hint of an amused smile on the corporal's face as he turned away to open the rear door of the humvee so Jake could climb in.

As Beck made his way around to the front passenger seat, he realized the corporal's response was not entirely what he'd been expecting. He'd become used to the troops covertly staring

at him or answering him stiffly while on duty, and breaking off their conversations to watch him as he passed while they were off-duty. He couldn't blame them for that: he'd created a confusing and upsetting situation. Yet sometime in the last month, things had changed. Whatever indiscretions Beck had committed, it seemed his men trusted him again. The situation might still be more than a little weird but it was also now... normal.

Something had changed within himself as well, he saw, sliding into his seat and turning round to make sure Jake was settled safely in the back. The baby was no longer a terrible mistake he needed to atone for. Nor did he feel, as he had done for a while, that it was the universe mocking him for the loss of his wife and daughter by offering some kind of false replacement. It was just a baby: a child that needed to be loved and cared for. He remembered that moment in the Med Center when he'd seen it sucking its thumb on the ultrasound screen, and he imagined himself in a few months' time, leaning over a crib and watching it sleep, thumb tucked in its mouth.

The humvee moved off with a jolt. No, Beck thought, facing forward again, this baby wasn't a mistake at all.

oOo

Gail took another look around the living room, checking everything was in place for Jake's arrival. Maybe...? She nudged the recliner an inch sideways. There! Now it would be in the perfect position in front of the fire for him to put his feet up and keep warm.

She plumped up the cushion again. It would be nice to have one of her boys back home to look after. The house had been too quiet since Emily had moved back to her place in The Pines. And it really wasn't safe for Jake to be living out at the ranch by himself in his condition. Though it had taken her long enough to persuade him to move back: there were less than two months left until he was due. Only persistent nagging and Kenchy's support had persuaded him in the end. It was like he thought being pregnant was no big deal.

She felt a rush of irritation at him for getting himself in this mess—and at Major Beck having helped him get there. Hadn't the man done enough damage already with the way he'd treated Jake after he'd arrested him? She didn't think she'd ever forget her first sight of Jake slumped on the floor of the hog farm basement, his hands tied behind his back. It had been worse even than finding him half frozen and pinned under Stanley's truck, because that had mostly been an accident. Whereas what had happened at the hog farm had been deliberate. If Major Beck—.

Gail took a deep breath. Major Beck was going to be the father of her grandchild, and that was what really mattered, wasn't it? That was why, when Jake had first broken the news, she'd swallowed down her shock and anger and given Jake the support and approval he needed. And—.

A soft knocking at the door startled her from her thoughts, though she'd been waiting to hear it for the past half hour. She hurried to answer, a broad smile breaking out on her face.

"Hey, Mom." Jake, loitering on the stoop, gave her a shy smile.

"Oh, honey." She drew him into a hug made awkward by the bags he was carrying and the swell of his stomach. Pulling back to let him step inside, she peered over his shoulder. "You didn't walk all the way?"

He shook his head as he set down his holdall by the foot of the stairs and lifted the strap of his messenger bag over his head. "No. Just from Main Street. One of Dale's guys gave me a lift to City Hall on the milk cart."

"You should have made him drop you here," she admonished, helping him off with his coat.

"Mom, it's not even ten minutes walk!" She could tell from his tone that he was rolling his eyes a little though his back was to her. He turned around and gave her a conciliatory smile. "Besides, I'm going to be doing it every day when I go to work."

"Yes, well—." She left the rest of the thought unspoken. That was another topic they'd already discussed numerous times and where Jake wouldn't budge. She, meanwhile, was still firmly of the opinion that while it might be all very well for a healthy woman to go on working until a few weeks before her due date, the normal rules didn't apply in Jake's case. She'd had to settle for the fact that at least he wouldn't be overexerting himself there, just manning the radio, and he'd be close to the clinic if anything did happen. She waved a hand toward the recliner. "Anyway, you'll be wanting to put your feet up and have a little rest."

He gave her an amused look, his mouth twitching up in a wry grin, but let her steer him to the chair. She hovered over him while he unlaced his boots. "You're feeling okay?" Without really thinking about it, she reached out and put the back of her hand on his forehead, brushing his bangs away so she could take his temperature.

"I'm fine, Mom." Lifting his head, he drew away from her as he eased back on to the recliner. He let out a sharp puff of breath. "Oof! Well, still getting a bit of back pain. But it's been a lot better since I took your advice about sleeping on my side. Thanks." He gave her a quick smile as he reached behind him to settle the cushion more comfortably in the small of his back.

"Good!" She tilted her head and took another look at him, narrowing her eyes. She'd had to drag the complaint about the back pain out of him, and only when she'd caught him stretching and wincing. "Anything else?"

"No. I told you. I'm fine." He finished adjusting the cushion and looked up at her. He must have caught the skepticism in her expression because he hesitated and then added, his cheeks turning a little red, "Well, I've been sort of... itchy. On my stomach." He gestured down at himself.

"Hmm." Gail's mind raced over the half dozen conditions that had that symptom. Fortunately, most of them weren't serious. Still.... "Let me see?" When Jake seemed reluctant, she added gently, "I'm a nurse as well as your mom, you know. And I did have two children of my own."

He chuckled. "I know." With a shake of the head, he pulled up his sweater and T-shirt to expose his stomach.

Gail bent forward and ran her fingers lightly over his skin. His belly button had popped out and his bump looked more prominent than she'd expected, but she supposed it wasn't anything out of the ordinary—apart from the whole thing being wrong, of course. He had a couple of stretch marks and his skin seemed a little flaky, but that was all. Straightening up, she gave him a reassuring smile. "Looks like your skin's just a bit dry. I think I've got some moisturizer upstairs that'll help, or I can ask around. Maybe some calamine lotion, if it's really itchy."

"I need a beauty regime for my stomach?" Jake gave an amused snort as he straightened his clothes.

She grinned at him. "Just be glad you won't be wanting to get back into a bikini next summer."

He laughed. "Well, there is that." He glowered down at his hands resting on his stomach. "I still feel huge, though."

She hid a smile. "You'll get a whole lot huger. I remember the last few weeks carrying you, I felt like I needed an Oversize Load sign on my back." She patted him on the shoulder. "Now, why don't I make us a warm drink?"

"Mom." He caught her hand as she was turning away and squeezed it gently. "I know I'm going to be a pain about all of this but... thanks. For everything."

This time, she let the smile break out. This might all be wrong on so many levels, but a part of her wouldn't have missed it for anything.

A few minutes later, as she was handing Jake his cup, there was another knock at the door: a firm, brisk tattoo. "Who on earth...?"

Putting her own cup down, she went to open the door—and found Major Beck outside.

"Mrs Green." He dipped his head in greeting. "I heard from one of Dale's men that he'd brought Jake in to town and I.... May I come in, ma'am?"

She hesitated for a moment and then stepped back, holding the door wider to let him in. "Of

course.”

Once across the threshold, he must have caught sight of Jake. The two of them greeted each other as she was closing the door. Both of them sounded a little wary. She heard the major add hastily, “Oh, please don’t get up on my account.” Turning to face them, she saw he had a hand out to encourage Jake to remain where he was.

Apparently satisfied that Jake would stay seated, he turned back to her, holding out the box that had been tucked under his arm when he’d entered the house. “I brought these for Jake.” He tilted the box so she could see it held a dozen or so apples. “They were part of my rations but I don’t much like apples and I thought Jake could use them....”

From the way his gaze slid away from her as he offered the explanation, Gail suspected he liked apples just fine, but he’d wanted an excuse to make a present of them to Jake. She accepted the white lie and the box with a smile. “Thank you.” Whatever the man might have done in the past, he did seem keen to do the right thing now. And if she wanted her grandchild to know both its parents, she supposed she ought to try to make him welcome. Clearing her throat, she gestured to the cups sitting on the low table between the chairs drawn up close to the fire. “We were just having something to drink. Would you like to join us?”

“Please. I’d like that.” He inclined his head in her direction, his eyes crinkling in a smile.

“Then I’ll just....” She gestured toward the kitchen with the box of apples.

When she came back with another cup, she saw Beck had stationed himself in front of the fire, a little to one side, his hands clasped behind him. He and Jake were talking quietly, but even as she paused in the door for a moment to watch them, Jake let out a sharp cry of pain and made a grab for his calf.

“What is it?” Beck had dropped to his knees next to the recliner.

“Leg cramp.” Jake got the words out through gritted teeth. “Dammit.”

“Oh, honey—.” Gail hurried forward to help him, but Beck was faster.

“Here.” The major put his hand on Jake’s foot and helped him flex it, stretching out his muscles. By the time Gail had reached them and set down the cup of tea she’d been carrying, Jake was puffing out a breath and nodding that it was better.

“Don’t usually get them during day,” he confessed, as Beck went on gently manipulating his foot. “Been keeping me awake at nights the past week, though.”

"Pillow under your feet while you sleep," Beck suggested, sounding a little distracted. "My wife got terrible leg cramps when she was having our daughter. Said it really helped. She wrote me it was just as well I wasn't home when she was expecting: she had so many pillows in the bed, I would've needed to sleep on the couch." His hands still on Jake's foot, he added, "You should do some exercises as well. Stretches and rotations." He showed Jake what he meant. Glancing up and apparently catching the look of disbelief on Jake's face—one that Gail suspected was mirrored on her own—he muttered, sounding a little embarrassed, "I was on the track team at college."

Jake held his gaze for a moment and then smiled and nodded. "I'll try that. Thanks."

Beck got to his feet, dusting off his hands, and accepted the cup Gail now held out to him. "Thank you, Mrs Green."

Sitting down in a chair and picking up her own cup, Gail watched the two men as they went back to talking about the latest news about the ongoing war between Cheyenne and the Columbus-Texas alliance. She still didn't entirely approve of the way either of her sons had chosen to live their lives. But, just as she'd come to see Mary wasn't so terrible for Eric after all, she reckoned that if Jake *had* to choose someone to have a baby with like this, he could have done a lot worse than Major Beck.

oOo

The March wind plucked at Beck's uniform as he squinted down the road at the column of troops approaching the checkpoint on Route 6. Even from this distance, he could make out the lone star on the flag fluttering from the leading humvee. The last of the ASA's troops had withdrawn the week before, their numbers already depleted over the previous months as Cheyenne's cause became more desperate. Beck's patrols had pushed out cautiously after them, as much in search of fuel and food as to confirm that the siege had finally been lifted. Everywhere, they found signs of hastily retreat and even a few deserters, who had quickly surrendered.

"Fine sight, ain't it, Major?" A glance sideways showed Beck that Colonel Davies was grinning broadly at the sight of his compatriots. He had been in regular touch with the Texan troops for the past week as they slowly advanced north through Kansas.

"Yes, it is, Colonel." Beck turned his eyes forward again as the lead humvee drew to a halt fifty yards away and an officer got out. "Yes it is."

The officer from the Texan column approached and, coming to a halt a few paces away, saluted. "Colonel. Major. Captain Fox, 36th Infantry, Texas National Guard."

Beck returned the salute. "Major Beck, Tenth Mountain Division, United States Army."

The way he stressed the last three words wasn't lost on the Texan captain. He gave the

briefest of nods after he completed his salute that showed he understood Beck's meaning: Texas, the Columbus government and Beck might all be on the same side, but Beck would only be taking orders from a chain of command headed by the legitimate president of the United States.

The captain cleared his throat. "Sir. We are here to provide such assistance as the residents of the State of Kansas may require and request."

Beck nodded. "The mayor's waiting to speak to you, if you and your men would like to join us." He gestured toward where Gray Anderson waited outside a tent that had been set up a hundred yards away on the town side of the checkpoint. As the captain turned and indicated to the column behind him to advance, Beck added, "Welcome to Jericho, Captain."

Half an hour later, the preliminaries were over and they were seated around a table in the tent discussing what Jericho needed and what Texas could provide. Beck became aware, as Gray questioned Captain Fox about how soon fuel could be shipped in and how quickly they could be reconnected to the power grid, of a corporal entering the tent and speaking quietly to his aide-de-camp.

A moment later, the lieutenant bent next to Beck to whisper in his ear. "Sir. Sorry to interrupt. We've just had a message from City Hall. Dr Dhuwalia wanted to let you know that he's concerned about a deterioration in Mr Green's condition and has decided to operate today. He's preparing Mr Green for surgery now."

"What?" Beck swung round, the Texans and the conference forgotten. "Is Jake—?"

"I believe he's fine at the moment, sir. It's just a precautionary measure." Despite his words, the lieutenant's tone was anxious, though whether for Jake or his commanding officer, Beck didn't know.

"I—." Beck swung back to see the newly arrived Texans were looking at him with confusion and Gray and Davies with concern.

Then Gray nodded at him. "You should go, Major. I'm sure we can manage satisfactorily without you."

Beck hesitated for a moment longer, until Davies also gave him a nod. Then he was on his feet with a hasty apology. As he made his way out of the tent, he heard Davies explaining, "Major Beck has developed some, ah, close ties with some of the townspeople...."

The news that Jake was going under the knife had apparently already spread through the detachment providing security at the talks. Half a dozen soldiers offered salutes and some variation of "Good luck, sir" and "I hope everything goes well, sir" on his way to the humvee, though Beck was too distracted to do more than nod in reply. He wanted Jake to be fine, and

Kenchy was undoubtedly doing the right thing by moving up the cesarean, but he also wanted the baby to be fine. He wanted to be able to hold his child in his arms....

He was too choked up at the thought of what he might be about to lose to be able to give the order to his driver as he climbed into the humvee, so it was just as well the corporal seemed to understand the situation, putting the vehicle into gear and moving off as soon as Beck had slammed the door shut.

It still seemed like an eternity later, though it could only have been twenty minutes, before Beck was striding into the Medical Center. Even as he approached the reception desk, a nurse wordlessly pointed down the corridor. At the far end, Eric and Gail were hovering outside a treatment room that had been turned into an operating theater. Beck headed toward them, trying to suppress the fear clawing at his insides.

Eric hurried to meet him. "Jake had a dizzy spell and his blood pressure dropped, so Kenchy —."

Beck nodded. His fear must have been evident in his face, because Eric gripped his arm and added, "It'll be okay. Kenchy's a good surgeon."

"I know." Beck could barely get the words out. He knew Kenchy was good. But the doctor was dealing with something no one had ever faced before. With a nod at Gail, Beck took up station outside the door alongside the two Greens.

After ten minutes, he began to pace.

oOo

Jake rose slowly into wakefulness, aware of people talking quietly nearby and the soft hum of machinery. Sluggishly, he forced open his eyes. "What...?"

"Hi, honey." His mom's face loomed into view as she leaned over him.. She brushed his bangs back from his forehead. "How are you feeling?"

Jake blinked at her, memory returning. "A bit woozy. How did...?"

He tried to sit up further but a hand on his shoulder pressed him back. "Just take it easy." Kenchy, on the other side of the bed, went on looking at a monitor that, Jake supposed, showed his vitals, before he turned and gave Jake a nod. "Everything went well, but you're going to need to take it slow and get lots of rest, okay?"

Jake nodded. He stopped trying to sit up and instead turned his head. "Where...?"

His mom took a pace back as, from beyond her, Beck said quietly, "She's here." His voice was

filled with pride and happiness—and love. He stepped up to the bed and carefully transferred the bundle he'd been cradling against his shoulder into Jake's hands.

Resting the bundle against his chest, Jake looked down at his daughter. She looked back up at him for a few seconds, before her unfocused gaze wandered away. She had dark hair and dark eyes and was rather red faced. "She's beautiful," he whispered.

"Yes, she is." Beck reached out a finger and touched her cheek lightly.

"She'll be due another feed in ten minutes or so." Kenchy spoke briskly as he made sure the heart monitor on Jake's finger was still in place. "Would you like to be the one to give her the bottle? If you feel up to it."

"Please." Jake couldn't take his eyes off his daughter. She looked so small and yet felt so solid, so incredibly real, in a way she just hadn't when she'd been inside him. He dragged his gaze away from her for a moment to look up at Beck. "If you don't...?"

The other man shook his head. "I did the last feed. Your mom did the first one. So it's definitely your turn." He smiled at Jake, a real smile, without any of his usual reserve. Jake grinned back, before he turned back to looking at the baby.

"I'll go get the bottle ready." His mom bustled out of the room. A moment later, Kenchy followed.

The room grew quiet again. The baby yawned and then hiccuped. Jake went on staring down at her, feeling a rush of pride and love and protectiveness. He'd thought he'd understood that being a father meant things were different, but he hadn't really, not until now. He hadn't understood that his world had a new center. That he was going to make sure his daughter had everything she needed and that she'd grow up free and unafraid, and that she'd be able to be whoever and whatever she wanted to be. That nothing would ever hurt her, no matter what the world threw at them.

Beck cleared his throat. "I was thinking...."

Jake glanced up at him, pulled from his silent worship of his daughter. When Beck paused, he raised an eyebrow, inviting him to go on.

"...maybe we could call her Victoria?" Beck finished. He looked a little embarrassed, though whether by the suggestion itself or by his presumption in making it, Jake didn't know.

"Victoria?" Jake tested the name on his tongue as he looked down at the baby. They hadn't talked about names before. It had felt too much like tempting fate. Yes, he decided: she could be a Victoria. He nodded. "It's a good name."

"You see, it's just," Beck cleared his throat again, "the Texans arrived today, and Jericho's officially free again, and after everything that Cheyenne did to us... to you...."

Jake's mouth curled up in a crooked smile. "So she's our little victory?" he teased gently, reaching out and letting the baby—Victoria—grab his finger.

"Something like that." Another glance up showed Jake that Beck was definitely blushing now. "Anyway, things will be getting back to normal now...."

Jake, shifting Victoria so she was settled more comfortably in the crook of one arm, let out a laugh. "Not quite." He indicated the baby with his newly free hand. "But I'm not complaining."