

Not So Different

By Scribblesinink

Major Beck proved as good as his word. Within thirty minutes, the army had cordoned off the corn field; guys in hazmat suits were soon crawling over the wreckage of the missile, collecting samples and snipping pieces from the affected plants. Beck also had a mobile decontamination unit brought up from Camp Delaware so Stanley and Jake could wash off the sex-changing toxin.

Though Stanley had pinned his hopes on it, cleaning up had done nothing to fix them: toweling off, he still found himself dealing with a bust that was heavy enough to throw him a little off-balance, while more precious body parts remained conspicuously absent.

"They'll figure out what did this to us, won't they?" he asked Jake hopefully after donning the green army coveralls Beck provided. "Figure out a way to... to turn us back?" He didn't much liked the way Jake merely shrugged in reply.

They also gratefully accepted the offer of the use of a tent set up within the perimeter. Made of drab olive canvas, it was as sparse as a prison cell—furnished with nothing but two narrow cots, a small table and a pair of folding chairs—but it spared them from further surreptitious stares and embarrassed glances. Stanley couldn't decide what was worse: the way Bill's eyes seemed to drift to his chest whenever Bill wasn't paying attention; the compassionate looks the major cast them when he thought they wouldn't notice; or the incredulous, wide-eyed goggle of Kenchy, who'd muttered a stream of half-finished sentences under his breath while an army medic drew several vials of their blood. "Impossible... There's no way.... Can't be...."

That had been a while ago; other than a private bringing them some sandwiches at some point during the afternoon, and Beck informing them that Kenchy's initial blood work showed they weren't infectious, they'd been left alone. They tried to pass the time playing Crazy Eights with a deck borrowed from one of Beck's lieutenants, but their hearts weren't in it, and Jake soon shuffled the cards together in a pile and put the deck aside. There hadn't been much talk since then—Stanley found Jake was as reluctant to speculate on the future as he was—and Stanley had fallen into an uneasy slumber on one of the cots when voices nearby woke him.

"Ma'am, you can't—." It was one of the soldiers stationed outside their tent. Stanley didn't know if they were there to keep curious people out, or him and Jake in, and he didn't really want to ask. He feared he might not like the answer.

"Don't tell me what I can't do." Stanley started up at the sound of Mimi's voice, filled with

purpose. "I want to see my fiancé."

"Ma'am...."

"Jake!" Stanley hissed, hopping up from the cot, his gaze darting around the tent in a panic. He didn't want Mimi to see him like this. But the tent was sturdily built, and the only way in and out was through the opening. Besides, it was already too late: Mimi had thrown the tent flap aside and marched in. In spite of his unease, Stanley swelled with pride at her courage, and he pitied the soldier who'd tried to bar her way: when Mimi meant business, she was a force not to be trifled with.

While her tone was determined, her face was strained, worry lines furrowing her brow, but her eyes flashed with purpose as she took in the tent and its occupants.

"Oh." Some of the fire went out of her gaze as she saw them. "I'm sorry, I was looking for —." Then she drew her eyebrows down in a puzzled frown, casting a quick glance from him to Jake, sitting at the table, and back. "St-Stanley?" Her eyes grew comically round in shock and her mouth fell open.

Stanley shot a helpless glance in Jake's direction. Jake looked back unhappily, his feminine features strange, yet at the same time oddly familiar, and gave him a one-shouldered shrug. Taking a deep breath, Stanley nodded at Mimi. "Yes, it's me." By now, he should've gotten used to the way his new voice was so much higher than his old one, but every time he spoke, he still cringed at the high-pitched sound that came out.

For a long moment, Mimi appeared frozen, gaping back at him with her lips pursed in an O. Then, much to Stanley's surprise, she doubled over and started laughing: harsh braying laughter that sounded nothing like Mimi at all.

Stanley frowned and reached for her, but she held out a hand to ward him off. "No.... You're not.... This is...." She gasped for air, before casting another look in Jake's direction. She managed, "Oh god, and Jake, too...?" before a fresh gale of laughter exploded from her.

"You know, it's not that funny." Stanley felt hurt, and more than a little annoyed. He would've expected rather more sympathy from her. "In fact, it's not funny at all!"

"No... you're right." Mimi drew a deep, shuddering breath, and another one, hiccuping between gulps of air, and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand as she slowly got herself under control. "Stanley, I'm sorry." Despite her laughter, there wasn't a hint of amusement in her expression. "Major Beck said there was an incident, and that you got doused with some toxic chemicals, but that I wasn't to worry. He didn't say...." Her eyes

grew wide again. "Oh my god, does it hurt?"

Stanley gave a vague wave, somewhat mollified by her apology. "Only when I run," he muttered, remembering their mad dash through the corn field, every step more awkward than the previous one as his body changed into something he didn't quite know how to use.

Mimi's attention shifted down from his face to where his new bosom was straining the material of his coverall. Her mouth twitched, and this time she did seem a little amused. "I bet it does."

She drew her gaze back to his face, her expression filling once more with compassion. "Did they say how long...?" She glanced over at Jake, who offered her a wry, lopsided smile that Stanley found surprisingly reassuring, since it made him resemble the old Jake more than anything.

"Nobody knows." Jake flapped a hand in the direction of the tent opening. "Beck's got his people working on it, along with Kenchy but—," another shrug, "Jericho isn't exactly overflowing with biologists or geneticists."

"We're hoping maybe it's temporary." Stanley plopped back down on the edge of the cot, trying not to think how Scott Rennie had been the closest the town had had to a proper scientist. And Rennie was dead. "Beck believes it might be a weapon, designed to confuse the enemy but not do lasting harm."

"He thinks you'll change back eventually?" Mimi rubbed her arms. "That it... wears off?"

"That's what we're hoping." Stanley nodded.

"Okay, that's... good." Mimi settled herself on the cot next to Stanley. For a long moment, the tent was cloaked in silence. "You know," Mimi murmured at last, looking up at Stanley from under her lashes, "worst case scenario? I mean, if you stay like this? I could ask Major Beck for some of that toxin. I guess it works the other way 'round just as well?"

"What?" Jake and Stanley squawked in unison.

Stanley added, "No, Mimi, that's—."

Mimi quirked an eyebrow. "It's, what?" Her cheeks dimpled a little. "Oh, wait, you don't want *me* to be the man around the house?"

There was a soft snicker from Jake, and Stanley shot him a glare. "N-no, that's not it," he

stammered. "I mean... it... it could be dangerous! Long term effects, and... and...."

Mimi's second eyebrow joined the first, and Stanley knew he'd lost the argument. Some things never changed, it seemed. He slumped beneath the weight of her scrutiny. "I don't *want* you to change, all right?" He glanced back up at her. "Cause I like you just the way you are."

Mimi's expression softened and she cocked her head sideways, a warm smile playing around her mouth that made Stanley's heart flutter crazily against his ribs. She leaned in to peck him on the lips, apparently not at all fazed by the fact that she was kissing a woman. "I love you, Stanley Richmond."

Without thinking, he kissed her back. "I love you too.... Oh crap!" He recoiled, heart hammering in his throat. "Does... does that make me a lesbian?"

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