In Extremis
by DinerGuy

Summary

Prompt fill: Character A must do something awful to Character B to save them from something worse.

The chopper goes down in mid-flight, leaving T.C. badly injured and Higgins even worse. Now, with a storm rolling in and floodwaters rising, T.C. might just have to do the unthinkable to save their lives.

Notes

After having previously discussed with frankie_mcstein how much we both appreciate protective!T.C. and how much he cares about everybody, she then told me about the prompt fill SHE was writing and things kind of snowballed from there.

I promise I am capable of writing something that isn't heart-wrenching... maybe someday I can prove it.

Standard disclaimers apply, and my usual thanks (and blame) goes to the aforementioned Frankie as well as truthtakestime.

There were a number of reasons Juliet Higgins could list for why she might find herself in the air, choppering above a vast expanse of jungle, looking out her window and admiring the view. However, this was not one of those reasons, and she was not simply admiring the view.
"How much longer can we stay in the air?" she asked through her headset, looking over at T.C.

The pilot glanced at her as he responded. "Still got a good half hour before we'll need to head back to base. We should be fine, but we just gotta keep an eye on the skies. Storm's supposed to roll in later this afternoon. If it gets here early, we're gonna have to bail; they're saying it'll be a bad one."

She nodded and turned back to look out of her side of the chopper. The wilds of the island sprawled below them, an unbroken, dark green carpet, and she had yet to see anything even close to any sort of structures that could be where their suspect was holed up.

And yes, the majordomo of one of the largest estates on the island had just used the words "suspect," "holed," and "up" in the same sentence. Why? Well, it seemed that she was not only the majordomo of Robin Masters' estate but was also—somehow—constantly getting involved in cases with a certain private investigator. A private investigator who just so happened to also be Robin's resident security consultant.

"See anything?" T.C.'s question broke into her thoughts.

Higgins glanced back over at him. "No, not a thing," she admitted. "How sure was Magnum that this was the area where we should be looking?"

"Aw, you know Thomas," came the response. "He sounded about ninety percent sure—which means he's probably only about seventy-five percent sure. If that."

Rolling her eyes in a laugh, Higgins tilted her head. "You certainly got that right."

The things she did for Thomas Magnum.

In the course of the next few moments, several things happened, none of which Higgins was completely sure the cause of, but all of which she knew were absolutely not good.

Second only to the blaring of an alarm, a series of lights illuminated the dashboard, some flashing and others staying brightly lit. T.C. swore and started doing something to the set of switches and levers, even while the mechanical bird pitched sharply to the left.

Higgins sucked in a breath and clenched her seat with both hands. She wasn't scared, not exactly, but it was more than a little disconcerting. Grabbing onto her seat cushion was more an instinctive act of self-preservation than a manifestation of any fears she might have of them crashing into the canopy of trees below and going up in a massive fireball.

All it would take was just one of the rotors coming a little too close to a treetop.

T.C. was straining mightily at the yoke, and he managed to right the helicopter a moment later. They leveled out, but the sigh of relief that left Higgins' lips was short-lived when they lurched downward with no warning.

Again, T.C. struggled with the controls, but the machine was slower to respond. And then, it suddenly yielded, flipping its nose up at an alarming rate of speed to the point where Higgins was sure their momentum would carry them to flip upside down.

T.C. yelled something into his radio about a mayday.

The next few moments were a blur of green and blue as the bird pitched first one way and then another, and then Higgins heard T.C. yell, "Brace, brace, brace!" as the jungle rushed up to greet them.
The last thing she remembered was squeezing her eyes shut in anticipation and dropping her head down between her legs.

When her eyes finally squinted open again, the whole world was still spinning. Not through a windscreen, this time; no, she had an unobstructed view of the sky above her. But everything was going in and out of focus, and the edges of her vision were blurry.

She blinked, but her sight only cleared slightly. When she turned her head to try to take in more of her surroundings, pain flared through it and forced a quiet cry from her. Okay, bad idea. No moving for the time being.

Higgins lay back, panting, and closed her eyes. She could feel her stomach roiling, and, with the pain in her head and the roaring in her ears, that was all her brain seemed able to process at the moment. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she thought she was probably in shock, but she didn't have the mental fortitude to consider why at the moment.

"Higgins?"

A voice, from somewhere close by. She knew that voice…

"Higgins? Come on, girl. Open your eyes."

There it was again. The voice was nice, she decided. Deep and low and calming. But, even if it was nice, she'd much rather just lie where she was and not have to do as she'd been told. The light hurt her head, and the sky swimming above her just made her more nauseous. No, she'd much prefer to just keep her eyelids closed, thank you.

A hand patted her cheek. It was large and warm, and she smiled slightly at the gentle touch—except, then, it patted harder, and it stung a little. She flinched.

"Higgy! Wake up. Come on!"

Okay, now the voice sounded a little scared, and she groaned. It wasn't going to leave her alone, so she might as well make it happy.

Blinking her eyes open once again, she found she was no longer staring up at the sky but, instead, at T.C., who was hovering over her. His eyes, full of concern, softened slightly when they met hers.

"There you are," he said in relief. "You don't know how bad you scared me."

"Mm," she moaned, making a concerted effort not to move an inch. "What… happened?"

He grimaced. "Chopper went down." He shook his head as he looked past her at something. "I don't know what happened. We were flyin' fine, no warning lights at all, and then it just… freaked out."

"'Freaked out,'" she repeated, striving for a joking tone but only partially succeeding. "Is that a technical term?"

"Not exactly," he chuckled. Then he turned back to her, raising an eyebrow. "How are you feeling?"

She could see his gaze as it moved from her face down the rest of her body, probably checking her injuries. If she was feeling this bad already, though, she knew she had a concussion. Which wasn't
that big of a deal; she'd had concussions before. But she hadn't yet been able to bring herself to take stock of any other injuries, and she wasn't quite sure what state she was in.

Speaking of, the man who was currently looking her over didn't appear to be in exactly mint condition himself. There was a gash across his forehead, several cuts scattered across his face, and his red shirt was torn and dirtied, smudged with blood and soot. She couldn't see much more than that, but, based on the way he'd winced when he'd turned, she was willing to bet there was more to his injuries than she could see.

Which would make sense, seeing as how they'd both apparently just survived a helicopter crash.

"I'm…" She searched for words, but then finally just settled for the truth. "Don't know," she admitted.

T.C.'s expression was hard to decipher. He rubbed the back of his neck as he studied her face. "I'm really sorry I have to ask this, but can you wiggle your toes?"

His voice was heavy with concern, so much so that her stomach immediately clenched. Something had to be seriously wrong.

"What is it?" she asked him, searching his face.

"Higgy… please," T.C. sounded hoarse. "I need you to try to move your feet for me."

"Right." Okay then. She took a deep breath, wincing at the sudden fire that she felt run through her side and tingle up her neck into her head. She shifted, twitching her right foot—planning to follow up with moving her left right after—but cried out as every nerve ending seemed to come alive with fire.

Tears filled her eyes, obscuring her sight, but she felt a hand close around her own.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," T.C. was murmuring beside her. He didn't remove his hand from her grasp.

She could hear a rough edge to his voice that hadn't been there before, but she couldn't focus past the excruciating pain that was radiating through her at that moment. Her chest heaved, and she clutched a handful of dirt in her free hand that lay at her side.

"Okay," T.C. said after a moment. "Come on, Higgy; you did good. Let's try again. Try to wiggle your toes."

Higgins shook her head.

"You gotta," he told her. She could hear him take a deep breath, and, by this point, her vision had cleared enough to focus on him again. He looked at her firmly, and she could see some blood had trailed down his face since the last time. "I hate to do this, Higgy; I know it hurts. But come on; you can do it."

Focusing on the blue sky above her, she bit her lip and gathered all of the strength she could manage. Then she gritted her teeth and started to roll her ankles outward.

The pain hit again, in such a hard wave that it took her breath away. She gasped, clenching T.C.'s hand tightly, the tears filling her eyes again.

He put his free hand on her shoulder encouragingly and looked into her eyes. "Higgins, I know this is hard. I know it hurts. But I really need to see the extent of your injuries. Take a deep breath, and
let's try again." He glanced down at her legs. "Why don't you just move your left first?"

Taking another deep breath, she swallowed hard and then tentatively flexed the toes on her left foot. She could feel them moving inside of her boot—thankfully, with no pain to accompany the movement. Next, she tried turning her ankle either direction, again, without much resistance other than a little soreness.

"Good!" T.C. said, sounding relieved. "Can you bend your knee?"

She did as requested, slowly drawing her left foot up until her knee was bent and her heel had moved up under it. A sigh of relief at the accomplishment seemed warranted. She didn't want to think about what was coming next.

Neither did T.C., it seemed, but his gaze turned serious. "Now, Higgy, this is gonna hurt, and I'm sorry. I'm gonna touch your right leg, okay?"

She nodded wordlessly, steeling herself for what was coming.

His grip left hers, and then she could feel his hands gently exploring her leg, prodding and massaging as they went. Any other time, she would object to someone's hands all over her, but she knew he was just helping, that it was a necessary action. He needed to see if there was a break or any other reason that one leg was causing her so much trouble.

She tensed up, waiting for the pain to hit again. It started to grow as he gently probed her thigh, but it didn't really hit until he'd moved farther down.

The minute his fingers pressed at her knee, agony shot through her bones. She yelled out, and her left leg kicked instinctively. Both of her fists grasped for something to hold onto, and she could feel the dirt and grass filling them.

T.C. kept going, though, and the pain kept coming. It rolled over her in waves, drawing what felt like one long, breathless scream from her lungs.

Everything grew dark for a moment, then she could feel him patting her cheek again, one hand rubbing her arm as his voice finally registered past the roar of the pain.

"Higgy. Higgy-baby, you're good. You're good. We're all done. You did great," he was murmuring as he coax ed her back to reality. "Come on, now. Open your eyes. I'm done," he repeated. "I need you here with me, okay?"

She pried her eyes open, unable to stop the moan of pain, and winced as she tried to adjust her sight to focus on the man sitting beside her.

"Hey, there you go." He smiled. "I'm so sorry, Higgy."

Shaking her head, she tried to muster up a grin, although she was afraid it probably came out more like a grimace instead. "Had to," she managed to croak out.

He shook his head at that.

"How…’s it?" she asked.

That drew his gaze back to hers, and he sighed. "Your leg got injured in the crash."

Well, that much she could've told him.
"I was worried about your spine; you were lying on a pretty big chunk of metal when I found you. But it seems okay..." He shook his head. "Besides your leg, you have, uh, some other injuries. I think you have a couple of busted ribs, and you're pretty scraped up, plus there's a pretty bad cut along your scalp that's gonna need stitches. I had to use your scarf to patch it. First-aid kit's gone—the wreckage is scattered pretty far, and I can't find it." His voice cracked, and he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Higgy. If I'd only—"

"No, stop it," she told him, shaking her head once. She took a breath at the pain that hit at the movement. "This was not your fault. This was an accident. If anything, it'd have been worse if not for you."

That drew a sad smile from him. "Thanks."

She returned the smile, tight though hers was. "Now, come on. How are you?" She coughed, wincing at the pain in her side at the motion.

"Well, near as I can tell, I made it out a little better than you." He winked. "But I hit my head—which I'm sure you can see," he joked, "and I've got some cuts and bruises. But I'll live."

Although she wasn't sure she believed him, she also didn't have the energy to press further at the moment, so she let it go.

She blinked up at the sky, trying to process everything he'd told her. The treeline formed an edge around the blue sky, and her momentary glance around—as well as the fact that they had actually survived the crash—told her they were in some sort of a clearing. She didn't know how they'd managed to land there, but she was extremely grateful for T.C.'s piloting skills in avoiding the innumerable trees around them. Or, at least, most of the trees. Even in her limited field of vision, she could see a line of damaged foliage, with broken branches hanging and leaves shredded.

There was the smell of smoke somewhere close by, an acrid, burning stench that smelled like jet fuel and burning wood and fabric with a metallic hint mixed in. Risking her stomach to turn and take in their surroundings, she was pleased to find it didn't protest as much as it had moments before—but the sight that met her eyes didn't make her feel any better.

The chopper was completely out of commission, and T.C.'s previous words about scattered wreckage popped into her mind. She felt terrible, knowing he relied on the helicopter to run his business. And, although she was sure it was insured, the sight of the red, orange, and yellow bird now shredded and burning around them was still hard to take. She couldn't imagine what her friend must be feeling.

As she'd assumed, they were in some sort of a clearing, and she couldn't believe their good fortune. In the expanse of jungle, T.C. had somehow managed to set the failing chopper down in the one place that had enabled them to survive the crash. Higgins didn't even want to think of what would have happened if they'd crashed into the dense trees.

T.C. pushed to his feet next to her. "I'm gonna go see if I can find anything that can help us," he told her.

She glanced over at him but didn't say anything, just watched as he stood. The way he was favouring his left side didn't go unnoticed, and she was sure there was a dark spot on his shirt, but she couldn't bring herself to focus close enough to make out what it was. A terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach told her it was blood, but she couldn't tell for sure.

"Maybe I'll get lucky, and the emergency kit will be close by," he said, giving her another once-
over. "Be right back." And then he limped off, disappearing from her view.

Higgins settled her head back to the ground and sighed shallowly so as not to aggravate her ribs. The others knew where they were, she told herself. Magnum had asked them to search the area; he'd know something was wrong if Higgins and T.C. didn't check in soon. Rick and Magnum had been searching part of the area on the ground, so, while they weren't exactly close by, they weren't too far away either.

And she remembered T.C. had gotten off a distress call before they'd crashed. All the two of them had to do now was hold out until their friends came looking for them.

A shiver wracked her body then, and she whimpered in pain as the shudder made everything hurt. She knew it was still warm out—it was the middle of a summer afternoon—so she must be going into shock. This wasn't good.

From off in the distance, she heard the dull sound of a shot and the fizzling of a flare and realised T.C. must have found some emergency supplies. Hope sprang into her chest. If they had flares, that was good then! Someone would undoubtedly see the light and come for them. Especially since Magnum and Rick had to know they were in trouble by now.

Something shifted at her side, then she felt a light weight touch down over her body. Higgins glanced down to see a metallic emergency blanket spread over her. Looking over, she could see T.C. settling back down beside her, and she smiled at him gratefully. "Thanks," she managed past quivering lips.

"Sorry, couldn't find much," he said quietly. "Did find a flare gun, but only has a few flares with it. Shot off one, but we should probably hold onto the others for a while." He grew quiet then, and she glanced over to see him staring off toward his ruined chopper.

"They'll be here soon," she told him, hearing her voice shaking but trying to sound hopeful. She bit her lip and slowly moved her hand in his direction, stopping when she felt her fingers brush his and grasping them. "We just have to be patient; Magnum and Rick know where we are."

T.C. turned to look down at her, and then he took her hand and squeezed it back. "Yeah. Don't worry, Higgy. They'll find us."

The two of them fell silent then, with nothing much more to say. Higgins let her eyes drift closed, longing for sleep to overtake her so that she could forget about all of the pain running through her…

"Higgins!" T.C.'s sharp voice broke into her dozing thoughts.

She frowned and squinted at him.

"You can't fall asleep, girl," he said firmly. "Stay with me, okay?"

Well, she didn't like the sound of that at all. "Tired," she protested.

"I know, and I'm sorry," he said, his voice soft and full of pain. "But you're injured; you gotta stay awake so I know you're okay, all right?"

She knew he was right, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Higgins opened her mouth to argue but was interrupted by a clap of thunder so loud it made both of them jump in surprise. The pain in her head flared at the sound, but that's not what had her worried.
"T.C." She looked at him with wide eyes.

"I know." His voice was serious. His expression said he knew exactly what she was thinking because he was thinking the same thing himself.

The storm was supposed to be a number of hours away. Now, however, it seemed it was moving in faster than had been forecast—with them stranded on the side of a mountain.

A flash of lightning accompanied the next peal of thunder, lighting up the sky and casting strange shadows through the clearing. Even amidst the flickering light from the few fires still burning in the wreckage, the lightning was brighter still when it flashed a second time.

As thunder rolled again, T.C. looked at Higgins, his face serious. "I think I saw a shack nearby when we were in the air. I'm gonna go see if I can find it."

He was right, she knew; they needed shelter with the storm rolling in. They were both injured and wouldn't fare well if they stayed out in the rain that would be sweeping through before long.

"Be right back," he told her, standing stiffly to his feet. He grunted as he pushed upward, then he turned back to look down at Higgins. "Don't go anywhere," he told her with a wink.

She chuckled, then winced. "Right. I'll try my best."

And then he turned and was gone, leaving Higgins alone in the clearing. Other than the thunder rumbling, there was silence. She noticed even the birds had grown quiet.

The tops of the trees were starting to whip back and forth as the wind rose, and she could hear the crashes of thunder getting closer and closer together as the seconds wore on. Lightning was flashing in quick succession now, too, and she could see dark clouds overtaking what had previously been a gorgeous blue sky.

Her eyelids felt heavy, and the temptation to close them and fall asleep was strong, but she knew she couldn't. She'd essentially promised to stay awake, plus T.C. was off looking for a safe place for them to retreat. She needed to stay awake so she could be ready to go as soon as he came back.

But how was she even going to hope to make it to shelter? The question sprang to her mind. She was concussed and couldn't move her right leg—not to mention all the other injuries she was dealing with that she wasn't even aware of. The very idea of trying to sit up, much less walk any distance, made her stomach clench.

'Don't be silly,' she told herself. 'You just have to push past the pain and do what needs to be done.'

She was Juliet Higgins, former MI6; she'd had plenty of training in ignoring her body and compartmentalising pain in order to accomplish a mission. This was the same concept, only, this time, the mission was getting herself to safety to wait out a storm. She could do this.

With that thought in mind, she decided she should at least be sitting up when T.C. got back. Then he could help her get to her feet without putting too much weight on her right leg, and she could hobble to wherever they needed to go. It would be simple. She took as deep of a breath as she could and then pressed her palms to the ground to sit up.

The world tilted at a sharp angle, and she could hear her pulse pounding in her ears. Higgins gritted her teeth and tried to keep moving upward, but she had to drop to her back again, panting and whimpering at the flashes shooting through her side, up her leg, into her head. Everything was whirling around her, everything hurt… she almost couldn't breathe for it all. Pressing a hand to her ribs, she tried to quiet her breathing, but it was almost impossible.
"Higgy?" T.C. was back, his voice in her ear. "Higgy, what happened?" She felt more than saw the hand he put to her forehead.

She didn't respond, just kept breathing.

Something wet hit her cheek, and that surprised her enough her eyes flickered open. She blinked and squinted as another drop of water landed in her eye.

T.C. frowned and looked upward, spreading his palms. "Rain," he said quietly. The seriousness in his tone wasn't lost on her. He moved so he was leaning over her, effectively blocking the water that was coming down from her face.

She could hear the rain intensifying as it grew from a few small drops to a steady drizzle, and she looked up into T.C.'s face. His brow was creased as he studied her.

"Hey, do you think you can try to get up again?" he asked. His voice was gentle but urgent. "There's a small shed not too far from here—looks like a hunter's cabin. It's not too far of a walk." He was trying to sound encouraging.

Higgins took another breath and then nodded. She honestly wasn't sure if she could get up, much less walk, but she had to try. They needed to get out of the weather, and she knew T.C. was hurt as well. If she could at least limp on her own power, even holding onto his arm, then they could get to the cabin and out of the elements. She owed it to him to get herself there.

His hand was on her back as she slowly sat upright. The waves of pain that washed through her were agonising, but she just clenched her teeth and pushed through as best as she could. She could hear herself cry in pain, but she blocked everything out. It took what felt like all of her strength, and, when she was finally sitting somewhat upright, she found she was panting in exertion. Sweat beaded on her forehead, but she had at least made it, slumped as she was against T.C.'s grasp. The battle was half won.

"Higgins." The seriousness to his tone worried her. It was deeper than it had been a moment before.

Shifting, she turned to look his way, biting her lip. "Hm?" It was all she could get out at the moment, and she lifted her eyebrow to underscore her question.

He was shaking, she suddenly noticed, and his brow was creased in a pained expression that sent fear coursing through her chest. She knew he'd been injured, but this seemed bad.

"Are… you okay?" she managed to ask.

The pounding rain was roaring around them at this point, coming down even harder than it had been moments before. Higgins could feel it soaking her hair and clothes, and she could see it running down T.C. as well. They needed to get out of the weather immediately before their being soaked to the bone made their conditions even worse.

She was in the process of gathering her strength for another attempt when T.C.'s gaze suddenly jerked upward and toward the treeline across the clearing. His head tilted in concentration.

"What—" She broke off as she heard a roaring sound in the distance. It was low at first, barely detectable over the sound of the pouring rain and crashing thunder. As it steadily grew, Higgins realised what it was, and her stomach dropped so fast it nearly made her sick.

Flash flood.
T.C. looked back at her, his eyes now wide and full of an urgency that she'd never seen from him before. "Higgins, we have to move."

She nodded, knowing he was right. The floodwaters would be there any moment and would sweep through the wreckage and carry away everything in their path. With nothing else in the clearing to offer any sort of buffer for them, she and T.C. would be sitting ducks.

"Okay, Higgy, ready?" He was practically shouting in her ear to be heard above the storm.

When she glanced back, she could see how heavily he was breathing. Pain crossed his face as he leaned down toward her, but he just put his hands under her shoulders.

"On three," he told her. "One, two, three!"

And then he pulled at her while she pushed upward, but they didn't get very far. She could hear T.C. cry out in pain even as she groaned herself, and she slumped back to her seat on the ground again. She closed her eyes against the pain now taking over what felt like every inch of her body. She caught her breath after a second and looked over at her friend.

The dark spot she'd noticed on his shirt seemed to have grown, even with the way the rain had soaked through his clothing. He was breathing somewhat abnormally, and he had a hand to his side as he clenched his eyes shut.

This was nonsense. What was he thinking? He couldn't possibly carry her in his condition! She was surprised he was still on his feet at all.

They had to move fast, she knew. The area was flooding, they were about to be overrun, and he was wasting time trying to help her—she, who couldn't move an inch on her own power at the moment. If he couldn't carry her and she couldn't move…

Swallowing, Higgins grabbed T.C.'s arm. "You have to leave me," she told him. It was true, and they both knew it. He had to leave her there and save himself. "I know you're hurt more than you're letting on. You can't carry me, and I can't walk." It was harsh, she knew, but she knew it was also necessary. He would die trying to get her to safety, and she couldn't allow that.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Magnum and Rick will never forgive if I leave you here. I'd never forgive myself."

"And I'll never forgive myself if you die because I can't move!" she burst out.

In the next second, something crossed T.C.'s face, and he sighed. He looked at Higgins sadly. "I'm so sorry, Higgy," he said.

She shook her head. "No, it's okay," she told him. And it was true; she'd made her peace with it. This was a dire situation, and sometimes sacrifices had to be made when things got desperate. She knew he would never leave her under normal circumstances—just as she would never leave him or any of the others—but she'd never forgive herself if they both drowned because he was too stubborn to leave her.

But then, in the next moment, he reached down and put a hand on either of her wrists. "I'm sorry," he said again, his voice tight.

"T.C., what—" Her words died off in a choked gasp as he suddenly threw his weight upward and started backing up at nearly a run.
Higgins had never felt pain like what rushed through her body as her arms were suddenly pulled over her head. It wrenched her injured side, and she cried out as what felt like waves of fire rolled over her. She couldn't even formulate words, couldn't think straight, could only feel herself bouncing over the rough ground—which set her right leg alight as if she was being stabbed with millions of knives all at once.

Agony rushed up her leg, through her hip and up her spine, joining with the pain in her side and rolling up to the top of her head. She tried to form words, tried to say something, to beg T.C. to just put her down and leave her alone, but no words came. She could feel liquid rolling down her cheeks and knew it was more than just rain, but she couldn't do anything to stop the tears.

Darkness began to claw at her as T.C. continued to tow her along. She could feel his staggering pace, and she felt when he suddenly stumbled and went down behind her. But the rain was still coming, and, even past the sound of the downpour and past the pounding in her ears, she could hear the telltale sound of flash flooding coming toward them. She hoped he would finally listen, just leave her where she'd fallen and somehow drag himself to safety.

But then his grasp was back at her hands, and she wanted to beg him to just leave her alone instead of putting her through torture again, but her throat betrayed her. It clenched up, fighting against the words she was trying to force out, and all she could manage was a whimper as the fire began rolling again.

In the next moment, she felt herself bounce over a particularly rough patch of ground and go airborne for just a fraction of a second. As her body came back down, the pain rushed through her once again, and she finally reached the tipping point of what her overloaded brain could process.

The darkness that had been haunting the far reaches of her vision grew as the world continued to spin wildly. Higgins' eyes slipped closed, and her head drooped to her chest as she faded from consciousness.

They were almost there, T.C. told himself, trying to coax his mind past the agony of his current predicament. He was breathing so heavily he felt he might hyperventilate, not to mention the pain in his side that seemed to grow with every step and the guilt that was eating at him.

Dragging deadweight across uneven ground is difficult on a good day. Memories of training exercises, bear-crawling across fields with a teammate hanging onto him, flashed into his mind, and he gritted his teeth. This was nothing like that at all, and that had been painful. Higgins weighed significantly less than his buddies he'd trained with, but, adding all the extra factors—the rain, both of their injuries, the muddy ground and countless rocks and roots scattered about—made this ten times worse than any exercise.

When Higgy's cries of pain had abruptly trailed off, he'd looked back at her in a panic and risked stopping to check her pulse. It was there—weak and shaky, but there—and he forced himself back to his feet to continue racing for the hunter's cabin. He didn't have time to stop, not now, not until they'd reached safety. Then he could worry about checking her over more, treating her injuries, trying to revive her.

He gritted his teeth as the motion of towing her tore at his side further. Stuffing the pain into a back corner of his mind, he forged on, checking behind him every few steps to make sure his path was still clear. Thankfully, the next time he looked, he saw the cabin looming up behind him. It was nothing fancy, just a small shack on the side of the mountain, but it was still standing. It seemed like it had been standing for some time, and that gave him hope that the rocky ridge behind it was enough to guard it against any floodwaters that might come through.
They were at the cabin now, and he winced as he realized what it would take to get Higgins up the two wooden steps and over the threshold. He dug down, gathering whatever strength he had left, and then stepped up onto the first stair.

He nearly dropped her as his knee buckled, but he somehow managed to keep himself upright. Sucking in as deep of a breath as he could manage, he growled and threw himself up the rest of the steps. He fell backward through the doorway, letting his weight pull Higgins the rest of the way inside behind him. Glancing down and satisfied that she was safely out of the elements, he allowed himself to slump the rest of the way to the floor.

All he wanted to do was just to lie there and never get up. Every inch of his body hurt. He hadn't told Higgins everything when she'd asked; she'd had enough to worry about, and he had needed to focus on her.

In fact, he still needed to focus on her. The thought pulled him to his feet, wincing as the movement jostled the wound in his side. She was still lying where he'd managed to pull her inside, her arms over her head.

He got to his knees and moved closer, moving her to a more comfortable position and trying to examine her in the dim light coming through the cabin's single window. The scarf he'd tied around her head wound had been lost somewhere outside, and he could see a dark color that had spread through her blonde hair. He shook his head as his stomach clenched. If only he could have summoned just a little more strength, just enough to have been able to carry her in his arms instead of dragging her across the jungle floor… He couldn't imagine what that movement had done to her injured ribs, and he found himself breathing a prayer that his actions hadn't caused a punctured lung.

And she'd been able to move her feet—for the most part—before, but how did he know what kind of injury that metal had really done to her back? He could have made it worse by towing her across the terrain… If he'd pushed it past the tipping point, he'd never forgive himself.

Getting heavily to his feet, he staggered over to a row of rough-hewn cabinets mounted onto the wall near a small table. Perhaps the owners of this cabin kept supplies somewhere. He'd give anything for a flashlight and a first aid kit right then.

There was nothing in the first cabinet, two cans in the second, and also nothing in the third. He grunted in frustration as he slammed the door shut, then turned to the last one.

A breath of relief left him as he reached inside and found a small metal box. Even in the low lighting, he could see the red cross on the lid. The box felt like it had supplies still inside, and he only hoped it was something he could use. Higgy needed help—fast—and he didn't know how much longer they'd have to wait for rescue.

He flipped the lid open and surveyed the contents with a small measure of satisfaction. There was a roll of gauze inside, a few small tools, some disinfectant wipes. Not much, but it would have to do. He'd hoped for some painkillers, for himself even if he couldn't get Higgy to take any, but the paltry kit was completely empty of any medicines.

T.C. clenched his teeth against the sudden wave of pain that rolled through him. He had to focus on Higgy, had to make sure she was okay. The rain would eventually stop, someone would come find them, but he had to make sure she made it through to then.

Slowly turning toward the door, he crossed back to Higgins, noticing with displeasure and trying to ignore the way he was limping. He sank to his knees and reached for the disinfectant and gauze.
It was slow going, and he winced in sympathy as he did his best to clean the gash on the side of her head before wrapping it up, but, finally, he was done. He sat back, panting at the exertion the effort had caused, knowing he'd done all he could for the time being. His phone had been lost somewhere in the plane crash, and he hadn't found Higgins' either, which meant no calls for help and no way for their friends to track them.

He could only hope his mayday call had made it through to someone and that Magnum and Rick would know where to look. There was nothing else he could do now, other than wait.

Outside, he could hear the roaring of rain pounding on the roof, and there was a louder, distant sound of floodwaters rushing past. He bit his lip and hoped they would be safe where they were. He knew he had done literally everything he could, but there was a part of him that wondered if he could have tried a little harder, worked a little more, and maybe saved Higgy from what he'd had to put her through.

The way she'd whimpered and tried to stifle her cries as he'd pulled her along to safety had torn at his heart. He hadn't wanted to—oh, how he hadn't wanted to. He wished he'd been able to just pick her up in his arms and carefully get her to the shed, but there had literally been no choice. It was either put her through what he'd had to or leave both of them vulnerable to the flood, and that ultimatum had only had one real choice.

He wondered how long they'd be forced to wait in the cabin before Rick and Magnum reached them, but he had no idea. Depending on the severity of the storm, rescuers might not even be able to reach the small shack on the side of the mountain until the weather cleared—and possibly until any floodwaters receded. And if there had been any sort of mudslides accompanying the flooding?

Honestly, T.C. wasn't sure if Higgy could hold out much longer. She'd seemed pretty bad off when he'd taken inventory of her injuries near the crash site... What if she was even worse off now after their flight through the jungle? Images of her bruised and bloodied form played through his head, but he shook his head to banish them. He couldn't play that game with himself right now. Maybe not ever, but especially not now. He needed to stay at the top of his game, needed to be there for Higgy until they were rescued and finally, truly safe.

A soft moan from beside him drew his attention back to the present.

"Higgins?" he called quietly, shifting over so he was closer to her. "Hey," he said gently, rubbing her shoulder. "It's okay. I'm here."

She was moving around a little, restless about something, and he wondered if she was just dreaming or if she was regaining consciousness. Her eyes were still closed, but her breathing increased in intensity. Her lips moved, muttering something silently.

Licking his lips, he tried again. "Higgy? Hey, girl, you're okay," he encouraged, reaching for her hand. "You're safe. Come on; open your eyes."

Again, she shifted and groaned. She was trying to say something, but he still couldn't quite understand her.

"Higgy? Come on." The words were starting to sound like a broken record, but he wanted nothing more than to pull her back to the present, back to him. He had to know she was all right. It felt like, if he could coax her eyes back open, then everything would be all right again.

As she mumbled again, this time more clearly, T.C. leaned forward. He kept his hand on hers, trying to make out her words. When he did realize what she was saying, it felt like his heart had
just been broken.

"Please," Higgins mumbled. "Please, no... Make it stop." She shook her head and her hand twitched as if trying to move. "Please stop..."

It was like she was begging someone who was hurting her, and the guilt came rushing over him again as intensely as the pain of his injury had. He didn't know if she was actually dreaming or just stuck in that no man's land between awake and asleep, but it didn't matter. He knew he had hurt her, and he couldn't do a thing about it.

"Please... no." Her voice broke. "No..."

"Higgy," he said softly, reaching for her. He couldn't give her anything to ease her pain, but he couldn't just let her lie there all alone like she was. Ignoring how it wrenched at his side, he shifted to pull her gently toward him and rested her head in his lap. It wasn't much, he knew, but it was all he could do. "I'm so sorry, Higgy-baby," he whispered to her as he stroked her cheek. "I'm so, so sorry."

"...please," she said again, and every word tugged at his aching chest. "Please make it stop."

He couldn't do anything but sit there and hold her and keep checking her pulse—because how much strain could a body take before it gave out anyhow? He could only continue to try to get her to hear him over her own tortured pleas, continue to say how sorry he was, could only hold her and pray their friends pulled off a miracle.

In the end, it was two hours and forty-five minutes before anyone spotted the shack sitting just under the ridge.

The mayday call T.C. had put out had been received, but heavy winds had prevented even Search and Rescue from taking off until the storm died out. Then, once they were in the air, there had been a lot of ground to cover. Spotting the wide swath of damage from the crash had been easy, but it had also been noticeably overrun with mud and debris, and everyone on the search team had known what that meant.

Half an hour later, once the rescue party finally arrived, Magnum and Rick were the first through the door. Both would later recount their relief tinged with fear when they'd found the two limp forms huddled just inside the shack.

Medical teams were called, and those on the ground did what they could until the additional helicopter arrived.

Magnum and Rick helped gently load each of their friends into the stretchers that first one bird then the other lowered down, then could only watch as the brightly painted choppers turned and headed back toward civilization.

It was an hour before T.C. was out of surgery, and an additional thirty minutes before Higgins was. Both had accumulated a long list of injuries, but their friends were just grateful to hear the words "stable" and "recovering well." However, they were also warned of the dangers of exciting either patient.

In the end, Magnum spent the night in the chair by Higgins' bed and Rick in an identical seat by T.C.'s, and Kumu showed up as soon as visiting hours started the next morning to send both men home for showers and fresh clothes.
It was another full day before Higgins heard a soft knock on her door. Magnum and Rick had finally been convinced to go get something to eat but had parted with promises to return before dinner. She glanced at the clock and wondered if they'd made record time and were back already. It couldn't be Kumu, as the older woman had also stayed most of the day before having to head off for a previous engagement that Higgins had insisted she keep.

When the door swung open at her invitation, the last person she expected to see was T.C. He rolled his wheelchair inside and smiled in greeting. "Hey, Higgy."

"Hey," she responded softly, her own smile wide. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, you know, it's gonna take some time," he said with a shrug. He glanced down at his chair. "They want me off my feet for a few weeks while everything heals."

A memory flashed in her mind then, and she tilted her head. "You never told me how bad it was for you out there," she reminded him. "I'm so sorry if you—"

"It's fine," he interrupted. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"But…" She trailed off as she studied his face, then sighed. "I… Thank you. For what you did." When he shook his head as if to argue, she raised an eyebrow. "I may not remember everything, but I know I wouldn't be here if you hadn't gotten us into that cabin."

T.C.'s face crumpled at that. "But Higgy, what I did to you—" He sighed heavily and looked back up at her. "If I could've carried you—"

"But you couldn't—that's just it!" She coughed and shot a guilty look at the monitor by her bed as it beeped at her. "T.C.," she continued gently, "you had absolutely no choice besides leaving me, and I'm only upset you injured yourself more by helping me." The look she gave him said she wouldn't accept any further arguments.

He shrugged a shoulder self-consciously. "The guys don't know," he said after a moment's pause. "You didn't tell them?"

"Well, it didn't really come up in conversation—plus, I got stuck with Rick, and you know how he likes to talk," T.C. added with a smirk.

The attempt to cheer her up worked, and she laughed—wincing as she immediately regretted the action's consequences on her bruised side. The doctors had said she was lucky none of her broken ribs had punctured her lung, but she still had a nicely wrapped, aching injury that would take some time to repair itself.

"Hey now, is somebody in here telling stories about me?" Rick's voice at the door broke into their conversation. "Don't believe this guy; he talks more than I do."

Magnum laughed and rolled his eyes at Higgins from where he'd entered the room behind Rick. "That might be, but T.C. wasn't the one talking my ear off in the car the whole way over here."

As the banter continued, Higgins shot T.C. a meaningful look, one that he caught and returned with a knowing nod. Then she smiled and nestled back against her pillows, content to listen to her boys playfully arguing. She and T.C. might have been through hell the day before, but being reunited with her family who would do anything for each other?
Well, that was pretty close to paradise.

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