Summary

When a group of make belief ecologists go scavenging in a prohibited military zone and get in trouble, International rescue is called on to help. But tides turn while they end up uncovering much more than trapped divers... (title updated from Deep Search)

Notes

Please, bear in mind that I am not thoroughly fluent in english (in the litterary matter). I'm trying my best to write a good story while using a lot of extended vocabulary and words, although I know that it may sound weird sometimes.

I do accept constructive criticism and help grammar or rephrasing.

Thank you very much and good reading!
Venturing in the depths

Logging in ..

...... ... ....

Logged in

Decryption....

Maximum characters set to 150.

Journal entry number 4, June 14th 2061.

It has been quite a few weeks of scanning and pinpointing the seafloor.

After a little while, we uncovered some debris that resembled our destination.

Unfortunately, these waters are under strict surveillance.

To access the target zone, we had no choice but to agree on being inspected by the GDF.

They came on board, recorded our activities, verified our legitimacy then we were cleared.

Only 24 hours to do what we have to do.

Next communication will follow after the first dive.

End of transmission.

The team was set and ready. The fake papers depicting them as marine biologists and photographers had been enough to fool the Global Defense Force. They were given twenty-four hours to investigate the area before being escorted out. After all, accessing a restricted military zone was never easy. They were paid a very important amount of money to get things done, and they would do it. A reputation is built on efficiency and good results.

The crew consisted of only three people. That was more than enough, sharing was not their leader's strong point. Mr J. or James Sheinor, black haired, black eyes and a mean grin. Just looking at him led to a feeling of uneasiness, as you never know what that unpredictable man has in mind. Self taught archeologist, was the best at finding things well hidden. He made a name for himself in selling artefacts on the black market. What was more impressive was his ability to easily get away from problems an disappearing right after a transaction. One could call him a thief, but that was an ugly word. He preferred the term "treasure hunter". His trusty sidekick, Joseph Herring, was never far behind. A stout, strong man, bald with a Viking styled red beard. Fearsome one he was, almost two meters high. He did not talk much and his loyalty was measured by the size of his paycheck. James liked having him around, his imposing size was reason enough to bring him along.

The third expedition member, Maria Suza, did not share her colleagues' shady background. Her reasons to accept this task was to get money fast. She owed a good amount to banks and other loaners. Her sad life story begins as she became actively implied with activists of the various kind when attending college. Her parents shunned her, refused to pay her scholarship. She was left with living in a shitty dorm, with too much people, and in less than acceptable conditions. Never able to keep a job, whether from bad luck or because it did not fit her beliefs, her money income depended
solely on this job. With it, she could pay back what she owed and find a better place to live. Until she ran out.. then, that would be an whole other story. She was the one posing as the marine biologist : she had not yet made it to third year of University, which made her an intern in the matter. That was more than enough. The "boss" gave them forged legal papers to pass GDF controls, than her job was to fool the eye. She did not know much about the details of the mission, just what she had to do. This was more than enough for her, then being paid and getting the hell away from these people.

Setting up the material, the divers were making the last preparations. Cameras and lights were to be wired down, nothing else. The GDF would patrol regularly overhead to make sure nothing looked suspicious. Fortunately, they were well organized : the ship's cargo bay had a hatch underneath, which led to a hidden compartment. The ship was engineered that way so that opening that hatch would not let the water in. Floating devices would ensure the ship's buoyancy, keeping it above the water line. Since it could only be opened underneath, the GDF did not notice anything when searching the ship from above.

James and Joseph prepared to dive. They did not give much attention to Maria up till now as they required her aid. She did not mind them either. They plunged in the depths and started gathering the material from the cargo bay. The suits for their expedition were top of the line. Their employer did not hold back on material. There was all necessary equipment for regular diving in deep sea, plus a few other added materials: laser cutters, crowbars and jacks, scanners, dart guns and some explosives. Stocking up, James initiated a conversation:

- Maria? Toots, you there?

Maria hesitated for a moment. They were using short waves communications. Roughly a few meters away could be tapped in. Since it did not reach broadband, this was perfect to not be spied on. The only problem would be the depths. She did not know exactly now far down they had to go. James was not the type for petty conversation, but was polite enough when addressing her. She picked up the call from her earpiece.

- Affirmative, James. Do you require anything?

- Just keep a sharp eye out. We don't want to get bothered until we got what we came for. Remember, stay calm and do your thing. These idiots bought it all, but we can't let our guard down.

- Yes, of course. Let me know if you need anyth...

James cut the comm before she ended her sentence. She sighed. Taking a notebook, she started making a few random sketches, and watching the sonars intermittently. Once in a while, a GDF flyer flew past them. She bowed her head down and sighed.

Deep below, the divers were nearing their goal. A platform sat on the ocean floor about a hundred meters. The place was in a bad shape. Bringing up a map on his wrist computer, he studied the layout at first, then projected a scanner on the wreck. Using an algorithm, the map took shape and indicated where the spotted location was now. He signaled Joseph with his hand and dove further in the wreckage. There were debris and sediments everywhere. A few metal beams barred the way, but Joseph managed to cut his way easily using the laser. They hurried inside: a large room which was initially a control center. Wires hung from the devastated consoles and panels were waving with the water patterns being eaten by rust and eroding to nothingness. They managed to remove more to gain access to the floors, heavy galvanized steel grills that laid the entire area. With the shifting, the floor was now tilted upwards and twisted, gathering algae. Joseph had a hard time removing one of them, even with the help of the crowbar and jack, the plates were lodged quite tightly. They managed to remove one and gain access to a small compartment. Inside, three metal
boxes lied, undisturbed, resembling black boxes in airplanes. James went in and with all the care in the world, removed each of them. They went back up to the boat in no time, securing the three cases.

By the time they made it back up, the moon rose high in the sky. The waters were darkening and Maria was looking at it, trying to shake off the feeling that something awful might happen. Or worse, they might get caught. If it was the case, there would be no money. And she would probably go to jail for lying, and accessing weird sunken military protected stuff. She began having second thoughts, sitting down, resting her chin on her fist. She called one more time


- No kidding, toots. Now, shut up and wait. We're almost done.

He closed his comm again. There was something else they needed that was still inside. Getting back down, there was still something they had to do. Unfortunately, the tides were rising and the waters became more and more agitated. They needed to tie a line to the ship in order to keep track in the darkness and to make it back with less efforts. Exhausted from their descent, they went on to the next target. The facility was moving, some of the metal structure weakened by the cuts. Once inside, they squeezed through a small corridor. There was a dead end. Jamming the crowbar in a joint, Joseph pried with a lot of effort the large metal plate that concealed a hidden door. The writing was still perceptible “Danger! Keep Out!”. The door was sealed shut, even pressurized. They realized they might have a lot of trouble getting this one opened. They tried, and tried. The facility moved, the tides got stronger. Joseph went all out, using the explosives on the door when, at last, a few bubbles escaped a dent in the metal. But at that very moment, there was a horrifying metal grinding noise. Joseph and James were shoved on the ceiling, as the control room seemed to twist and fall deeper. The remaining structure was shaken by the blow. James tried to make it to the exit, but was stopped by Joseph just in time, as a massive hunk of metal dropped in a clanking and grinding noise, blocking their only exit. The divers went on looking desperately for an exit, trying to cut more of the metal structure, but without success. It was clearly upside down now, and the integrity of the thing was so fragile that one simple cut could bury them forever. James went on his comm

- Toots? Toots? You there?

Having no response, he went on and on, until Maria responded faintly.

- Yes... got..... at's ..ong?

- Maria! Get us some help down there! We're stuck! Please, get us out!

Maria did not seem to respond at first. She only got a few words of each comm. But she heard one single word that made her blood freeze in her veins : "help". She could not do anything. Diving down would be crazy, as she was not as strong and fit as the men, and might result only in being pushed aside by the current. Waiting again, she managed to get a few more words

- "Stuck..... Can't ......out..... Help..... Two ..... Air

She panicked. He had two hours of air left. Going to the broadband radio, she called out for help, without a second thought.

- Calling International Rescue. Do you hear me? We need you!
The dive

Chapter Summary

International rescue responded to the call from the distressed divers. But beyond the rescue, Gordon found something interesting, but not everyone shares his excitement...

It was early morning in Tracy Island. The rising sun slowly filled the living room. Scott was sitting at his father’s desk, reviewing some papers before his afternoon meeting with Colonel Casey. Working aside the GDF as a civilian float was hard work and involved a lot of legalities and such. Damage reports done after rescue missions, weird insurance claims handled poorly by companies who had no idea who to blame for the disasters and even some claims for damage of property. The infernal load of paperwork was giving him a headache. Grandma brought him a hot coffee, still in her dressing gown and her fluffy slippers. She tilted her head as she watched him

- Still in your paperwork I see.

Scott sighed. He was secretly wishing he would not have to put up with the administrative duties. His father seemed to be handling the whole thing so easily, it seemed like he would only have the fun part of the job. Yet, he found out soon enough he did not have the same resources and neither the same experience his dad had gained over time. He slammed a document on the table

- How am I supposed to get all that done by myself? I’m gonna need a secretary to write detailed mission reports and file them in. This is ridiculous.

Grandma nodded and said, with a smile

- You could ask John? Or Kayo? Yes, I think she’d be great for the job.

Scott smiled

- She surely would shove it up their...

Grandma smacked him lightly behind the head

- You’re rude, kid! This house may be full of boys, but its not a mancave. Start by your language. You’ve been slacking on the matter lately. Every time you I hear you swear, the others do the same. Be an example.

The elder tried not to be irritated. After all, she was right. Once he got tired, he started being mean and rude. He was not as calm and paused as John might be… this is the main reason he was not the first to answer emergency calls and handling monitoring. His temper got in the way and he lost his cool too often. He picked up the papers again and went on reading more when John’s communication came online. More than happy about his savior, he answered.

- What is it John?

John was moving some screens around him while talking

- We have a distress call. You’re the only one up?
Scott got up and went down to the middle of the room

- Broadcast to everyone.

Regardless where the other boys were, whether still asleep or in the shower, John’s communication was available everywhere. The siren was loud and none could really ignore it for long. He went on

- Six hundred kilometers off the western Australian coast, there are two divers trapped in an underwater structure. There are no further details. I could not speak directly to the divers, it seems they are not equipped with broadband communications. The call came from the surveyor in their boat. With two hours of oxygen left, we need to move fast.

- Alright John. I’ll get Virgil and Gordon on site right away.

By the time he finished his sentence, the two boys came in the room. Gordon was still in his pjs and Virgil was wearing his gym clothes. Scott motioned to them

- Head out! No need for an additional ship. John will fill you in with all the other details.

Virgil caught a glimpse of the paperwork and smiled. He knew how much Scott hated this whole thing. While resting upon his loading platform, he waved

- Too bad you have to stay home for your paperwork! I’d hate it!

Scott sneered. He would have loved to head out. But two people trapped underwater was not enough to have him going also. International Rescue had been given new strict rules since the Colonel Janus incident. Some of the higher ups realized they had too much freedom and the rules regarding their operations were seldom applied. Scott had to agree to a new set of rules, including reporting all rescue operations in detail, with the material used and the damage done if there was any. They had to operate while taking as little airspace as possible while also explaining their choice of ships. It was insane. Eventually, all this would go away when the paperwork would be judged too heavy for the GDF to handle, or if they shuffled the administration again.

- Keep me informed if anything goes wrong John. This seems fairly simple, I’m giving you authority.

John nodded and disconnected.

Virgil and Gordon set out for the location. John got in touch while on flight

- Thunderbird two. The area you are entering is a military protected zone.

Virgil frowned

- Meaning?

- We have to gain permission from the GDF to access the zone. I’m in touch with them now and they will be sending a flyer to your location. Apparently, these people were supposed to be marine biologists filming wildlife in this area.

- I doubt it. What’s that structure they are stuck in anyway?

John sent a projection of the destroyed facility to Thunderbird two’s holo-projector
- It was an old military facility. Apparently, it was abandoned some years after the war and sunk six months ago by the GDF.

Gordon did not seem to like the idea

- I don’t understand why they keep filling the ocean floor with all their garbage

The hologram updated, looking like a clear map of the broken down facility. John continued

- The place had gotten dangerous apparently, scavengers kept going in to steal stuff. I don’t have more details, but there was a reported death. This is why they decided it was time to make it disappear.

Gordon sighed

- There is something not right about this…

- Whatever, Gordon. We need to get them out now. They don’t have much oxygen supply. I’ve sent you all the information I could. The GDF should meet you in about twenty minutes.

John cut communications. Virgil looked at Gordon one instant.

- We can’t do anything about it. Let’s just stick to the mission.

Gordon seems thoughtful

- I dunno. Its really strange that this particular zone would be under surveillance even when the facility has been sunk. You’d think they’d let go after having sent it in the bottom of the ocean. This place has value, and the GDF knows it. Something reeks.

- Don’t get funny ideas, Gordon. We don’t want trouble. Just concentrate on our mission. That’s all.

Virgil was quite straightforward on his last comment. He did seem very uneasy to work alongside the GDF in that fashion. Having them around usually meant trouble, or delays, which they could not cope with.

Upon reaching their destination, Gordon took place in Thunderbird four. His mind was set, there had to be more about this whole thing. Trusting his fabled “squid sense”, he took it upon himself to release the divers and then try to find some clues to why this place was so important to the GDF. A rapid scan of the area showed not radioactive particles, or any kind of hoarded rare metals that would need to be protected. Military secrets maybe? What else would be so important?

It was almost midnight. The sea was agitated. Maria grabbed hold of a side of the boat, struggling to put on her life jacket. The cruiser seemed to have taken water on a side, as one of the shifts that brought the facility down pulled the attached cable down below with some of the ship’s boards with it. The radio took on water too, so Maria could only rely on using her short wave communication system. Material flew right and left as the waves crashed on the hull when, at last, the massive Thunderbird craft was upon her, an enormously bright spotlight lit the area over the ship. She sighed with relief before addressing them.

- International rescue! Please, do something! The ship is going to sink!

Virgil caught the communication and responded
- Hold on, I’m coming down to get you out. Stay away from the rear end.

He launched the pod a few meters away before coming closer in to secure the boat. While Gordon proceeded to launch, dropped a line down on the stern end of the ship. Helmet on, he zipped down towards Maria, grabbing her firmly. She hung herself on the pilot, determined not to let go. He went on

- Now hang on tight.

Attaching himself and Maria to the grapple line, he reversed the pulleys and went back up Thunderbird two. Right at the moment they set foot on the ship’s interior, the young woman dropped on the floor, exhausted. Virgil kneeled down and inspected her with his helmet’s medical scanners. She stood there, watching the cruiser being swallowed by the waters. She mumbled in a low voice

- There goes my scholarship..

Virgil looked at her

- Did you say something?

She denied, looking down at the inky black sea.

Gordon was making progress underwater. He was in constant communication with Thunderbird five. Checking his maps, he pinpointed his destination. Unfortunately, the place had been badly damaged and there was little indication to where the divers might be. The facility shifted ninety degrees to its right and a lot of debris and the main structure gave in. It was almost buried under scrap metal.

- Thunderbird five, please run a full health signals scan of the place. I want to pinpoint where I need to cut. This place is a mess.

- Agreed Gordon.

John was sending inputs when EOS responded

- John, this is a peculiar situation.

He turned to look at EOS’ scan searched which showed three life signs: two obvious ones and one fainter. The AI beeped and its LEDs went flashing

- John, your brother might be right. There is another life sign in the wreckage, and its positively neither amphibian or fish.

Gordon overheard the whole thing

- See? Told ya! There is more to it!

John frowned. They were straying from the initial mission

- Gordon, get the divers out. We can’t assume this is our business and we can’t go against the GDF’s jurisdiction. I’m sending you the exact location of those two men. Get them out fast. They only have thirty minutes of air left.
Thunderbird four struggled to get passed the heap of debris but finally got to what seemed to be a relatively damaged wall. Using the laser cutter, a hole was cut, big enough to fit at least two people through. Going EVA, Gordon managed to get in and reach the divers. Both of them were already feeling the lack of oxygen and exertion from trying to get free. Their reserves would deplete a lot faster if they did some massive efforts, which was the case. Taking them one after the other, Gordon brought them back to his submarine, sending them up in dry tubes to be picked up.

- Virgil, I've sent both divers up to be picked up.

- FAB, Gordon.

Knowing both divers were going to be secured by Thunderbird two up above, Gordon went inside. John got through to him on his comm immediately.

- Gordon, mission is over. Go back up.

- But John, the life signal is coming from… over there!

He turned towards an unevenly twisted door on which he could make out the “Keep Out” words still. A lot of bubbles escaped from the interstice, hinting that there might be some part of the place that was still holding air somewhere. Gordon managed to squeeze inside. Water was coming in and the place was almost flooded. Pointing his flashlight around, wading in chest high waters, he got closer to where the life signal seemed to come from.

- John, are you getting this? What is that?

He flashed his light straight in front of him and projecting his display onto John’s. There were numerous controls, half destroyed from a blow that might have came from the top. Other than that, the place was mostly untouched. In the middle laid a weird glass and metal tube. It seemed to had fallen from the wall and laid horizontally on the floor. The tube was big enough to house a human being. The inside was swirling with green and white fumes. He touched it, amazed by his discovery

- What is that?

John recorded the entire visual. By then, a communication came through from the GDF. They had arrived. International rescue had to leave the site.

- I don’t know, but the GDF is here. You need to get out now.

- Not before I got a look at what’s inside first!

- Stop, Gordon! We don’t know if its dangerous! And I don’t have time to get you through to Brains. Go back to you ship and fast.

Gordon cursed in his breath. Ignoring John’s warning, he tried to dislodge the appartus from the floor. Curiously, it was not stuck to anything and came quite easily. Although it was kind of heavy, he was determined in bringing it back to his ship. From the inside, the door was clearly an airlock. Turning the handle, it gave in quite easily and with a few strong knocks, the door opened. Dragging the tube along with him, he loaded it in Thunderbird four and pressed on to go back to the surface. John was not pleased

- Now how are you going to explain this one to the GDF?
Gordon smiled his usual casual smile

- Relax! If they don’t know, that won’t hurt them! Besides, if we can uncover some secrets they have, we might be on to something. What if its an alien?

John facepalmed

- This is ridiculous. Plus, its dangerous. Do you know what it is?

- I don’t. But we have medical scanners on board Thunderbird two! Come on, this will be an adventure!

- An adventure we might all regret. I really don’t want Scott to hear about this one so soon…

- He’ll hate it. But not if we get it to Brains first. I’m sure he’ll persuade him to take the matter into hand.

- Come back to Thunderbird two, you lingered down there long enough. They might start to become suspicious.

Meanwhile, the GDF flyer neared the site, accompanied by a surveillance patrol cruiser. Colonel Casey was on board the flyer. She introduced herself as politely and firmly as usual.

- International Rescue! This is Colonel Casey. We have come to pick up the shipwrecked crew. Please hand them over to us right now.

John picked up right after closing his link with Gordon. He opened a link with Thunderbird two. Virgil had gotten his ship up right above the pod and was “fishing” the dry tubes towards it. Both divers were still in shock and dizzy after their adventure. That did not prevent them from trying to get away. James looked at Virgil right in the eye

- Say, what about I give you twenty thousand dollars to get me out of here? With that ship of yours, you can really drive them off. Make that forty if that’s not enough.

Virgil chuckled.

- It’s a little late for that. Your lift has arrived.

James was furious. He tried a right punch on his savior. He was no match for the pilot. Virgil was at least one head above him, he stopped his hand right out of the air.

- I wouldn’t try that if I were you. Its only gonna add up your sentence.

Joseph did not seem to want to go anywhere. Even though he would be the one to put up a fight, he did nothing that would put him in trouble, unlike his colleague. James grinded his teeth and spat at Virgil’s feet

- I have good lawyer, amazing ones at that. You wanna put it up with me? BOY?

The provocation was burning him inside. Virgil knew he could not do anything but take all the abuse from the shallow man. He watched him, angry, but in full control of himself.

Three uniformed men jumped on the pod’s platform to take James and Joseph in. Maria was brought from Thunderbird two and put in custody. Upon seeing her, James started screaming
- BITCH! You got us caught! You numbskull!Couldn’t you have done anything else? Huh?
What? You gonna cry now?

She bowed her head, ignoring him. She had given the call that saved his life. Maybe she ought to leave the area ASAP when they said they were stuck. Maybe she should have. Considering the abuse he was putting her through, she wondered why she had not done it. She cursed herself for a moment. This was human nature, after all. You don’t let another one die when you know you can do something. Virgil felt sorry for her and watched as the ship carried them away.

By then, Thunderbird four resurfaced and was being winched back in the pod. Colonel Casey emitted a last transmission

- We thank you for your usual collaboration and much appreciated help on the matter. I would request you to quickly leave the area once you are done.

The flyer remained in the sky to observe the loading of the pod. John responded as soon as Virgil announced he was ready for departure

- Thank you Colonel. We will be leaving now.

- Please, John. Tell Scott not to forget the report this time. It is very important in order for your organization to be in legal order.

- Don’t worry. He is working on the matter now. The report shall soon follow

- Over and out.

John turned his attention back to Thunderbird two. Gordon remained in the pod bay, examining the cylinder with the medical scanners. He did not manage to get it out of Thunderbird four since its weight out of the water exceeded what he could carry without damaging anything. From further inspection, he started a file, measuring the cylinder to 1,9 meters in length, about 0.9 meters across. He was dedicated to his task, until Virgil got curious about him

- So, Gordon, you planning in staying down there for.. whoa, WHAT IS THAT?

Gordon looked at him, John entered the conversation

- I tried to stop him. I really did…

- Gordon, what is that? Where did you get that? And why does it have.. life signs?

- Woah, hang on, bro. I wanna find out what it is. Besides, if it needs help, we can’t just ignore it?

John sighed

- Ok, that’s it. I’m getting you through to Scott. And there I thought you would not need a chaperon for this mission.

The comms rang. Scott picked up, happy to be disturbed from his paperwork again.

- Hey boys! So how did the mission go?

John went to speak, but was cut by Gordon.

- Scott! Get us Brains, fast! I need to show him something!
Scott looked at his other brothers, who did not seem to agree on to Gordon’s excitement. Virgil took over.

- Gordon picked up something from the derelict facility. We have no idea what it is, and we are bringing it to the island. Yes, I don’t agree with this either.

The elder’s excitement about the mission soon faded in dismay.

- Okay, I want to have full details of what that thing is. Does it look foreign? Is it man made?

Gordon answered

- There is some stuff written on it. It says H.M.R. It looks like a company sign. The base seems to contain some electronics, but some water went in and flooded the entire thing. Its useless now. I can’t clearly see inside, but I think there is a figure in there.

Brains arrived in the living room at this moment and started watching the feed.

- Gordon, I overheard. Give me a visual.

A thorough scan was sent to the central holo projector. Details about the size, material, even life signs were shown. Brains pushed his glasses back on his nose.

- This is definitely an am..m..azing find! This looks like a c..cryogenic tube. Try scanning the interior. I need to see what it is.

Gordon went on gathering more data on the cylinder. All of his brother’s apprehension became curiosity as Brains seemed more and more interested in it. Taking all the data, the engineer started making a few calculations, correspondances, matching some information.

- F.f..from what I see it, the interior gas m.. might be Chlorine dioxide, mixed with carbon dioxide and oxygen. T.. that would explain the yellow color. It’s a compound used for d..disinfection. Not a bad thing really. It might be keeping what is inside aseptic. Gordon, as s.. soon as you land, I want that in my lab.

Scott watched Brains in awe. He did not know what to make of this situation. But going along with it might also be dangerous. The opinion on the matter differed. Gordon was all excited about his find, along with Brains, but all the others just seemed to find the situation a little awkward. He issued one last command before closing communications

- Gordon, we will go along and do some research on this. But you are entirely responsible if anything happens. Make sure you stay with Brains at all times. And I’ll ask Kayo to keep an eye on the situation. This concerns her if we jeopardize the island’s safety with a foreigner. Let me be clear with you : this is not a game. We have in our hands something that might cost us International Rescue if it were to emerged publicly. All of you are required to keep silent about this.

They all agreed.
Mysterious intruder

Chapter Summary

Gordon brings home his find to Brains who is more than excited to study it. But as it unexpectedly escapes, John and EOS chase it through the underground base. What they find is rather unexpected.

Gordon carried the cylinder with Virgil’s help down to Brain's lab. He managed to get it safely into his ship underwater, but on land, it was a lot heavier. They installed it safely on the ground and secured it. Kayo watched them as they slowly lowered the metal container on the floor. She brushed the glass interstice with her hand before asking

- So what kind of surprise is this? Aliens?

She looked at Gordon, amused. He shrugged

- Hey, I don’t know. Maybe the GDF is trying to hide something. I wanna know more about that. What do you want us to work on, Brains?

Virgil waved as he exited the room

- I'll leave you guys at your stuff. I need to catch up on some maintenance on Thunderbird two.

Brains directed Max to remove the bottom cover, carefully revealing the damaged electronics. He then proceeded to thoroughly inspect the boards and chips.

- If we can s..salvage some information from this, a drive or anything containing data, t.. this would help us get a good idea. I also need to rig the capsule to a computer and see if there is some way of opening it. The controls seem completely dead.

Gordon kneeled down and assisted Brains in carefully removing the electronic boards while Max held the heavy parts. Kayo could not help but stare through the glass. The gases seemed to become thinner and thinner, as she could recall a face inside. Getting closer to it, she pointed it out.

- There really is somebody inside this thing. This is unsettling.

A loud metallic noise was heard. Like hinges breaking. Suddenly, the cylinder burst open, sending Max flying as everyone else drew back in reaction. Whatever was inside seemed to move. Kayo tried to take a look, but was blinded by the expanding fumes. Sluggishly, “it” came out. A white and black figure, wearing an helmet with a dark visor. At first, its movements were slow an sloppy, but it seemed to gain a bolt of vigor after a few seconds and headed straight for the exit. Kayo ran after it, trying to follow as fast as she could. She got in touch with John.

- John, emergency! Security breach. We have an intruder. It seems to be heading for the hangar. Try to follow it. 1… I…. *cough*

- Kayo! Are you okay?
- Bare.. ly. *cough* Follow it! Now!

She stopped suddenly, unable to catch her breath fully. Her lungs were irritated by the chlorine gas. She could not recover fast enough. She bent over, and raised her head, catching a glimpse of the fugitive disappearing around a corner.

John started monitoring and sent a general alert.

- This is Thunderbird five, we have an intruder on the island. I’ll seal all exits leading above ground. It is still inside the underground tunnels.

EOS popped various maps as John chased the intruder through the service corridors. Eventually, it stopped and looked around. EOS responded rapidly

- John..

The intruder rose its head, staring directly in the camera node. EOS seemed to react to its stare. John accessed the island’s security as it reared into darkness. The heat signature filter was still able to watch its every move until eventually, it totally disappeared. John was surprised by this sudden move.

- What? It .. changed its heat signature?? How?

EOS moved right in front of John

- John, listen. For some reason, I’m able to.. Well, “it” tried to gain some access onto the island’s system node when I caught it. And I felt .. something. It is afraid.

John looked at EOS, concerned

- Afraid? But how can you know this… why? How can you feel?

- I think its human. You have to speak to it

- How? I don’t have a visual. And even so, will it understand? Okay, I’ll try.

John opened an area wide comm in the corridors where the intruder vanished. He kept it plain an simple.

- Please, we mean no harm. Get in the light so we can see you. We are here to help.

Nothing was moving. Looking through all the cameras, he did not see anything. He went on frenetically, searching with EOS’s help.

- Where is it? Can we locate it another way?

- There might be a way, John. I’ll have to try to open a link directly to it.

- Is it dangerous? Can it access our systems from there?

- It does not seem to be as much as a threat as the Mechanic. I would not worry about it.

EOS’s LEDs started flashing. She opened an active comm channel on Thunderbird five’s panel
- Please, we wish to help you. Why are you running?

The was about a minute of silence. Then it responded with a rasping voice

- Who.. what.. are you?

EOS went on

- I am a friend. I will help you. But you will need to tell me, what is your purpose?

There was another response. This time, the voice seemed to improve. It came closer to a female voice

- Why? How.. can you help me? How can I trust you?

There were some movement on the cameras. John got a glimpse of it just in time to see exactly where the shadowed figure was going: Thunderbird Two’s hangar. It had already gone beyond the point where he could stop the intruder by barring the way. Knowing his brother might still be working on his ship, he quickly opened a communication link to him

- Virgil, you there?

Virgil raised his head from his work. He had set up a sound system with an old phone and was streaming music aloud. He went to turn it down as John called.

- Kinda busy? So, you caught your alien yet?

- Be on your guard. I think its headed your way. And drop the alien thing, its clearly human.

- So what should I look out for?

- White and black clothes, a uniform of some sort. It looks hostile. Better to be careful.

- Sure thing.

As soon as Virgil cut the comm, there was a deaf noise coming from some crates closer to him. Grabbing hold of a wrench, he approached carefully, trying to get a closer look at where the it could be coming from. Stretching beyond his cover, he caught a glimpse of white, then another noise, polymer on the solid concrete ground. He tried to come a little closer. What he saw caught him completely off guard as he was expecting a fight. Instead, he saw the intruder had collapsed, its back to one of the crates, clutching on a helmet on its left hand. She was a woman. A young woman, about mid twenties at first glance, wearing a complex white suit, black boots and gauntlets. Her messy dark blonde hair stuck to her face and neck, she must have been wearing that helmet for quite a bit of time. She looked completely exhausted. As he approached, he dropped his guard. She looked at him, defiantly. He remained several feet away. When he tried to come closer, she issued a warning

- Don’t!

She was trying to move, but her body seemed stiff. She stared at him with her hazel eyes, waiting to see what his next move would be. He put down his tool and raised both his hands to dispel any signs of threat

- I don’t want to hurt you. Let me help you get to a place where you can rest.
Her eyes kept moving around, studying her surroundings but always returning to Virgil. Once she caught Thunderbird two towering above, she asked

- You really are.. International Rescue?

Virgil smiled

- The one and only.

She relaxed her shoulders. Trying to get up, she stumbled. He caught her just in time and insisted:

- You need rest. Are you wounded?

She remained silent. Even if his eyes were soft and reassuring, he did not succeed in having a response on the matter. He went with a different strategy

- What is your name? I’m Virgil.

Her stern face melted. She looked back at him and answered.

- My name is Abigail.

He helped her out of the hangar as she clutched on him, fighting to keep conscious and using all little energy she had left to try to walk. Even as he tried to talk to her, she did not answer.

John got in touch with Scott after the events. He brought up a visual of his brother helping the intruder out. They got a clear view of her. Scott studied her in detail. John began

- Virgil found her. He is bringing her in a room as we speak.

- Her? So she is a woman?

- I don’t know why, by I can’t seem to be able to scan her. Something protects her. Even her face without the helmet.

- She might have some blocking device on her. Or do you think its her suit?

- Might be. She changed her heat signature when running away. That is something out of the ordinary. Other than that, EOS seemed to be able to "feel" something from her. The technology involved is very advanced. I don't know what else out there would match up to that level.

- I’ll keep that in mind. Right now, we need to do some research on the matter. I’ll follow up with Brains. Keep and eye on her at all time. I want to have all details.

- Sure thing.

Scott was thinking: could they have found something that might pose a threat to International Rescue? He could only see the downside of it. Pushing aside his paperwork, he got up for a walk, trying to clear his mind until more answers were available.
Searching for answers

Chapter Summary

After discovering who this mysterious intruder was, a lot more questions are plaguing the Tracys and their entourage. Scott is determined to find out more.

The intruder’s presence made everyone nervous. Scott mostly. Trying to figure out why she was there in the first place, he could not come up with a logical answer. He was angry at the fact that didn’t get to speak to her first. Ever since Virgil brought her back from the hangar, half conscious, they had made sure she would rest in a locked room under constant surveillance. Brains was still working on the data recovery and John kept an eye on the room. Scott had insisted the surveillance be constant. And by constant, he meant watching each and every move. Although that did not please John to intrude in Abigail’s privacy, he did was he was asked to do.

She slept for two entire days before finally waking up and fully realizing her whereabouts. Kayo went to meet her inside. They had not succeeded in removing her suit while she was unconscious. Brains even took a look and could not figure out exactly what this “second skin” was. He was certain the answers would come on their own once he collected the data from the capsule.

Abigail was looking outside. She had managed to comb her hair as much as she could with her fingers, yet it still looked soiled. She turned to face her captor, not a single word spoken. Kayo began with introductions.

- My name is Kayo. I am in charge of the security here. Your presence has created a lot of commotion and your escape got everyone on edge. Now that you settled down, I think its time for you to give back what you owe us.

Abigail was a bit taller than Kayo but a lot more massive. He broad shoulders, her arms and legs muscular yet her figure was very feminine. Her suit helped a lot in defining her silhouette: she could not hide much in it. She remained straight and listened. Her posture was perfect, as a military stance should be. Kayo went on.

- We have a lot of questions and will require your complete attention. But first, we want you to get out of that suit and dress casually. We will bring you something appropriate to wear.

Abigail nodded.

- I would be more than happy to get out of this suit. But first, I’d like a shower. Its been.. hum... what day are we? And what year?

- June 17th We fished you out of the sea about three days ago.

- Its been five months and about twenty days since…

Kayo grimaced. She took a step back.

- Well.. I’ll go get you some clothes. Then you’ll have to come with me.

Without further notice, Abigail disappeared in the bathroom to take a well-deserved shower. As
John watched her undress, he realized she was actually “shedding” her suit. It seemed like it was responding to her in some way. He quickly reported it to Brains who was more than excited about the matter. Judging he had done enough peeking, he turned his attention back to Kayo.

- Kayo, do you want me to summon everyone in?

- Not yet John, give her an hour. She needs a good scrubbing.

Kayo was going through her drawers, trying to find some clothes that would fit Abigail. She was not exactly her size so she sought after Grandma Tracy. They succeeded in putting an outfit together, using Grandma’s old yoga pants, a large t-shirt Kayo had would never wear and some ballerina slippers. Abigail already had some undergarment underneath her suit, which she kept to avoid unwanted looks from the boys. She would look a little rag-tagged, but more appropriate for a meeting.

As Kayo entered, Abigail came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. She stopped and stared: Abigail’s left arm, and both legs were not organic. Finely crafted and detailed prosthetics, moving exactly as normal limbs would. Abigail grabbed the clothes from the startled girl. Kayo did not know what to say. Abigail realized her host was not very comfortable with what she was seeing.

- I really hope none of you judge me at first looks. Do you want to wait outside?

She gestured at Kayo and went back in the bathroom. A little ticking sound came as he feet were tapping on the ceramic floor. It was an unsettling noise. Kayo refrained from showing further emotions and waited. Eventually, Abigail emerged, ready to go. Kayo called John.

- We are ready. Summon everyone.

Abigail sat at one end of the living room, everyone in front of her. Even Lady Penelope joined the fray, anxious to see what she had to say. Scott watched her with a stern look, while Gordon and Alan were going on with their fantasies about cyborgs and aliens. Virgil was curious: he knew she was not a bad person, he had felt it when he met her. Brains could not take his eyes off Abigail’s left arm, which made her quite uncomfortable. John was there as listening from one hear and the other on his systems. Scott went on to speak.

- Good, now that everyone is here. I know its not exactly a friendly gathering and we are all anxious to know how you came to. More importantly, who are you exactly?

Abigail looked him straight in the eyes. She always did stare her speaker the eyes when she spoke and never let go. She began

- My name is Abigail Shaw. My current status is.. unknow I think.

John started a research at the same time. A result came up faster than expected

- It says here that you are MIA. Your social credits add up. Hair, eyes, height and all.

She cleared her throat. She was beginning to feel thirsty.

- I’ll skip on personal details. About five years ago, I signed up to join a private military force. They were looking for specific individual profiles : qualified people to work on “special” projects aside the regular grunt work. Holling Military Research was the name. Since I pursued studies in mechanical, electrical and bio-engineering, I was more than qualified to be part of their research
team.

That name seemed to ring a bell in Brains’ mind.

- Magnus C. Holling? the same Holling who manufactured the learning chip?

- Exactly.

Alan seemed puzzled.

- What’s a learning chip?

- It’s a sp.. special kind of way to learn new skills. But a dangerous one. It consisted in inserting a m..microchip in an area of the brain in order to rewrite neuron patterns to gain specific skills. Like piloting. With that chip, your neurons would rearrange so you would inherently know how to pilot a ship regardless of the experience you have. Not only is it an unethical way to gain a set of skills, but it had terrible side effects. It was removed from the market after it had driven a few people insane.

Abigail nodded.

- Yet, Holling continued to distribute his products. Not only that, he perfected it. But that was not his only project. He wanted to outfit disabled war veteran with extremely advanced prosthetics in order to give them a better quality of life. I designed these prosthetics…

She squeezed her left fist and looked at it, mumbling ".. and ironically ended up wearing some". Nobody seemed to notice.

Lady Penelope related to that

- Yes, I do remember my father speaking of funding a war veteran project. But the funding was suddenly withdrawn. I never knew the reason behind this.

Abigail nodded.

- There was an enormous amount of money that came from different donators. But after the first trials, nothing was working correctly. The tissues around the prosthetics showed signs of necrosis. Since it is not made of the usual metals or polyesters but in a special kind of erosion resistant carbon, we knew the material was causing this. The few who volunteered for the tryouts died of sepsis. We tried to hide it not to lose the funding so we came up with a solution, but it was too late. Holling had to let us all go.. So, unless he got some money from somewhere else, we had no more jobs.

Scott frowned.

- The Hood? Did he take part in this?

Abigail stared at him again.

- I do not know about this person. But there was funding from undisclosed sources. We had our jobs back, so nobody went around asking where it was coming from. A few months afterwards, there was an explosion in the lab that killed three technicians and wounded four engineers. I was one of them. They saved me by fitting me with these.

Gordon watched with disgust. He could not believe such things as human modifications existed.
- Why on earth would you agree to this?

- They did it to save me. It was also part of the job contract. If it came to it, my body would become research material. Holling research required you to donate your remains to science, since many of the samples used in the labs for research came from our own bodies. Tissue, blood, bone marrow, everything that was necessary. We are the sources of our own samples.

Brain intervened.

- Gordon, many of the advances made in medicine today come from experimentation from human samples. We are alive today thanks to them.

Gordon crossed his arms and reared back in the seat, clearly not agreeing with the current state of things.

Grandma Tracy came in with refreshments and her fabled pan “seared” cookies. Lady Penelope was listening with attention and sipping on a cup of tea. Scott asked.

- So, the company had a strong interest in keeping you alive since you were part of the solution for their success, right? But what else? You don’t seem to be a simple civilian. And you mentioned having signed up for a private military, you must have had battle training.

Abigail clasped her hands together.

- Yes, I did. About six months of training. Not much more. I spent more time in the lab than on the field. After all, they could not take the chance of losing us.

- But what about his real motives? Surely that was not all? You were not given million dollars worth of material simply to go on with your life.

- He had another goal in mind. The veteran project was only the beginning. When it failed, we had to switch to plan B fast. They called it “Project Olympus”.

John was recording all that Abigail had been saying up until now. He was doing some background searches with some of the information provided by Abigail: Magnus C. Holling, the funding, the scandal... All came up as news of global interest, but nothing new. He eventually came up with a publicity video on a long-abandoned web page. He broadcasted the video to the others.

- Let’s see what this is about.

The video looked like a cheap publicity for some kind of HR service. The host was dressed in a checkered suit jacket and had his hair licked backwards.

“How would you feel if all your employees were always agreeing, and never complaining. Always productive, never slacking? Completely devoted to your business and success? We, at Holling Industries, have at heart the success of entrepreneurs and companies and wish to help them maximize their profit without the need to make jobs cuts. We even help perfect skills in order to fill more specific positions.”.

Up until now, it sounded a little cheesy. But looking onto it, there were images of people working in a chain and repeating the same movements over and over. This was very unsettling, as they resembled robots. They were putting together weapon cartridges. The video stopped, the link was suddenly broken. John turned back to the others

- So, what was that about?
Abigail had watched but eventually turned away. She looked back, disappointed.

- That was one of his weapons facilities. I visited it. That’s what I was talking about, the perfected learning chip. Not only was it giving access to a set of skills, but it increased some of the body functions: dexterity, reflexes, concentration.

Scott waved a hand, halting the current conversation.

- You were not done about that Olympus project. I want to know more.

- Olympus was going to be a safe heaven. If there ever were another worldwide conflict, all the World Council dignitaries would take refuge there. Nothing would be able to get through. The security will be very high and there was a plan for some “special” keepers.

She stopped and looked at Scott. He had a bitter face, clearly showing his disdain. She turned to the others. Brains, Penelope, John and Virgil seemed concerned.

- If you feel overwhelmed by this, we can go through it some other time

Kayo took a glass of water from the table and responded.

- No, go on. This is rather interesting. So what about these keepers?

- I told you earlier that four engineers were wounded. We were the four people working on the latest tech. My job was the prosthetics, the nano technology, and the cerebrum computers. My other colleagues worked on different projects: one was a flight system capable to attaining 500 mph and fitting on a human being. He also perfected the tech behind our suits made from titanium weave, a smart fabric. Another one worked on advanced communications, frequency modulation and the ability to use our cerebrum computers in order to access wireless nodes anywhere, and beyond that, hacking programs to break into them. The fourth guy had made a micro missile launcher. Missiles so powerful it could break a fighter jet in two in one blow. They were the size of a finger. This could be worn on our backs, it was as little as a hiking backpack, and also very light.

- All this seems so familiar to you. Do you know if these were ever really used?

- Used, no. Tested, yes. This research was top secret. I don’t know what became of the blueprints once the facilities were evacuated. They must have kept them well hidden. Or simply destroyed them.

As the interview going on, Abigail seemed to tire. She took a deep breath.

- Olympus was to be protected by four guardians: us. Our codenames were Athena, Chronos, Artemis and Hermes. The four gods of Olympus. During training, we took down remote controlled fighter jets, killed countless foot soldiers, destroyed systems, tapped communication networks. We could do anything. The facility where you found me was one of many used for training.

Kayo was waiting the right moment to ask her question.

- What happened to the other engineers?

- Chronos was Dennis Edwards. He died of complications related to the nano technology. Hermes was Charles Ericsson. He crashed while testing one of the flight modules. Artemis was Siegmund Blundberg. I don’t know what happened to him.
Abigail looked at everyone. She crossed her arms and took a deep breath. She seemed exhausted.

- I think I told you quite a lot for the moment. If its okay, I’d like to retire and get some rest.

Scott nodded. Kayo escorted her back to her room.

Abigail did not say a thing before getting to her room.

- Kayo? What will you do with me now? I’ll have to stay locked up?

She was visibly upset.

- Beats me. Depends on what Scott might want to do. Turning you over to the GDF might put us in a worst situation than keeping you here. Until he has made up his mind, you will have to remain under our custody. Do you want anything to eat?

- A simple broth. I’ll need to go slowly on eating. And some rest.

- I’ll have some delivered to you. Oh and, don’t take this too personal : we are only keeping you here preventively. Don’t make any attempts to leave. That would not play in your favor.

- Even if I tried, where would I go? I know who you guys are. I’m not even going to try my luck.

- Good then. I’ll let you rest.

Kayo exited the room and made sure the door was properly locked before leaving.

Back in the living room, Scott was still trying to process all the information he had gathered. He found himself scribbling a few notes during the interrogation that John had already looked up in background. Penelope put down her cup of tea and began.

- Magnus C. Holling’s industries went through a lot in the past few years. He was accused of doing illegal research and experiments. Unfortunately, due to a lack of proof the charges against him were dropped. He now seats on the world council as a weapons advisor. I do not know much about his activities, but knowing we may have some real evidence on him, we could expose him. I do not plan to go head to head with that man, but if we can right what is wrong, I believe we might be doing the World Council a favor.

Scott rested his head on his fist, thinking. He wrote a thing or two and dropped his pen.

- I don’t want to get involved in this. We already went through enough with criminals. A legal battle is something I don’t want and don’t need.

Virgil looked at his brother.

- But what are we going to do about Abigail? We can’t just send her to the GDF. What do you think they’ll do to her when they learn about what she is? Cybernetics and artificial implants experimentation on humans is illegal.

- I don’t know. Hell, I don’t even know what to make of all this.

Brains decided it was his turn.
- I have an idea. I really want to study her modifications. I know it is completely unethical, but at least I have to find out the basics. Please, allow her to stay. As long as we keep her on Tracy Island, I doubt it will be a problem. Under surveillance, of course.

Scott seemed to like Brains’ proposition.

- Why not. That is not such a bad idea, provide she does not create problems. This will be your responsibility, Brains. Do what you can, and give me a full report. Now I need some air.

He got up and left.
Midnight stroll

Chapter Summary

John soon finds out more about Abigail as she is determined not to remain locked up.

Abigail woke up. It was the middle of the night, and she was hungry. She tried going back to sleep but could not even manage to stay in bed. The door would be locked and nobody was around to walk her to the kitchen, provided she remembered where it was. On the room wall was small LCD monitor used to control various parameters: lighting, temperature, dampness and a few security features. She tapped on it but was denied access, as the input seemed biometric. She sighed. She will have to use one of her hidden functions to get out. This would not be appropriate, but in the current state of things, it was necessary. She touched the computer’s interface on specific locations: the screen reacted to her hand, as if it was an electrical signal. She concentrated on the screen. There were some things she could see, as if her eyes were the back of a mirror projecting an image. Her implanted neural computer generated some code, she began working it subconsciously. After a while, the door opened. She had hacked the door’s locking system.

Going down the hallway slowly, she looked around. Everyone was sleeping. But she knew it would not be long until she was discovered. Without her suit, there was a lot she could not do. After about five minutes, John appeared through her bracelet.

- I thought we told you not to get out. You agreed to these terms, didn’t you?

She turned towards him.

- Well, they told me I could not go alone. Now that you’re here, I’m not alone, am I?

He was surprised. She was quick witted.

- Ah.. yeah. Good point. So, where are you going?
- I’m hungry. Where’s the kitchen?
- I’m going to upload some directions for that onto your bracelet. I’m not a tourist guide.
- Wait, I have a better idea.

She stopped and concentrated again. While doing so, she could see some projections of icons and codes that could not be seen by anyone else. She was gesturing in the real world, but accessing the virtual world. John received a notification via his systems. She opened a connection.

- I am giving you the chance to connect to me. That way, you will be able to track me better. Should you ever need to spy on me, you can. Other than with a direct visual that is.

By doing this, she would know what they were up to, what they wanted to know about her, when they would try to check on her. And it would dispel her thoughts about John being a peeping tom. Should he ever try something, she could sever the link and know the truth. He seemed reluctant.

- Why?
- It is a proof of good faith. I am entrusting you with a direct access. The other guy told me I had to demonstrate I was not here to be a nuisance. That’s my way of showing you I’m not.
- Well, thank you.
John opened a direct connection and started monitoring her. It was exactly as she said but her signal gave more information that just her whereabouts. Body temperature, heart rate and pulse oximetry. All she had given him was access to her vitals. He smiled.

- That’s .. one way to do it. Well, at least I’ll know when you go exercising.

She smiled and had a dirty thought but did not reply.

- The kitchen, now. I’m going to devour anything.
- Anything? Be careful what you ask for. Grandma’s cooking is something to be avoided.
- I’ll fix myself a quick snack, that’s all. I can make my own stuff.

He guided her to the kitchen. She went ravaging inside the fridge and found enough food to make a sandwich. She sat down at the table and started eating. John was still projecting himself through the bracelet. He asked.

- So.. How do you feel? I mean, how exactly can one feel with those limbs?

She took a bite and swallowed almost whole. She eventually answered.

- It’s weird. You know what they call phantom pain? I get this sometimes even if I have a full set of limbs. It’s like an extension of yourself but that’s not really your body. It’s there, but you can’t really feel like its real.
- Do you have feedback? When you squeeze something?
- I do have feedback, there are plenty of sensors. The pressure on the hand goes beyond 100 psi when its at full torque. I have to be careful when I tune it.

She continued to eat the sandwich. Once she finished, she washed the whole thing down with a full glass of water. John was waiting on her as she went back into the fridge.

- Are you done?
- Nope. I’d like some sweets.
- Are you serious?

She reared and looked at him, hanging on the fridge door.

- You are my chaperon. You agreed on this. So you have to wait.
- Or I could just hang up on you and leave you there.
- But you wouldn’t, would you?

John sighed.

- No, I won’t. Finish your business now. I really hope I don’t get caught by Scott. He’s really not going to like this.

She searched the fridge but ended up with nothing good. She pouted, taking simply some milk out. Looking around, she grabbed sugar and cocoa and mixed the whole lot in a pan. John smiled.

- Hot cocoa? Well, that’s one way to satisfy a sugar rush.
- And a good one at that. I usually did this to feel comfy before long nights of paperwork. It helps a lot.
- Do you have a family?

Abigail took a deep breath. Evading the question, she stirred the mixture. But John was still waiting on her to answer. She had to go through it eventually.
- My father died in the Global conflict. My mother raised me and my sister until she died of breast cancer twelve years ago. My sister took care of me, I was underage at that time. She died in the North American grid incident. My two-year-old niece died alongside her. I’ve been alone ever since.
- I remember this. The self driving vehicles were hacked and infected with a virus causing the software to act erratically. That was horrible.

She held back her tears, rubbing her eyes, then drastically changed the subject.

- So, do you ever come down here? Or you stay up there in space floating all day?

John laughed.

- I like it here. Plus, I have a job to do.
- Committed to your task. My, my… I understand how you feel. It is better to be alone sometimes.
- I’m never alone. I can talk to my brothers anytime. And the world never sleeps.

Her drink was ready. There was more than one serving, so she poured a second one and disposed of the pan in the dishwasher.
She went on the terrace, just far enough to look at the sky outside and sat down. The wind was cool and refreshing. She shuffled her hair and took a sip of her hot cocoa. John went back to his work while she was stargazing. He yawned.

- I really should go to sleep.
- Really? Well.. keep your comms up, please?

She smiled to him, a childish smile, begging him to keep her company so she could stay. At that moment, a noise came from the stairs. Virgil was coming down, stretching. He went rummaging through the fridge. He did not seem to pay any attention to Abigail or John, still sleepy. He grumbled and was clearly looking for something. Closing the fridge, he grabbed hold of the milk jug on the counter and paused for a moment. Something was not right. He looked around and saw the cup of cocoa. John did not say anything, he was looking at his brother and smiling, as if enlightened. Abigail gestured.

- You can take it. Be careful, its hot.

John yawned anew.

- Finally, someone to relay me from this task. Well, Virgil, your job now.

He cut the comms. Abigail bit her lip, cursing in her breath, not knowing how he would react to her. Rubbing his eyes, he stretched again: he was wearing a tight shirt clearly detailing his shoulders and abs. His relaxed striped pyjama pants were not quite fitting with his looks. The young women eyed him. He grabbed the cup and came closer.

- Thanks. By the way, are you feeling better?

She smiled.

- Thanks for caring. Yes, I had some sleep.

He tried not to stare at her arm but could not help himself. He switched to the sky.

- So…
- So what?
- Did John let you out of your room?
- I got out by myself. Nothing’s broken, just a little fiddling with the programming. He found out and was nice enough to stay with me for a while.

She held her cup with both hands, staring at the sky. After a while, she looked at Virgil who was sitting down, legs crossed, sipping the hot cocoa.

- You are lucky.
- Lucky?
- Yes. For all this, I understand now. You have everything you would ever need, and you want to help everyone.
- That’s kind of the point.
- I wanted to help people too. It ended up differently. Badly.

He looked at her.

- You have regrets?

She turned to him quickly, like if he had struck a sensitive chord

- No.. no. I don’t regret anything. But I’m.. ashamed.
- You don’t have to be. You had your reasons to sign up for the project
- Not the best reasons. I did it because I had nobody left. No family. Very few friends.

She sighed.

- I should put this all behind me now. This is a new beginning, I hope. This time, I promise I will not screw up.
- So have you decided what you want to do now?
- No. I don’t know what I could do anyway. Come out in the open somewhere in the world? I don’t think this is a good idea.
- Take your time. No one is urging you. Scott does not want you to leave right now, so it’s all in your favor.
- Scott…? That’s the angry guy, right?

Virgil laughed.

- Yeah. He’s been quite busy these past few days and needs a break. He’s a really nice guy once you know him better.
- I don’t think I want to.

They both looked at each other and laughed. He finished his cup.

- This is pretty good.
- Thanks. It’s my own recipe.

He gazed at the sky for a moment then directed his gaze on Abigail.

- Don’t overdo it. Thinking too much is never a good thing. You need to let go sometimes. You should not worry, we’re going to look after you now.

She seemed puzzled. Virgil’s calm attitude contrasted with Scott’s rigid, born leader one. At first, she believed they were going to hand her to the GDF or any other authority. But with what he was saying, she was going to stay for a while. She felt her stress dissipating. Virgil’s company was refreshing. She wrapped her arms around her knees.
- I’d really like to be helpful around here.
- For now, just concentrate on resting and getting your strength back. Then we’ll see.

He got up.

- It’s really late. I don’t usually get up that long in the middle of the night. You better get back to your room too.

She agreed. They brought theirs cups back on the kitchen counter and headed back to their rooms. Virgil made sure Abigail was back in hers. He opened the door for her.

- Sleep well. Brains has a lot in store for you tomorrow. You better be well rested.
- Thanks.

She smiled as the door closed. Getting back to her bed, she felt like this discussion eased her worries a lot. She would need to speak to him again.
Penelope travels to GDF command to talk to the Colonel about the recent events.

After the reunion took place, Lady Penelope started doing some research of her own. Having access to the World Council's databases proved useful to some extend. Unfortunately, on this occasion, it was less than helpful. Most of the direct references to Marcus C. Holling had been removed. It was no surprise, considering he was the Council's and the GDF's weapons advisor and distributor. His seat had granted him some level of immunity. It was thus impossible to find anything about project Olympus and all of the registered lawsuits mentioned on regular news websites had vanished.

Sipping a cup of tea, she was thinking: if she could get a confession out of the two imprisoned men as to whom they were working for, she would have a head start in her investigation. Parker entered the room, bringing some cucumber sandwiches. He noticed Penelope's fixated eyes on a wall portrait clearly indicating she was in thoughts. He asked.

- Is everything all right m'lady?

She shifted her eyes on him.

- Quite right, Parker. You see, our friend Mister Holling might not be the righteous man we all thought he was. We will need to get to the bottom of this

- How do you suggest we do this, m'lady?

- I've a few questions to ask those divers. Bring the car around. We are heading to the GDF headquarters.

- Right away, m'lady.

Parker laid the sandwich tray on the table and quickly headed for the door. By the time Lady P had gathered her things, he was waiting in front of the porch.

On their way, Penelope asked.

- Parker, you have done some soldier work so I need to ask you a question: Holling has been around for quite some time, if we relate to his extensive background in military supplier, do you know anything about him from the time of the Global Conflict?

- I think I do. Some ammunition cases did have that branding. I remember some rifles also did. That is all I know.

Penelope pondered, looking through the window.

- So, he was only providing ammunitions and weapons at the time?

- Yes m'lady. But there was also some very peculiar thing. Soldiers did mention having been
offered some money to take part in testing of some sort. We all believed it was pharmaceutical research at that time. It was good money, or so I heard. Never been in one of those. They hand picked the candidates.

- Now this is interesting. Do you know any surviving veteran soldiers who could speak about it?

- I did not know all the names, m'lad. And the few I did must either be long gone or retired by now. We could trace them, if they are still alive.

- Good idea, Parker. I will keep that in mind. Right now, I am curious about the implication of Holling in this particular incident. The divers were well aware of the danger and went on regardless. Most of all, if this facility did belong to Holling at that time, it must have been known to him that Abigail was in there. This was not a lucky random dive.

The GDF facility was an eerie and cold place. England's rainy weather did not help. The surrounding area was protected by a barbed wire fence and surveillance lights. As FAB1 neared the gate, they were admitted inside and brought to Lieutenant Colonel Baker's office, Colonel Casey's right hand. Laura Baker was a stout woman, reddish blonde haired with light freckles and deep blue eyes. She was always the one to laugh and a good person although her uniform made her look serious. She welcomed Penelope warmly in her office along with Parker who stood by the door.

- Salutations, Lady Penelope. It is a pleasure to receive you in my office today. To what do I owe this visit?

Penelope smiled. She met Baker at a social event when her father was still around. Both of them talked for a while and became acquainted. They seldom used to see each other outside formal meetings, but always promised to share some tea eventually.

- I am happy to see you again, Lieutenant Colonel. It has been a while.

- Oh, please. Do not be so formal behind closed doors.

- Well, dear Laura. I am happy to be here today with you. There is a delicate matter which I mean to discuss with you.

- By all means, I am listening.

- There has been an incident involving two men, divers, in a restricted military zone. I thought you might know where they were detained. There are some questions I need to ask them.

Laura laid her hands on her desk, getting closer.

- What kind of questions?

- Why they were there, what they were after and who sent them. Quite simple don't you think?

The lieutenant Colonel looked at Penelope for a moment. She seemed to be looking for a proper answer.

- Penelope, I don't think you have the jurisdiction to interrogate them. You see, they are still under Casey's authority. She has been very strict about who gets to see the prisoners.

- Do you think there might be more to it?
- I do not know really. The Colonel refuses to delegate her cases. She gets overwhelmed sometimes, but she pretends she's fine. Still, there is some basic information I can give you about our two reckless explorers.

Laura brought up a screen and started inputting some credentials. Both files of James Sheinor and Joseph Herring popped up. The two ladies read them. Laura laughed.

- Interesting characters. Now I understand what you might be after. And... what is it exactly you want to know?

Penelope smiled. Laura was not the one to be conned that easily.

- I cannot say yet. There is something at stake and I want to get to the bottom of it. They might be related to a high official of the World Council and I want to know how.

The lieutenant listened attentively. Yet, she had a few inquiries.

- That is juicy information. How much of it is reliable? Will your meeting with these men not be dangerous for your position?

Penelope considered.

- Maybe. Yet the Council summons me to do this kind of work. I believe they have faith in my charisma and would not be spending precious time sending me otherwise.

- You are right. Let me see if we can meet with them.

Laura made some arrangements. The two men were to be interrogated later in the day by Colonel Casey.

- That is strange.

Laura kept on reading the file.

- It says there is to be an envoy to meet with the two men. It does not specify who…

- Well now, this is rather peculiar, don't you think?

- Yes, quite. We could go to the Colonel to see who this envoy is. I doubt they would be referring to you without a name.

Penelope had a sudden flash.

- The records for the two men are in here. Were there not a third person on that boat? Where has this one gone?

Laura started looking in the case.

- Nothing is mentioned about a third person. Are you sure there was?

- More than sure. My source indicated there was a young woman on board. About twenty years old.

Laura acquiesced. She understood who Lady Penelope's sources were without doubt.

- Nothing is mentioned in the file. She was released, maybe? She'd be as guilty as the two men.
There might be a way to obtain the information from the arrest but it is not available for viewing. Might be in the Colonel's personal files. I don't even know if she is detained here.

- How about we go and pay a visit to the Colonel?

- Sounds about right.

The lieutenant rose and straightened her uniform. Her skirt was amazingly wrinkle free, not what to expect from a military bureaucrat. She led the way in the corridor to the Colonel's office.

As they made it to the parlor, a deep manly voice was heard from the inside of the office. Penelope stood straight, faintly recalling the voice. Once the door opened, a tall and handsome man came out. His hair was black as onyx but for his greyish temples, his eyes as dark as night and his square jaw inspired respect. His cologne was enticing yet even more than his looks and his proud posture. He was followed by Colonel Casey. As they came to Penelope and Baker, the man approached the lady, grabbed her hand and kissed it as a gentleman would do.

- Dearest Lady Creighton Ward, how lovely to see your beautiful face in this grim place.

Penelope stood straight, trying to keep her cool. The man was Marcus C. Holling. She responded with a smile, feigning being happy to see him.

- Sir, fancy meeting you here. I trust you have very important matters to attend to?

- Certainly. And what about yours? I trust you were here for a casual visit no doubt?

He was clearly here to interrogate the two captives. Penelope could not refrain from speaking as she would be questioned by the Council, and her presence would be even more suspicious.

- Yes, a few routine formalities. We will see the Colonel some other time as I am guessing she is quite busy.

- Quite, I'm afraid.

He smiled. She felt like he could almost sense her motives. That man was a strong judge of character and a fierce businessman. As he let go her hand, the Colonel saluted the group and went on, warning her visitors.

- Lady Penelope, we will meet some other time. Lieutenant Baker, I will require your presence.

Baker nodded and stood in salute as Penelope watched both Holling and Casey going down the hallway. When they were far enough, both women looked at each other. They went back to Baker's office. Penelope was rather tense.

- You have no idea how much I despise that man. He has always had this arrogance. I cannot believe he got away with everything

- He has friends and money. A LOT of money. His father before him had some strong financial expertise. No wonder he turned out to be this way.

Laura did know the man a bit. Holling's background was no secret to anyone. He took up the business after his father passed away some twenty-five years ago. In less than a few years, he doubled the financial assets and began to be active in the weapons industry. The global conflict then occurred, sending his profits skyrocketing. He was highly regarded in the financial and business communities. His transgressions would have passed unnoticed if the "Learning chip"
scandal had not taken place. Penelope sighed and made her way to the door.

- I will be going, Laura. The colonel stated she required your presence. You should head back before she suspects anything.

- Thank you, Penelope. I will research the whereabouts of the girl and send you as much information as I can.

Penelope was escorted back to the entrance. Parker had remained silent the whole while, studying the place. When Holling around, he made sure he remembered his face. Once in the car, he did not hold back

- This man is a very upsetting character, m'lady. I understand your disdain. I could have punched him, was it not for his position.

- Parker! Please! Let's not revert to playing his game, shall we? We have no choice but to lay low for a bit. Until then, I will try to get some information about the young girl and her whereabouts. If we cannot get to these men, and it might be better not to, we should question her.

- I'm sorry m'lady.

On the road, Penny called John and asked him to check the young woman's identity. She also gave him the names of the two individuals detained by the GDF. John sent all the information about the whereabouts of the young woman.

- She is detained in a facility in the United States. She is American after all, so they might have sent her back to her country.

- ...or simply kept the two men under hand to make sure they were closer to him. That devious individual.

- I don't know. Here are the infos about the place. Might want to check it out tomorrow once its daytime there. Speaking of which, I also matched the two mens' identity. Turns out they are notorious thieves, or treasure hunters of some sort. Their names were also mentioned in some murder investigations. Not pretty. Henchmen of some value no doubt. The weirdest thing is that they don't have criminal records.

- Holling might be behind this. Or they are under payroll for someone else.

- Whoever they are, they might be powerful and dangerous. Those guys don't look friendly either. Be careful on this one. That's a big fish you're trying to pull out of the sea.

- Will do, John. Thank you.

Lieutenant Colonel Baker met with Colonel Casey in the interrogation room. The two suspects were being brought in by a back door and sat in a small lighted room, in front of a tinted window. Marcus Holling watch the two men waiting, hands in his back. He then turned around to face the Colonel.

- As we discussed, Colonel, this matter strictly concerns the Council only. Please have your officers exit this room and keep only the necessary personnel. My safety is not at stake here.

The colonel responded in her usually serious official tone.

- As we discussed, Mister Holling, these men are still being held under the authority of the GDF.
Until you have any other orders straight from the High authority of the Council, they will remain here. This is where you'll be meeting them.

Holling took a deep breath, clearly not agreeing to the Colonel's words. He knew he could not force her hand, she was impassible. He took a few steps towards the door.

- Very well, then. No recordings, no cameras. If you wish to obtain your confessions, Colonel, you will have to step in yourself.

- Yes, as we agreed. Go ahead.

Laura did not understand as Casey dismissed all the guards inside the rooms. She then returned to face the window at Baker's side as Holling entered the secluded room. As soon as he was seated, Casey hinted at her.

- My hands are tied on this one. I am relying on you to take over, Lieutenant.

- Yes Colonel.

Baker nodded and faced the window, staring at the men. They could only hint at what they were saying as no sound came inside. The Colonel Lady Penelope were likeminded about Holling. The lieutenant was relieved at that.
A bit closer to the truth

Chapter Summary

Penelope sets out to the United States to meet with Maria. An unexpected turn of events then haunts her.

Penelope began planning for the day ahead. After learning of the whereabouts of the young woman, she would need to arrange a meeting with her. Travelling to America still took a few hours even with FAB1's advanced engines. She had to rest and Parker too, the journey would be demanding.

After a relieving shower, she went back to her boudoir. During an entire hour, she made plans, downloading maps of the area and revising the detainee's file John had obtained. The young woman's name was Maria Suza. She was studying at a Californian University, currently in her PhD, which was quite a feat to Lady P's eyes. It was hard to understand why someone of that level of education would choose to tag along with criminals. Either she had something to gain of it or she was set up. This was the aristocrat's guess, refusing to believe the young woman would deliberately turn rogue, even with activist background. Moreover, she would need to learn the nature of the charges pressed against her.

She contacted the facility to inquire about visiting hours. There were no particular restrictions, but the regular American regulations for meeting: behind a glass pane, handcuffed hands and feet if the prisoner was known to be aggressive. The United States prison conditions did not improve over the century. Everyone was treated like a high-end criminal unless proven otherwise, no matter the offense.

Penelope took a break, exhausted from her planning. She was thinking about Gordon. It had been a long time ever since they chatted. She was dying to speak with him.

Both Penelope and Gordon flirted for a long time but were kept apart by their duties. Every time they crossed path, they could only but catch a glimpse of each other. In the beginning, Gordon tried to get away from the island a few days to meet with the Lady but ended up being called back by his father. After a while, he gave up, facing the fact that if he wanted to be part of International Rescue, he had to stay with his brothers. Penelope also had a job to do, she could not remain at the island. They carried on their long distance relationship knowing that, one day, they might have a chance to be together. She missed him so much.

The lady got up and went through her wardrobe to put on something more fitting for a call but not too chic. It was passed 10 pm in London after all. She opted for a casual form fitting shirt, a pair of loose couturier pants and a short denim jacket. After a light touch of makeup, she was ready and called Tracy Island. Gordon was enjoying some time in a chair by the pool when the call rang. He immediately answered, seeing who it was.

- Lady Penelope! This is a nice surprise! So, what hails you this late?

- Hi Gordon! I was thinking we were overdue for our usual chat.

- Yeah, I thought so too. Let me go to a place where I can get some privacy.
He got up and went for his room. On his way, Alan gave him a look, lifting his eyebrows repeatedly up and down a few times with a large smile. Gordon winked at him, pointing him with his finger and grinning. He shut the door and locked it to make sure nobody would want to interrupt. He jumped on his bed and resumed the call.

Penelope was waiting with a smile.

- So, how have things been, Gordon?

- Pretty much the same, I'd say but for all this excitement on the last mission. Scott is as pissed off as ever at everything and Kayo has been trying to calm him down a bit.

- Now that is an unusual turn of events. One would think Kayo would need someone to keep her calm. Those two never cease to amaze me.

Gordon laughed.

- Yeah, they have been flirting around for a while. We're still waiting on them to go public, you know.

- Those things take time, dear. Scott might still think he is betraying his father's trust if he admits his feelings for her. Everything will be sorted out in due time.

- That's going to be a show. I can't wait.

Penelope smiled. She loved Gordon's free spirit. She had always envied him. Her father was a rigid man who expected no less than perfection from her. Now that he was away, she could drop the act a bit, yet she had become a celebrity and could not take it easy in public.

- And how fares your guest? Did she tell you anything else?

- I dunno. That's Brains' thing. He's not sleeping at night, he's so excited at everything. It's worse than a kid at Christmas Eve. Never seen him like this since the last time he installed a new engine in Thunderbird One. He's shaking with excitement.

- That's good. It keeps him busy

- Nah, that's not good. He keeps going on about how dangerous and unethical all her augmentations or modifications or whatever they're called, are. He insists she's human. I don't think you can say someone is human after having even an ounce of modification on you. Deforming your body for the sake of what?

Penelope felt bad suddenly. She spent her life doing charity work to help disabled people. Gordon had always been very fond of himself, his physical appearance was important to him and he was dedicated to it. He was not as open minded as the Lady on the matter. His prejudices were one of the things she hated from him. He was not that mean, just that he resented some people, like the handicapped or mentally ill. Even if he tried to do some charity work with her, he could not bear to lay eyes on them. He was also gullible some times. He really did fall into conspiracy theories and read a little too much about them. Scott had tried to keep him away and explained the danger behind this misinformation, asking him to refrain from reading anything of the sort. Unfortunately, Gordon did take a shot at them again from time to time.

- But Gordon, you know this is something that is up to her. It was her choice. Truly, you cannot hate her for that?
- I don't hate her as a person. Well I don't know her anyway, I can't tell. But that's just not right.

- She needs these prosthetic arm and legs to be able to go around, isn't that the most basic thing?

- That's not at all what I'm talking about. A cerebrum computer? Nano technology in her blood cells? Those things. Plus, this was all done by the military. What I hate about all this is not the fact that she can go on with her life, but that the people who are meant to protect us are doing this research. Why? To protect us? Or to control us?

Penelope was going to talk about her recent visit to the GDF headquarters but decided it was best not to mention anything to him.

- Dearie, I did not mean to rile you up with all this. Please, take some time to consider. While she's at Tracy island, she will be under surveillance. Do not worry, things will turn out fine.

- Yeah. I hope so. Or we'll all be dead in our sleep. What if she can get out of her locked room? What if she is some remote-controlled cyborg used by the Mechanic? Or even the Hood? Or their flunkies?

- Calm down and try not to jump to hasty conclusions, will you? The Mechanic and the Hood have been dealt with. You need to move on now.

Gordon took a deep breath. He saw that Penelope was beginning to be annoyed by his attitude. He sighed.

- I'm sorry, sweetheart. I get carried away sometimes.

- Don't be sorry. Just work on yourself. This will be sorted out very soon.

- Do you have a lead?

- More or less. I will give a full report once I'm done. In the meantime, do not do anything harsh. Please, sugar?

He liked it when she said that word. With her accent, he found it kinky. He replied to her with a big smile as she blew a kiss to him through the comms. They parted. Gordon remained on his bed for a while, holding his hand to his heart. Seeing the love of his life always cheered him up.

Parker got up early to prepare FAB1 for a long flight. He polished it, checked on the mechanics, tire pressure, flight motors. Everything was ready. The vehicle was his baby, he made sure all was in perfect order in all times. The Lady had to go around a lot, he could not ignore even the slightest problem. He was ready by ten, luggage was loaded and the Lady was seated, ready for a long flight.

Penelope gazed through the window as they were taking off. She kept wondering why the young lady would not be held in the GDF headquarters. A hundred different scenarios popped in her head simultaneously. She dismissed her thoughts. Only the truth mattered and that was exactly what she was off to find.

- They landed about fifteen minute off the detention facility. Making their way in was quite easy: it was not a high security edifice. Many other visitors were present at the time to meet with their loved ones. Penelope sat down at the front desk and asked to meet with Maria Suza. She was directed in a booth where the young lady was brought in. They were seated in front of each other, separated by a glass pane. Maria turned her head, escaping Penelope's gaze before the aristocrat began speaking.
Hello Maria. Don't be afraid. I am here to help you.

Maria turned back towards the lady. She was clearly not trusting her. Penelope went on.

I have a few questions about the incident which led to your incarceration.

Maria did not move. She sobbed. Penelope went on.

I can help you, if you want me to. This will be free of charge. What do you say?

The young woman looked everywhere, but never laid her eyes on Penelope. The aristocrat could see her tear drenched eyes. Then, at one moment, Maria spoke.

How do you plan on defending me? I don't know if I can ever get out of here. They said it's between 2 to 10 years. I don't want to be here this long.

Well then, let's get to work on your case, shall we?

Why would you do this for me?

This will be my way of thanking you. In return, I only need some information of your part.

Maria seemed to be more cooperative afterwards. She looked at Penelope.

What is your name, madam?

You can call me Lady Penelope. Now, do you have a lawyer?

I have no cash. The state funded lawyer comes in here once a week and meets with only a few of us. I dunno how long it will take before he comes to me.

Good then. Consider it already settled. I will take care of this. Now, I will need you to tell me about your expedition. From the beginning.

There was no guard behind Maria. She was alone on her side of the room. Penelope also was but for Parker hiding out of sight.

There was an add in the Campus newspaper. I was looking for a job, so I usually go through this column. It's hard to work when people know you have been file for civil disobedience. I've never done anything bad, just been at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Let's keep ourselves to this particular event, shall we?

Yes... sorry. I answered an add for a well-paying job. They asked me to meet in an apartment building, not so far from the campus. Inside, there was simply a chair and a desk on which laid a questionnaire. There was nobody else. I looked around. Once the questionnaire was done, it was written on the back to leave it there. That's what I did. At first, I thought it was some kind of scam, but the paper never asked me for any personal detail, just my phone number. I just filled it up and left. They called me back, asking me to meet a man called James Sheinor at a coffee shop in Los Angeles.

Can you describe to me this mister Sheinor?

He was kind of short, black hair, stubbly shin and a mean grin. At first, I thought he was some kind of women abuser. When I got to him, he asked me if I was the Marine biologist they were waiting on. He brought me in his car and we went to a small house on the outskirts of town to get
some other big guy. Then we were off for the shore. A boat was waiting for us there.

- Was it Sheinor who set up the meeting?

- No. He kept cursing at his "boss" of his. Never mentioned his name the entire time. I tried asking once, he told me to "shut the damn fuck up bitch". I could not talk to him when he was angry.

- Well, that is some ill mattered individual. Please, go on.

- We went to the rendezvous point at sea. There was nothing there. Then a GDF patrol boat caught us and asked our motives. My job was to convince them that we needed to survey the area and take pictures for a marine biology blog. I had a lot of explaining to do. They relied solely on my knowledge to enter that zone. We were given an authorization, but only for 24 hours. I heard them talk about recovering a priceless lost item from the depths when we were on the way.

- Did they say precisely what it was?

- Not really. When they came back up between two dives, I overheard them say they had recovered two black boxes. They were inside the ship's hull, but these guys are so loud that I heard everything. Then there was a storm. I had to call International Rescue for help.

- What are exactly the charges pressed against you in whole?

- Trespassing. That's what they said here. But I'm not sure, and the lawyer has not come yet to explain anything.

A bell rang. The visit was over. It had been an whole hour. Penelope stood as well as Maria.

- Do not worry Maria. I will take care of everything.

- Thank you. I hope I can trust you. Please don't let me down.

Penelope walked out of the room and back into the car, followed by Parker. When they were in the vehicle, her ladyship gave the order to go back home. On her way, Parker asked:

- That young lady surely walked into a trap.

- The saddest part in all this is that she took the job regardless. We cannot defend her on the motive of ignorance. She went on with it. All we can do is hope we can come to an arrangement with the GDF. In the mean time, I have to report to Scott. We are close to getting more answers.

As they were about to cross the ocean, Parker noticed a red flash in one of his rear mirrors. When he turned on the scanners, nothing was showing. He ran a few more just to make sure. The lady was concerned.

- Anything wrong, Parker?

- Seems not, m'lady. I thought I saw something behind FAB1. Must have been a sun ray in the mirror.

- Do be careful, Parker. The sun is going to set as we go. I would not want you to be blinded by the light.

Penelope contacted Scott afterwards. She gave him the entire details of her meeting with Maria Suza. She could hear him tap his fingers on the desk.
So, you are telling me there is something of value in the wreckage?

It seems so. She mentioned hearing them collect some black boxes. This does sound like data boxes to me.

Or could be something else.

Scott sighed. He really did not know what to do. He asked the Lady:

What do you think we should do? Is it worth it?

If we can use that information to frame Holling for all his mischiefs, yes. I do not want to put you at risk, but letting him roam around freely might be dangerous.

I see. Another megalomaniac on the loose, but this one is legit. It's going to be hard if we engage in such a battle. I'll ask Gordon to check it out immediately.

Thank you, Scott.

Penelope closed the comm. She was wondering what to do with Maria. She promised her some legal help, after all. It was starting to be late in London. If she wanted to call Laura Baker, she'd have to do it immediately. She had to resolve this quickly.

Dear Laura, how fares you?

Dear Penelope! Busy as always.

I have a favor to ask of you. It's about this young lady who was arrested in the restricted zone. Her name is Maria Suza, she is detained in a New York state facility.

Yes, I remember us talking about that case. What do you require?

I would like to have her file revised. I am convinced her share of the blame is a lot less than her two acolytes. Can you tell me if you can send a lawyer or an officer to resolve her case quickly?

I will check on that. It's not our priority, but I'll tell you immediately once I have engaged some procedures.

Thank you, I am in your debt.

It is a pleasure.

The whole trip back to England took about four hours. The lady was exhausted, she requested a hot bath and her supper to be served in her boudoir. She also ordered Parker to get some rest.

While dining, she received a call. It was Laura Baker. She was frowning. Something had happened.

Laura, what hail you this late?

Penelope, I have done the checks you requested me for a lawyer for Maria Suza. But there is a slight problem.

Which is?

She is dead.
Penelope was in shock.

- What happened?

- The facility director reported that she had committed suicide in her cell. That was some time after she was brought back from meeting with you. There is no further detail.

- I… I don't understand! Are you certain of this?

- Absolutely certain. The prison guards found her hanging from bed sheets tied to the bars. Her cell was closed and she did not have a cell mate. She was not murdered.

- Oh my… Thank you, Laura. Excuse me, I'm going to need a moment.

- Take all the time you need. Good night, Penelope.

This had no sense. Penelope could not believe it. Something was amiss. Nothing seemed to make sense. She started to believe this was not a fortuitous set of events. What to do now… ?
Two days had gone by. Brains did his reports to Scott about his findings on Abigail. He had done a complete scan of her body, revealing all of her physical modifications. That came as no surprise to see that her left arm up to the shoulder, both her legs, the left one up to the knee and the right one half thigh, were cybernetics implants. What did strike them was the network of subdermal receptors she had. Crawling under her skin in a web like pattern, these wires like links were too numerous to have been implanted through surgery. It had to be a conductive liquid injected under her skin that crawled his way everywhere. Scott had asked Brains to make sure it would not pose a threat, which he did.

Abigail refused to give Brains a blood sample and simply told him it was better to remain untouched. Even after he had insisted, she gave in and gave him a bit of an explanation. As he was no specialist in life science, he could not make much out of it. Yet, as she explained it, he understood her bloodstream could get rid of poisons such as alcohol or drugs in a flash. Her regenerative features still remained a mystery he would want to investigate further.

That morning, the coffee machine was running at full. Brains was at his third cup, he could not contain himself. He had succeeded in rigging the electronic modules from the glass tubes to his computer and had begun copying all the information. When Abigail came in, he rose to greet her.

- 'Morning! Did you s… sleep well?

After what he had put her through the days before, she wished he would let her be. He could have torn her to pieces only to know what she was made of. She tried hard to keep cool and not lose her patience. She replied with a half smile.

- Yes. So, what's up this morning?

Brains showed her his progress on downloading all the information. She was amazed.

- You really did it? Oh my… .

- I'm really eager to see what's in there! You'd think it's some precious data!

She knew it was nothing important. All the data contained in this tube was meant to be used for the awakening. With the transfer finally complete, Brains encoded it to fit his desktop holo computer. Many files could not be read. All of the videos were dead links: no sound or image came through. The water had done some damage and it was impossible to recuperate.

Abigail shrugged. She thought it was better this way. There was a lot of information she wished to keep for herself. She got up, stretching.

- Am I off the hook yet?

- No! There are still a lot of things I need to check with you.
- What now? I told you about the subdermal receptors, what else do you want to know?

- I need to study your suit. I heard J… John say you changed your heat signature. This is a real feat. You will have to explain this to me.

She was fed up with him. She thought about knocking him out and going for a snack, yet that would not be perceived as cooperation. The suit was already in Brains's lab as it had been confiscated once she had gotten out of it. Her helmet sat on the table next to it. She massaged her temples before explaining to him.

- I told you it was titanium weave. This is a very rare, very expensive and very special smart fabric. It was not my work, I know only a few things about it.

- Y… yet you know a lot. How did you shift your heat signature?

- Through the combined use of the suit and a command from my cerebrum computer to my subdermal receptors. The suit can change color, as it refracts light when a command is issued with a low current impulse. It can also use optical reflection. The heat signature works the same way. A combination of factors make it possible. It is not solely the fabric or the suit itself.

Brains inspected the suit attentively. While he was busy, she grabbed a rubik's cube that was lying around and began fiddling with it. She raised her eyes periodically to watch Brains as he was manipulating her outfit. Eventually, she was bored and got up.

- I'm going to the kitchen for a bite. Don't tear it. It's expensive. It'll cost you if you do.

- Oh! Of… Of course not! Don't worry! I'll be waiting for your return.

Abigail sighed, relieved when she got out. Coming back was not really her intention. Brains was not a bad guy but he was annoying. She always hated nerds, yet, bio-engineer were seldom anything else than that. She liked to think herself not in that category.

She reached the kitchen, at last. Alan was there, studying, and Grandma Tracy was preparing meals. Abigail went to the fridge and was grabbing some cheese when Grandma grabbed her arm.

- Kid, there's a rule here. My kitchen! Nobody else behind the counter while I'm here. So, whatcha want to eat?

Abigail gave one of a stare to Grandma when she grabbed her. She was both surprised and irritated at the elder woman. She tried not to push it too hard.

- Okay, Grandma. So, you're the snack bar lady?

- That's just when I'm around. I have a killer meatloaf you'd want to try.

The young woman looked at Alan who was gesturing a very demonstrative "NO" with his hands. She turned back to Grandma.

- No thanks. What else you got?

- I've got steamed mixed vegetables. That's a new recipe I've tried with Max. The boys don't really go for the veggie dishes, so knock yourself out if that's what you want.

- Sure, why not. I need meat also.

- There's some bacon and beef strips I can cook for you. Sit down at the table, I'll get you your
snack, kid.

She grimaced at being called "kid". Sitting down at the table, she looked at what Alan was doing. He was studying principles behind bacteria growth and life in hostile settings like space and oxygen deprived environments. Abigail smiled as she read along with him. He was barely staying awake, really not enjoying his reading. She taped her left fingers on the table, generating a faint clicking noise on metal on the stratified surface. Alan turned his attention to her. She pointed his holo screen.

- Anaerobic organisms. What's your field of study?

- Computer science, astronomy, physics, engineering and a some of those extra courses we need to take to fill our curriculum. I really hate it.

- Were there no other choices?

- Yeah. History of fine arts, Wildlife conservation and Social science things. Microbiology seemed like the least boring of them all.

Abigail smiled. She did hate all the social studies.

- So, what's your job around here? You're the little guy who need to finish school before doing all that neat stuff the others do?

- Oh, not really. I already had some training. I'm an astronaut.

She gave out a silent "whhhhhhaaat?", gasping, as he mentioned he was an astronaut. To be so young and be qualified to go to space could not be real, even with the technology of their time. She asked him, not believing a single word.

- How old are you?

- I'm nineteen, why?

- That's awfully young to call yourself an astronaut.

- I've trained under the best: my father, Jeff Tracy. He was an amazing teacher. Thanks to my dad and Thunderbird three, I was able to experience space when I was quite young.

- The legal age to go to space is supposed to be ten. Hope he respected that. It's dangerous otherwise.

- Yeah, he did. But hey, you don't go anywhere without taking chances, do you? I insisted so bad that he had to take me.

Abigail reared in her seat. She was getting a reality check by a smart assed kid. He was right. That was exactly what she said when she first injected herself with the nano technology. She changed the subject. Alan was all smiles as he talked to her, he had tossed the holo screen aside. She became curious.

- You go out in space often?

- When it's required. We have some work to do up there: cleaning out debris, some shuttling for the higher ups of the World Council sometimes, satellite surveillance also. And there's the distress calls that come in once in a while. I'm a very busy guy. Well, not as busy as the others, but I get
some action often.

- And your brothers trust you to do your job?

- Of course! I've proven myself countless times. All those space missions you probably heard about, that was me.

- I see.

Grandma brought her a plate full of bland vegetables and overcooked meat. She dug in. Alan resumed his reading. She paused her lunch for a minute. The taste was utterly awful.

- I did not get your name.

- I'm Alan! Happy to meet you, Abigail.

She bore a half smile.

- Me too.

- Scott has not been very nice to you since you came in. Don't worry. He's not really that mean.

- I'd like to believe you. Virgil told me the same thing the other day.

- Oh, so you've met him? That's good. He's very calm and comforting and has a lot of faith in humanity, you know.

- He is, actually. He checked on me. That was very nice of him.

- He's like that with all of us. He takes good care of us. We need the big guy, or we would just become crazy. The atmosphere has been tense in the past few months. If not for him, things might have gotten really bad. We all have our tempers, but Virgil smooths things out.

- The kind of guy to bring in all the stray cats he finds, right?

Alan laughed.

- Yeah, kinda like that. He's a sensitive guy. But don't push him. He is scary when he gets angry.

- I'm trying to get hold of everyone's name and all. Kayo was nice enough to explain a few things. I've met the space man. Your other brother, the surfer boy, what's his name?

- That's Gordon. He's the prankster of the family. Don't mind him, he's usually not that funny. He does not take life very seriously.

- She nodded, finishing her lunch while he was talking. She took her plate and got up.

- That was a nice chat. Thanks. If you need help with your course, I'll give you a hand. Don't hesitate to ask.

- You betcha!

Gordon passed through the kitchen, going straight for the living room. He did not pay much attention to Abigail or his brother. Scott had summoned him and he responded quickly. He stood in front of the desk, awaiting his brother's order. The elder rose his eyes from his paperwork and stared at him.
- Gordon, I have a job for you. It will be a special one. There is not place for any goofing around. Got that?

- Yeah, I got that! So what is it?

Scott popped a holographic image of the wreckage of the ship. Gordon recognized it.

- What's up with that junk? We saved the people of that wreck, was that not enough?

- There might be more to it. The two men you saved might have brought on board some important information. It sank along with the ship. You do recall they did not have anything in their hands when you got to them?

- Nope, nothing. They were trapped inside. I think they were going for the door where I found Abigail. How valuable is that stuff?

- A lot it seems, or so Lady Penelope says. I want you to go there without being seen and bring me back those boxes. We can't fly you there, so be careful on your way.

- FAB! Don't worry, I'll bring them back before you know it.

Gordon made his way towards the silo and programmed Thunderbird 4 to be set to launched from the island. He got dressed and entered his ship, ready to go.

- ETA 2 hours. Scott, can you ask John to scan the whereabouts of the ship and make sure he can pinpoint the boxes? I have a feeling there will be surveillance underwater this time.

John answered, popping on his brother's computer.

- Already on it.

Gordon was startled.

- Wha.. Have you been listening all this time?

John smiled. Gordon laughed.

- I hope you don't listen to all of our comms like this.

- Nah, only those between you and Lady Penelope

- WHAT?

- Just kidding. Here is what I got. The area is well surveyed. There are helicopter patrols and an aircraft carrier doing some sonar scans. You'll have to wait on my signal to go through and make sure you get out before they see you.

- You think there's going to be some subs?

- I don't think so. The GDF is not equipped with small submersibles. They have far bigger ships which are not fit for such a task.

- Good then, piece of cake!

As Gordon approached the zone, John popped in his comms.
- Gordon, you are too far in the zone, I'll give you directions on your computer, go there. The ship is not far away from you.

- Yeah, sure. Patch me in.

The infos popped on the dashboard. Gordon went around as John instructed. He was close to the wreckage. John went on.

- The detection spectrum of this type of sonar is incredible. This must be some new technology. Let me calculate properly.

Gordon took refuge behind a small rock formation. He turned off the lights and laid low. John eventually gave further details.

- There. Now you'll be ok. Follow this trajectory and make sure you don't do too much drag. They might detect you otherwise.

- FAB.

Gordon went closer, keeping his lights out until he reached the wreck. He got out the articulated arms and began tossing aside the debris until he found one of the boxes. Bringing his ship closer, he uncovered the second one in what must have been the ship's hull.

- John, I have a visual. I'm going EVA to get those boxes.

- Be careful.

Swinging his seat backwards, the aquanaut dove into the cold black waters. Recovering both boxes, he jumped back up in his craft and left. John had set him a route to make sure he would not cross the ship's sonars.

- Good work. Get word to Brains once you get home. It seems this information was also necessary.

Upon leaving the area, Gordon picked up a disturbance in the direction where the GDF craft was. As he was going the other way, he tried to zoom in on his computer. The waters were swirling. He quickly called John.

- John, can you check that GDF carrier again? I've caught something on the feed but I'm too far off to be able to see anything.

- FAB! WHOA!

John's face was surprised. He was silent for a moment. Gordon waved to him

- John? Earth to John? Is there something happening?

- The carrier… there was an explosion just now! An helicopter patrolling around crashed directly on it. What in the world happened there?

He brought up the latest readings of the area, watching the helicopter's trajectory and projected it to Gordon who was as surprised as his space bound brother.

- What is that? What happened?

- I dunno but it looks like something shot out from the sky. There was some motion from the northwest. Does not seem big enough to be detected… or simply too fast? I'll have to check on that
incident. Let's hope nobody needs help.

There was no distress call. John was relieved at that. Gordon was itching to turn back and go help but that might look suspicious. He made his way back to the island base.

He brought both blackboxes inside the living room as Brains was waiting for him impatiently. The scientist took them both from his hands, not wasting a single minute. Gordon smiled.

- Now that's one excited guy. Let's hope he does not find anything he'll regret.

Scott came in the room as John appeared. He had not given him the details of the explosion yet.

- There was clearly something that shot down that helicopter. I don't know what though. No aircraft in sight, nothing on the water either.

Gordon turned to the central holoprojector.

- A ground fired missile?

- Unlikely. If a missile was fired from the vicinity or even land, satellites would have picked it up. Space debris or a small meteorite is my guess. The object was too small to be detected but big enough to trigger an explosion.

Scott looked at his brother's feed depicting the events visually.

- You're suggesting that chopper was struck down by a meteorite? Rocks don't explode, you know.

- The helicopter caught fire then fell and exploded. It happened so fast it's difficult to understand in which order it did.

- Remind me, why are we making such a big deal out of this?

- It occurred as Gordon was leaving the site. This is weird. That's all.

- Or it could only be bad luck on their part.

- Don't tell me luck is a satisfactory explanation for you. I won't buy it.

- How about a mechanical failure then?

- That's better.

John closed the comm. Scott went back to the desk.

- Good work, Gordon.

- Thanks bro. Get some rest now, will ya?

Gordon then proceeded to leave the room, leaving Scott alone.

The setting sun was painting the living room in a reddish golden color. The elder heard his brothers in the pool. He looked over his shoulders and turned back only to find Kayo sitting on the side of the desk. She was wearing a light cyan summer dress, her hair untied.

- You're missing all the fun. The boys are setting up the volleyball in the pool and Grandma's cooking some fried pineapple chicken balls. Sounds like a party. Want to join?
- Listen… I really can't. I'm still two reports late for Colonel Casey. I have to work on these.

- And what if I help you tomorrow?

Scott sighed. He stared at Tanusha contemplatively. She was so pretty under that light and the dress she was wearing was not only hugging her figure in a suggestive way, but transformed her in a whole other kind of woman. She was so feminine and delicate in this outfit he would have liked to lift her from her feet and carry her to the setting sun. But he had brothers, so any kind of public romance was impossible. Yet, he still felt it was not right. She took his hand.

- Come on, Scott. I'm helping you tomorrow. Now, you're coming with me, and we are going to have some fun.

Scott rose and drew closer. He locked his arms around her waist. She smiled sweetly. They gazed in each others' eyes for a moment. She got up on her toes and brought her lips closer to his. They kissed. It was light, soft. Scott was reluctant, his hands were shaking. Kayo brushed the side of his head with her hand. He slowly pulled back.

- We… We can't be seen like this.

- There is no one here. What's so bad about us?

- It's not us. I just… I can't…

- You can't always remain alone, Scott. Let me help you and share your burden. Stop pretending to be invincible. You're clearly not. If you want to help your brothers and the organisation, you'll have to get some rest. You are exhausted.

Scott did not like being told what to do. Even though he did not feel like listening, he did. She was right, he did need some rest. He brought her close again for a hug. She rested her head on his shoulder. They remained like this for a while watching the sunset.

The boys were having their garden party. Abigail had found a nice spot far away from the pool. She was sitting down on a chair and watching everyone have fun. John joined her.

- You don't want to go in with them?

- I'd rather not. I'll just scare the lot away if I undress.

- Ehhhh… What do you mean?

- I have scars. That's not pretty. Plus, they are happy just being together as a family. That's cute.

- You know you could just dip your toes…

She looked at John, eyes narrowed. He realized what he had just said.

- I am so sorry, I did not mean to offend you. It's an expression. Don't take it personally.

Abigail lied down in the chair.

- I know. I'm the one who should calm down. I would love to feel anything between my toes again would it be sand, water, or even the hot feeling of woolen socks. I miss that. But hey, I can walk, so why should I be whining about anything?

- Well, happy that you are taking this so lightly.
- I'm not. I'm just pretending to so you won't feel bad. Why are you not back down here? These guys could use a hand to win their game.

She pointed out the pool to John. Alan and Gordon were struggling against Virgil alone during a volleyball match. Abigail laughed as the ball went over as Alan could not catch it in time while Gordon had pressed his brother's head underwater to get it. She looked at John.

- Quite a show these guys are putting up. I'm actually enjoying myself.

- Yeah. I don't really feel like it.

- Come on, you can't stay up there all your life. Don't you have a fear of missing out on anything?

- Like I told you before, no. The world is full of action. Speaking of which, I wonder where Brains is.

- In his lab, overdosing on coffee and reading the contents of the black boxes.

- Do you know what is in these boxes?

- Not these ones. I was put to sleep before the data was backed up. I'll check it out tomorrow. Right now, I'm comfortable here.

- I'll check on him. Have fun.

John cut the comm. Abigail looked up at the starry night. She always felt as if she was in a snowball and that the stars were stuck on the top of the globe. It felt like everything else did not exist. She heard some steps coming closer to her.

- Still looking at the stars?

She turned. It was Virgil. He was drying himself with his towel and sat down on the ground beside her. She rose to look at his muscular body while he gazed at the sky. She went back to the sky, smiling.

- Yeah, always did like that. Makes you feel like tiny grain of sand in this massive universe.

- You should try the water, it's good.

- I'd freak your entire community out if I did. Not the best of ideas.

- You're welcome to join us, you know.

- I thought you'd say that. I'm okay by myself here. I've just been brought back, things are still a little confused.

As they were talking, Scott came out followed by Kayo. He was holding a guitar, an old keepsake he used to take out on family reunions. His father before him could do a tune or two, yet it was his mother who had showed him how to play. As the elder, he took up the responsibility of getting everyone together. He sat down and began tuning it. Alan and Gordon rushed out of the water to dry up and sat in front of him. Kayo motioned at Virgil and Abigail to get closer and they did.

Once everyone was there, he began by a little ballad his father enjoyed and all the boys sang together. A cannon of voices both low and high pitch reverberated in the crowd. Gordon's voice was terrible and he seemed to enjoy ruining the song as Alan did his best to keep up. Virgil's deep voice kept on tune at all time, ignoring the younger. Abigail hummed gently but did not sing aloud.
When the song was over, Scott turned around and looked at everyone.

- So, who's next?

Alan raised his hand.

- Oh, oh, oh! Me! Me! Let's do the "Dance of the Monkeys" one.

Gordon laughed.

- So you can dance along?

Alan hit him in the ribs with his elbow as he let out a loud "OWWW". Kayo looked at them.

- That's enough kids.

Scott proceeded in asking for more suggestions. Virgil was thinking when Abigail spoke.

- Can you do "Twilight sonata"?

- Yeah, I think I know that one. Let me see if it's right.

He fiddled on the strings and got the good chords. The music came back to him so he began. Abigail went on singing. As she went on, all the boys and Kayo began looking at her, amazed. Scott was smiling as he was playing. As he finished playing, they all clapped. Alan smiled.

- Wow, that was some voice!

Gordon emphasised with an excited nod. Virgil went on.

- You are really talented. Have you ever practiced your voice?

- Never, actually. Sometimes, when I was alone at the lab, I used to crank up the music and sing my heart out. Never was the karaoke type either.

- You should really try. Next gathering, I'll lead on the piano and you sing. How about that?

He smiled. She blushed, beginning to question herself as if he was flirty or just plain nice.

- Thanks, I guess. Next time then, yeah.

Scott was waiting for someone else to suggest a title.

- So, what's next?

Grandma appeared behind them, carrying platters of food.

- What's next is the food, boys. Eat, you'll sing later.

They all dove in, happy, enjoying this precious moment as a family.
Death in the closet

Chapter Summary

The boys are summoned for a mission. Scott makes a gruesome discovery.

**** Warning****

This story contains some material that might not be appropriate to light hearted people. No violence, no torture, just depictions of a very gruesome scene. You are advised.

The title was changed to fit my fic better as I recalled Deep Search was the name of an episode and the fic does not have any ties to it.

After getting a quick lunch, Brains decided to go through the contents of the black boxes regardless of the time. It was already passed eight. He found videos, spreadsheets, diagrams and formulas, all were information about various experiments that were conducted at a facility named Cradle Alpha. He managed to understand some of the experiments, linking them directly to Abigail's bio-engineering work. The nano particles she had in her blood, also named nanites, were originally created about fifty years ago, as mean to fight cancer. The project was dropped, as World Health Organizations refused to recognize it as a viable treatment. The patents were then purchased at a derisory price and the work began anew. These were used to fight the sepsis that occurred with the use of the cybernetic implants. But they had other effects. The regeneration of dead cells, from aging through tissue degradation, even wounds could repair themselves in the nick of time. A paper cut would need less then an hour to heal. This fascinated Brains as much as scared him. He understood why Abigail did not want to share her secret: it was literally the key to immortality. However, the nanites were very sensitive to high electric currents. He took note of that.

He came across a huge number of patents, all labeled with numbers and attributed to the work of the four engineers Abigail had spoken of during her interrogation. The owner of the patent was labeled as a number not to be recognized. He researched it online and found nothing on the World Businesses registration directory. There was not a single reference to Holling in any of the papers he read so far.

Jumping around to another subject, he found a folder containing various files under the label "Project Olympus". This subject was the most delicate of all, some files were locked and he could not even manage to crack the password. Yet, he had in his hands some interesting information about the keepers and their future task. This looked like a brochure, it gave him shivers down his spine. "Selling the life of people..." he thought. He cursed but continued reading on each keeper. A chilling description was the introduction.

"And came the gods, keepers of the sacred city of Olympus, under the eyes of their father, Zeus, as they rained down their judgement on the blasphemous souls that dared defy those who dwelled in the marvelous city."

If Olympus was really a place, he'd try to keep away from it. He wondered what Zeus was a there were no information about it. He resumed the reading.
"Chronos, master of time and space. With an innate ability to control the flux of energy around him, none shall possess better control of the airwaves."

"Hermes, messenger of the gods. Flying to destroy all the enemies of Olympus. Through his cunning talent and sharp reflexes, he shall guide the others to victory."

"Artemis, the hunter. Gifted in marksmanship, he needs a single arrow is needed to destroy his enemies. His prowess knows no bound."

"Athena, protector of the city, heart of all that lives. Knowledge of the land is strength. Never shall she falter. Her defense is the best offense."

This all sounded to him like a sales pitch for a video game. More brochures were showing a few features of the different keepers. His eyes were red, he could not take it anymore. He had to go to bed. As he got up, he noticed one file he had not gone through yet. It was a formula with the name "Acidosemine". This word rung a bell, although he could not remember, being way too tired. The engineer went straight to bed.

The sun was about to rise. Scott jumped out of bed, awakened by a siren. John had signaled everyone, a distress call came in. The boys made their way in the living room to find the space monitor floating on top of the 3D projector.

- Guys, we have a situation. Take a look.

John popped up the outline of a building on the 3D monitor. It looked relatively big.

- This is a chemical treatment facility in Western Virginia, USA. About ten minutes ago, there was a giant explosion that came from the northeast of the building. Some chemicals have spilled along the façade and caught fire. The majority of the plant was evacuated but for a specific area where the explosion occurred. Many workers are trapped inside and the firefighters lack the necessary equipment to fight such a fire.

Scott responded, rubbing his face.

- All right! Virgil, take Gordon and Alan. We'll talk strategy on the way. John, keep us updated. I need to know if the situation changes.

Kayo came in then.

- Can I be of some help?

Scott was heading for his boarding platform as he answered her.

- Stay here in case we need backup.

As the Thunderbirds flew towards the mission, John had patched in all the information about the chemical. It was a very potent combustible used in manufacturing explosive devices of all sorts. He made further research about the facility. He communicated it to his brothers.

- This plant belongs to Holling. One of his companies owns this land. You'd think he would put up more security features for handling such chemicals.

Scott replied.

- Whatever he did or did not do, these people need help. We need to save them.
- FAB. The fire has spread a little. The wind is quite strong tonight and there might be rain. This will make matters worse in spreading the remainder of the chemical along the façade. That fire will not be put out by water.

- Right, John. Virgil, as soon as you land, I want Gordon and Alan to take pods and concentrate in controlling the flames. We should at least try to get the workers to safety.

- Scott, you can go inside through one of the northern walls. You can land there also, I'm sending you the location.

Being the first on to arrive, Scott went inside through the far north side of the facility to try to rescue the trapped workers. The emergency doors were obstructed with debris that had fallen from the roof. He saw from afar some of the trapped workers in an area where the fire had spread. There were also some vats of chemicals in the vicinity.

- Virgil, I'll point the location of the trapped workers. Also, be careful not to breach the marked walls. There is chemical in those areas.

- FAB!

Thunderbird 2 landed near the northern part, as John instructed. The blaze was so strong, it was melting the metal sheeting of the walls. Gordon and Alan both rigged up Firefly pods to shoot dry powder to extinguish the fire while Virgil was outfitted with his exoskeleton claws. They attacked the brazier head on, trying to contain it. The flames had already reached to top. Virgil issued the commands to his brothers, keeping his cool.

- Gordon, aim for the base. If you cut the largest source, it will buy us some time. Alan, come with me, you're going to open the way so I can free the workers. Scott, keep me informed and get out of there. I'll need you to escort these guys to a safe area once they are rescued.

Scott did not listen. He tried to reach the workers from the inside. He made his way up to the platform where the flames were raging.

- Are you guys in yet?

Virgil answered.

- Almost. As soon as Gordon puts out some of it, we're going in.

- Hurry!

As Scott was talking, there was an explosion right in front of him. The workers switched platforms, taking refuge in a locked explosion resistant compartment. The fire was still raging all around. Scott pinpointed the new location of the workers. They were further from the walls. Time was becoming a problem. The roof was coming down slowly as the flames melted it. He noticed there was some chemical overflowing from one of the vat which provided the flame an extra boost. If he could find the pipe fueling it, he would prevent a bigger disaster. He went on deeper inside the compound, following the pipes.

Alan and Gordon shot some powder cartridges to smother the flames, resulting in creating a large enough path for Virgil to walk in. Alan followed close behind as Gordon continued to contain the flames outside. The roof was collapsing. Virgil had to get back and let Alan's Firefly pod open the way. They succeeded in reaching the workers, hopping them on the back of the pod. As they were going out and clearing the way, there was a bigger explosion from inside. John looked at the damage as Virgil and his brothers were struggling to leave the area, blown away by the force of the
blast. He rolled on the ground, protected by his claws and got up rapidly.

- SCOTT! Come in! SCOTT!

He clenched his teeth, hoping his brother had not been caught by the blast. No answer. All the brothers watched the brazier as the roof collapsed completely. Gordon went back in to fire more capsules on the flames and Alan joined in. Scott still did not respond. They did not lose hope, working hard cleaning the debris to reach him.

Scott opened his eyes. He had fallen from very high. It did not look like this tunnel was there before. He tried getting up, clearing some debris that fell on him. There was no trace of fire where he had landed. Above him rose an elevator shaft. It was rather small, and a quick inspection of the top floor showed it was sealed before. The explosion that shook the building might have opened it. As he looked up, he noticed he was several floors down. He rubbed his back, his fall was not without pain. His left leg was throbbing. He really hoped it was not broken. As he rose, he noticed he could walk on it, which reassured him. He tried contacting his brothers without success. He was too far underground.

There seemed to be a large room in front of him, as the deep darkness spread further. He cracked a lightstick, cursing at the fact that he did not have a powerful flashlight like his brother did. The light produced was dim but enough to see his surroundings. There were tables with various dusty lab supplies laid on them.

As he went further, he stepped on something that felt soft. He looked down to realize it was a half-decomposed hand. He was startled, gasping in fright, as he reared in a table behind him. The table backed up, and a loud thud was heard. A cold liquid suddenly touched his hand. He turned around to find a bloated corpse's abdomen had burst, revealing the oozing foul dark liquid. Terrified, he dropped his lightstick and headed for the shaft. As he made his way back, bumping on every single obstacle on his way, he noticed more and more corpses. He heard the disgusting sound of liquid squirting, skin rupturing and bones cracking as he struggled to make it to the exit. The stick has lodged itself in the remains of the purulent body, producing weak ambient light, exhibiting the macabre scene of fluid dripping from surfaces and innards slowly dropping on the floor. His leg was not hurting anymore, the adrenaline shot made him ignore it completely. He tried climbing, cursing again as he did not take his jetpack with him.

Fortunately, the shaft did have a makeshift ladder build in the wall. He almost had made it to the top, when someone clutched on his hand and pulled him out. It was Virgil. The fire was under control and he came back inside to find his elder.

- You all right? You didn't answer your comms! I was about to jump down… Whoa, what's that stuff on you?

Scott was panting. All he wanted was to puke from the sight of these disgusting, gut retching corpses. He broke free of his brother's grasp and staggered to the outside. He removed his helmet, tossed it aside and took some fresh air. Virgil followed him, concerned. He noticed his brother wiping the substance on the ground. It had also splashed over him and he had spread some over his helmet.

- What is wrong, Scott? Are you feeling ok? What was down there?

Scott's face was as he had never seen. It was the same face he exhibited when his father disappeared. Broken, frightened, overwhelmed, a mix of all feelings and anger. The elder asked in a trembling voice:
- Water… Please, I just want water.

Virgil passed his arm over his shoulders and brought him inside Thunderbird 2's med bay. He deliberately tried to understand why his brother was like that. He gave him some disinfecting wipes to clean himself up.

- Scott, tell me what happened? It's not like you to break down like this.

He raised his head and gazed into his brother's eyes.

- Corpses. There are corpses down there.

- What?

- You heard me, don't play dumb.

- Down that shaft?

- Yeah. That shit came out of them. It's disgusting… and the smell…

Scott bent over. He was going to be sick. Virgil caught him just in time and gave him a bag. He rubbed his brother's back as he was throwing up, trying to look away. Gordon came back inside the pod. He noticed Scott in the med bay. Gordon ran towards him, keeping a safe distance as his elder still had some caked fluid on him.

- Scott, you stink! Where have you been?

Virgil urged his brother to calm down.

- Easy. We'll sort this out. Just wait until he's better.

Alan came inside the pod at this moment and John appeared.

- I have news. Scott, you okay?

Virgil went in front, motioning to his brothers.

- Give him some space. He's okay. John, can you access his helmet's recorder? I want to know if we can have a visual. We might have to go back down there.

John was fiddling on one of his monitors. His face told it all.

- That's not going to be a good idea. We have company.

- Whom?

- The GDF.

- That can't be good.

Virgil went outside and noticed the two enormous flyers hovering at a safe distance from the facility. They were accompanied by two smaller aircrafts. Since Thunderbird 2 was in the way, they could not land. Colonel Casey went through to the boys.

- International Rescue, this is Colonel Casey. I have to ask you to leave the area immediately. The cleanup crew is already here and ready to start removing the chemical before any natural disaster
occurs.

Scott rose his head. He was in no shape to address her. John took over.

- What about the workers?

- A medical bay has been set up as we speak on the southern side. They are taken cared of.

Scott said he has found something on the lower floor…

- John Tracy, do I have to remind you that I am in charge of the surveillance of International Rescue's operations. I have issued an order. Lift off and we can talk as you are airborne. We need to contain this disaster before it contaminates the land.

John recalled Virgil who reluctantly took his craft back in the air. Since Scott was in no position to pilot, Alan took over Thunderbird 1. Once they were up, John called Casey again.

- Now, can we talk?

- Yes, but quickly.

Scott drank more water than took over.

- Were all heads accounted for during the evacuation?

- They were. Nobody was missing.

- Are you sure about that? And do you have the layouts to the facility?

- We have made the necessary verifications. What are you talking about?

- There were some corpses down there. In an advanced state of decay. Something is fishy, Colonel. I swear.

- Do you have any proof of what you advance?

John was working on Scott's feed. Unfortunately, the recording was bad, as the camera was damaged in his fall. Even with the night vision filter, he could not see anything. The elder cursed.

Casey was interrupted by a communication sent from a man in a gray suit. He was tall with a strong build and a straight figure. His grayish temples were giving him a serious look. He stared at the boys with his onyx eyes.

- Greetings. I am Marcus C. Holling. International Rescue, I wanted to thank you personally for saving the workers of this facility. I am grateful that you have come to their aid. Each and every one of them will receive proper medical care and we will make sure to offer compensation for the loss of salary during the reconstruction of the plant.

The boys dared not speak. Holling's voice was a deep low-pitched tone, making it sound reassuring. He resembled Jeff Tracy in his way of addressing people. Scott got up and met his gaze.

- Mister Holling, what are you doing exactly in this facility? Why were there some dead bodies on the lower floors?

Holling looked at him, barely twitching an eyebrow.
- All lives have been accounted for. Nobody died in that blaze. What do you mean?

- The lower floors. They were sealed before the explosion!

Scott had an accusing tone. Holling laughed.

- Please, refrain from raising your voice. I hear you and I can insure you there is no such thing. I will take my leave now.

Scott was mad as hell. Holling smiled before disconnecting as the elder could not come up with anything else to say. He wanted to go out and dive in the shaft again to oblige everyone to see what he saw. But they had taken off and were about to leave the sector. He went up to the cockpit to meet with his brother.

- Virgil, we need to land and go down there.

- We can't Scott. We have a direct order from Colonel Casey. We will be leaving now.

- NO! We stay and find out what that shit was about! I'm not going to listen if it means ignoring what happened down there!

- Stop! Take it easy. You are in shock. We are going back home, end of discussion.

The boys witnessed the cleaning crew setting up a perimeter with large barriers lined with a dark canvas. As the northern part of the facility was being secured, Casey appeared.

- International Rescue, your services are no longer required here. Thank you for your aid.

Scott was furious.

- Colonel, we have to see what is down there! Something is wrong! I tell you, I saw corpses!

- Scott, nobody died in that fire. Are you certain you are not overreacting? Please take the time to calm down and get some rest. Everything is under control here. Casey, out.

The colonel closed the link. Virgil looked at Scott.

- See? You're exhausted. At home, we'll enjoy a nice meal together and you take some time to relax by the pool.

Gordon nodded while Scott was pouting. He laid back in his seat and rested his head but could not disspel any of his thoughts. He knew what he saw. He tried recalling the scene but had that terrible feeling he was about to retch every time the image came in mind. The edge of his nails was still caked with the liquid, so he decided he was going to wash before getting home.

The birds landed safely at the base and everyone went to clean up. Scott was freshly showered, he decided to immediately jump in research as he came home. He contacted John.

- I want a full detailed scan of this facility. I can't ignore that.

- Are you still onto this? Really, Scott, I am beginning to think you had some hallucinations back there. Are you sure there were not fumes in the lower parts?

Scott brought his fist down on the desk.
- I KNOW WHAT I SAW!

- O-kay! Stop it. I won't have you screaming at me like this.

John cut the comm. Scott tried to call him back but he did not answer. He began cursing as he sat and buried his head in his arms.

- Why does nobody believe me?

Alan came back in the living room. He looked at his brother, unaware of the entire situation as he was bringing Thunderbird One home.

- Hey, bro. I heard something bad happened. Are you okay?

Scott rose his head to find his younger brother in front of the desk.

- I found something down the collapsed shaft. Corpses, a lot of them. But, nobody wanted to believe me. My camera was not working…

- I believe you. Holling arrived just in time. And Colonel Casey will surely investigate this. Trust her.

- Wish I could. What if one of them was Dad?

Alan gulped. He never thought they could one day find their father's remains. The others came in afterward. Grandma Tracy brought in snacks. Neither Scott nor Alan wanted to eat. Both were in thoughts. Virgil turned to his brothers.

- Dig in while there is some left, guys. What's wrong?

Alan went to sit with the others. Scott withdrew. Virgil looked at him go, worried. He caught up with him.

- Scott, are you sure you're okay?

- Yeah. I just need some sleep. All that stuff has given me a headache.

- Get some rest then. We might need you again soon. Or would you rather have Alan take Thunderbird one while you recuperate?

- Out of the question! I'll be all right. Give me a call if something is up.

As Scott was opening his room's door, Kayo came along. She grabbed him by the arm.

- Gordon told me you were in shock. What happened?

He went inside. She followed him and closed the door behind her as he sat and dropped himself backwards on the bed. She smiled, and joined him, lying on his shoulder. He began.

- I saw something today. It was horrible. Yet nobody really believes me and there is no way I could prove it.

- Have you tried going back to see?

- Too late. The GDF ordered us to leave. And Holling was there with the cleanup crew. I've never seen a team responding so fast for disaster relief. He's hiding something.
- Want me to check it out?

- No. That's too dangerous. If the GDF knows, we'll be sanctioned.

- But we have to do something!

He put a finger on her lips.

- I know. I never felt so powerless. We can't act against the GDF's will and Holling sits on the World Council. Casey's right. I need to let go.

He rubbed his forehead.

- I got one hell of a headache. This whole thing drove me crazy. I'm going to turn in for today.

- But you have not eaten yet. It's only ten past five…

- A nap then. Virgil urged me to rest. I'll do just that for now.

She rose and smiled to him.

- I'll let you sleep.

He grabbed her arm as she was trying to leave and pulled her back to him on the bed. They kissed for a long while before he rolled her aside. She giggled.

- Are you going to take a nap? Or do you have something else in mind?

- You could nap with me.

- I'm not tired.

- I'll make sure you are.

She bit her lip. He had convinced her.
That morning, the grounds around Creighton Ward manor were busy. The gardeners were working hard for the lush gardens to look their best for the season. The rose garden, in particular, had always been a favorite of the Lord. In the height of summer, the roses were in full bloom. The scent was so amazing that the tenants used to eat outside every day.

Today was no exception. Penelope was having breakfast in the cozy pagoda built in the middle of the giant gardens. She was reading the news on a tablet computer. Parker came and served the tea. He then stood ready, a towel over his arm, waiting to see if the lady needed anything. She motioned with an opened palm, inviting him to sit down.

- Dear Parker. I am in need of council.

- Yes, m'lady. Anything you need. Are you still bothered by the young lady's death?

- Quite bothered. I do not know what to make of this whole story. I have a feeling the GDF does not want to give more information. I was thinking of going over to the Council for news, yet I am afraid that would arouse suspicions.

- M'lady, you could invite your friend, the Lieutenant Colonel and have a chat at the manor.

- I have thought of this, but I'm afraid it might put her in trouble.

- Is there an event which she would attend? You said m'lady and her met at one.

- The World Council does host an event in summer, but it's in five weeks. We may not have that much time.

- How about you perpetuate the family tradition of the Garden festival? Your esteemed father used to host a party in summer for everyone to come and admire his rose garden. It is one of the most beautiful gardens in England, m'lady. Even the Queen came once, she gave an award to m'Lord your father.

- Brilliant idea, Parker!

- Will you invite all of the Council's dignitary, m'lady?

- You mean Holling? I have no choice. It would be safer to deal under his nose rather than in his back.

- What about the Tracys?

- I will see that Scott can make it to the event. I will contact Tracy Island as soon as I am ready.

- Will you be needing anything else, m'lady?

- Please ask the gardeners to put a few choice roses in my boudoir. And, thank you, dear Parker. Your advice is always helpful.

- Thank you, m'lady!

Parker took off, his head high with pride.
After the rescue mission, most of the Tracy brothers, accompanied by Abigail, Grandma and Brains shared a meal. They related the details of the mission, including Scott's incident. Grandma worried about her elder grandson. Virgil calmed her down, exposing the facts. As for Kayo, Alan could only picture her rocking Scott to sleep. His brothers smiled, aware of what was really happening. He was mature enough to understand what the two were most likely doing, yet they did not want to break it raw to him at the table in front of Grandma.

Bedtime came early as the boys were exhausted from their rescue. Brains went back to sleep also leaving only Abigail to help Grandma with the dishes. When they were done, the young lady went directly to the lab. She wanted to check the boxes before the next day, as Brains would ask her so many questions about the content he already went through. She had something in mind.

John appeared, looking around.

- Brains?

- He's not here.

- Where is he?

- Back to bed. Or dead. Either way, drinking six coffees in a single day is not good for you.

- What are you working on?

- A project. I'm looking for my colleagues' labs. I'm planning on going there.

- All by yourself?

- If that's what it takes. The awakening was made to be an event. Yet, nobody stepped in anywhere. There was supposed to be much more going on around the world.

- You are still hiding some things, right?

She raised her head and looked at him, her face very serious.

- Can I fully trust you?

- Being free in here is not enough?

- I checked. We're in the middle of the pacific. Can't fly. And swimming is out of the question, the coast is way too far. That's one hell of a jail.

John remained silent. He was thinking how he could get her to speak. He found the perfect answer.

- We could let you off. Then you would be on your own, fending for yourself in a world where you don't exist anymore. Any attempt to get a job, or try to go along with society, will eventually raise suspicion about your cybernetics and get you caught. The GDF will deliver you back to Holling or detain you. Here, you could have a home, friends, food and luckily, a job working for Brains. I'm sure you can bring something to International Rescue. All I ask you is that you trust us.

She was watching him during his whole monolog. He was right.

- You know, I really like the way you talk. No wonder you're the lonely guy in space. You have a sharp tongue. It'd be scary to have that talk with you face to face. You win.

He smiled.
- That wasn't that hard. Now, tell me.

- The awakening was supposed to take place in order to restore the functions of the "City of Olympus". It exists somewhere, but I don't know where it is. I was not supposed to be alone. I don't know what Holling wants to do, and I want to find out about it.

- What's your plan?

- The three other labs were connected to Cradle Alpha. That was the place you found me in. There was Cloud Alpha, Star Alpha, and Bolt Alpha. Those were the codenames we gave the labs. Under them, there were plenty of other smaller labs. The coordinates for these are all in the files. I have found a few of the beta ones, but no alphas. Still working on it. I'm sure I'll find them eventually. There is just so much stuff in those files. It was part of my database.

- Was Cradle Alpha your lab?

- Yes. The GDF raided it and arrested most of the technicians. Holling contained the incident but we had to destroy most of the samples in fear of having them confiscated. We then moved to the other facility where you found me. It wasn't a proper lab, we didn't get time to set it up. It was just an old observation post abandoned during the previous war.

- I see. This is big, really. Just, how much trouble can we expect from Holling because of this awakening?

- When he gets proper authority, it will be hell. Right now, I don't think he can do anything. He's going to scratch his way to the top. And trust me, he'll get there.

- I see. I will tell our agent about this. We have this covered.

- Wait! Are you going to help me find the three labs? I really need to.

- Yes. I will.

She smiled at him.

- I knew you were a nice guy.

John blushed.

- Well, yeah. And, just to let you know, I'm not flirting. I'm just doing the right thing.

- What makes you think I want to flirt with you?

- Nevermind…

She laughed aloud. When she took a deep breath and voiced her thoughts:

- You're like the guy behind the bar who listens to everyone's troubles. You must have troubles of your own, but you decide to help other regardless. Their needs come before yours. I know that must be the same with your brothers: you think you can't impose yourself in order to make sure they are happy and safe. I respect that, a lot. If I can't get through to Scott, then I guess you'll be my only hope. You understand what is happening and you may have a bigger idea of the entire picture unfolding before our eyes. This is not just my personal vendetta. It's the world. Isn't that what you guys are about? International Rescue? Keepers of the world's safety?

John nodded, smiling peacefully.
- That's right. I'll be going now. Good luck on your search. Notify me if you come up with anything.

- Can you help me transfer this on the holo-screen so I can work upstairs? It gets lonely down here.

- Sure. But everyone has gone to bed. You'll be alone still.

- Alone with the sky. I really hate being caught between four walls, if you know what I mean.

- Guess I do.

He did a few manipulations on the computer before ending the communication.

Abigail went back upstairs. She fixed herself some hot cocoa and sat down near the pool to resumed her research. The night in this hemisphere was pretty. The sky was different from what she was used to in the north. She strayed a bit, losing herself in the stars.

The computer beeped. She shook her head, coming back to reality. She heard footsteps in the kitchen. She resumed her work, ignoring whomever it would be. Virgil came along and sat down near her. She raised an eyebrow.

- You again? Are you always getting up at night or are you checking on me?

He laughed.

- I thought you agreed to respect the curfew.

- Well, I don't know who was supposed to enforce it. Scott is not there, Brains is gone to bed and I don't know where Kayo is. So maybe it's you?

- Not at all. I'd be the last person who'd want to do that. I'd rather trust you beforehand.

She smiled, dismissing the screens she had in front of her.

- Your brother told me you were quite the humane one. I see it now.

- Human nature can change. If you were a bad person, we would have known by now.

- Are you so sure about that?

- Pretty sure.

- You know very little about me.

- I know just enough. Plus, last time we talked, you promised you would not screw up again, remember?

She giggled.

- You're right. Hey, I haven't forgotten about our duo. I'm looking forward to it.

This made him quite happy.

- What kind of music do you like?

- I don't have a lot of preferences... Indie, a bit of pop although it really gets on my nerves
sometimes. Rock ballads, I love these. A bit of jazz and bossa nova when I'm working.

- Good, I'll find a title you like and work on it. Maybe try to get Scott in too. We had a good guitar duo when we were younger. He is also a very good bassist.

- Really? Wow. Okay, it's settled! I'm eager to try that!

Abigail's casual expression turned to excitement. She did not bear the same smile as she did earlier. Her face shifted to amazement. Her traits had changed, showing a more genuine expression, a twinkle in her eye. Virgil was kind of proud to have "cracked" her shell.

- You're pretty when you show your real smile.

Her face flushed suddenly. She never wanted to show such emotions with people she was not acquainted with. Her mouth opened but she could not find words. Instead, she turned her head on the scenery. Virgil laughed.

- I did not mean to offend you.

She looked back at him, pinching her lips not to smile.

- No harm done. It's okay. I got a little excited, that's all. Don't think this will happen again.

- Okay. If you say so.

He smiled, knowing it would.

The heat was unbearable. Feeling a tingling in his arm, Scott woke up. He was sweating profusely and his breathing was heavy. Kayo was lying on his arm, fast asleep. He took his arm back slowly, making sure he would not wake her and headed to the bathroom, picking up a pair of loose pants to cover his nudity. As he was opening the tap, things were getting swirly around him. He put his arm just in time on the wall to stop his fall. Splashing some water in his face and neck didn't change anything. He could feel his heart pounding in his ears. The ambient noises faded. He fell on the cold tile floor, unable to get up. Kayo had heard him. She tried to get up but ended up slipping. Both her legs could not hold her. Her arms were weak and she was breathing haltingly. She tried to reach out to Scott, her body tangled in the sheets. After a good minute of struggle, she stretched and reached out to the beside computer to open a communication window. She pressed the emergency button. John was the first to respond.

- What's wrong!? Kayo, are you okay?

She tried to speak, only able to pronounce a few syllables in her breath.

- H... help!...

She rested her head on her arms, weary. John's voice rose.

- What is happening? Kayo! KAYO! I'm sending someone over!

John opened the emergency beacon to all the residents of the island. Virgil was the first to be alerted, as he was still in the kitchen with Abigail. When the alarm rang, they looked at each other before running together towards Scott's room.

As they came in, they witnessed the scene: Kayo was lying down on her back, trying desperately to rise and Scott was lying unconscious on the bathroom floor. They both rushed in to get to them.
Abigail touched Kayo's forehead.
- She's burning with fever! Do you have some place we can get them to?

- Virgil remained calm as always. He had a serious look on his face.

Yes, the med bay. Follow me.

Abigail locked her arms on Kayo's chest, carrying her from behind as Virgil did the same for his brother. The other residents had responded and stood outside the room. Abigail went out first dragging Kayo out as Gordon stopped her.

- Wait, what is happening?

- No time.

- At least tell us what happened!

Gordon piped down when he saw Virgil. He and his younger brother stood helpless while Grandma watched, covering her mouth. She went to hug both her grandsons as they watched the scene.

The med bay was on the same floor and only a few rooms away. Abigail dragged Kayo unto a bed while Virgil did the same for his brother. Their whole bodies were hot to the touch. Kayo was conscious but completely confused.

- That's not good. You know a doctor? We need one, now!

John tagged along. He heard her.

- I'm on it.

John turned around while Abigail put a mask and some glove as Virgil dragged the medical equipment to the beds. She and began to work on installing probes and electrodes on the patients. As she was done, she turned to Virgil.

- Is there any way one of them could have contracted an infection? Did you have any contact with any contaminated areas?

- Scott had some caked fluid on him when he came up from the shaft of the facility. And then he was sick. He said it was the sight of corpses he found down there.

- Corpses? Did you get a visual?

- No. His camera was damaged and we had to leave on order of the GDF.

- Okay. You should get out now. I got this. Thanks for your help.

Virgil exited the medical bay. She turned around to see that Kayo's breathing was becoming faint. She installed an oxygen mask on her. Brains came inside, gloves and mask on. As he looked around, he asked:

- What has happened?

- Their fever is high. Monitoring is installed. Their breathing is faint, we need something to stabilize them. Which antibiotics do you have on hand?
- IV A…Amoxicillin.

- Good, prepare it.

Brains went to the pharmacy to prepare the dilution. Abigail gathered some blood sample and installed some IV catheters on each of the patient's. The engineer came back with the IV bags ready to be installed. Abigail made sure the IV was dripping at the right speed. She then proceeded to the lab with her samples. Brains remained with the patients, keeping a close look at their vitals.

Doctor Chang Meiying was still asleep when her emergency line rang. She picked up, still groggy, greeting John in Chinese. He responded to her in the same fashion, but with a horrible accent. She smiled.

- John Tracy, you have to work on that accent.

- Later, Doc. We have a situation and need your assistance.

- Break it down to me while I change.

She got up and went behind a rice paper screen. In the nick of time, she was dressed in beige "tailleur" pants and a short-sleeved chemise.

- Scott and Kayo have contracted some kind of fever. We do not know exactly what it is but it incapacitated them both. We need your help.

- All right, I trust you have already set up the med bay. Monitor their vitals and give them some of the antibiotics I sent over last time…

- Already done.

She was surprised. Tracy island's inhabitants were not trained in medical practices. Brains was capable of topping a nurse's skills at best.

- Did Brains finally take medical classes?

- We have someone new here who can help. She is a bioengineer.

- I see. Nice addition to your team. I will be at your island in about 45 minutes. Make sure I can land safely on the runway.

- FAB.

The middle-aged Chinese woman was well known around the Polynesian islands for saving people from malaria outbreaks and for her volunteer work with impoverished communities. She had inherited an enormous fortune from her father, a Chinese business man, who sold all of his companies before he passed away. At first, she worked through Doctors without Borders but then decided to go on her own. When the money went low, she began offering her services to all the wealthy island owners around the southern hemisphere of the Pacific. Jeff Tracy had met her and decided to make her the family physicist about ten years back. The boys grew up with her as she became inevitably aware of the secret of International Rescue. Fortunately, she treated it as a professional secret and swore never to divulge any information about the organization. Plus, as she traveled around in her own aircraft, gifted pilot as she is, finding a good mechanic was not easy. Jeff had introduced her to Brains who began making regular maintenance on her craft. She insisted on paying him but he refused.
International Rescue was always her top priority. Jeff had made sure she would understand the urgency. When one of the boys was sick, she was summoned immediately. Routine checks were also very important: when it was that time of the year, she used to spend a few days at the island and could enjoy some comfort at the villa.

As Mei landed, she was greeted by Alan on the runway. He helped her carry her equipment to the medical bay. She took precautions, suspecting contagion. As she came in, she witnessed Brains was tending to Scott and Kayo. The engineer was relieved to see the doctor come in. They both wore oxygen masks and their vitals were being monitored on screen as previously told. She checked on the IV, dilution ratio written on the bag and dripping speed.

- Doctor Mei! I am r… really happy to see you!

Brains broke down all the information to the doctor. She began examining Scott first and then switched to Kayo, taking notes in between each. She reacted.

- This is peculiar. It Is still too early for a final diagnosis, but my guesses go towards meningitis. When did they start having symptoms?

- I heard they were discovered early this morning. Scott was unconscious, heavily sweating. Kayo could not move and struggled for breath.

- Were they fine yesterday?

- I think so, yes.

- This is not normal. I'll get down in the lab. Keep your eyes opened for any anomalies.

The doctor left, concerned.

There was an awkward silence in the living room. Everyone was restless. Doctor Chang's arrival did help in releasing some stress, yet they had gotten very little news of Scott and Kayo. Virgil had joined them after showering and went over to the piano. He began fiddling on the ivories a bit, trying to get a melody right. Gordon looked at him as Alan was resting on his lap. He frowned.

- How can you be so calm at a time like this? What if we all get infected and die?

His older brother stopped for an instant.

- Doctor Chang is here, Brains and Abigail are helping. I have faith in them.

- I dunno. What if they are too late? I'm beginning to think Scott caught that shit during the mission when he fell down that shaft.

Grandma Tracy smacked him behind the head.

- Language, kid!

Gordon rubbed his head.

- Oww. I'm sorry. That was not such a bad word anyway. Also, we're adults, I don't see what's wrong.

- I won't start a debate on words. If your father was here, you wouldn't swear like that.
Virgil began playing. It was a very cheerful ballad. His brothers smiled. Grandma did too. She pointed out Virgil to Gordon.

- We should all take Virgil as an example. He knows there is a solution to all problems.
- Hey! I know that too
- And he does not swear.

Alan kept smiling. He sighed.

- I hope Doctor Chang can come up and give us some news quickly.

John appeared. He had kept most communication channels opened from Tracy Island. He had also mirrored the patient monitoring on his dashboard computer.

- She is on her way upstairs. With good news.

The Doctor arrived in the living room. Everyone went silent. She began.

- I have made a preliminary diagnosis. It seems that Scott had contracted a mutated form of meningococcus bacteria. It has spread over to Kayo through exchange of body fluids.

Gordon giggled. Grandma smacked him again. The doctor looked at Gordon and went on.

- Saliva, Gordon. This means none of you might be at risk but I will be taking blood samples just to make sure. Sit at the kitchen table, each your turn.

Mei went back to the kitchen. Abigail arrived with a tray containing needles and test tubes. She looked at Gordon and smiled, whipping a tourniquet in the air. He shook his head.

- You are not touching me!

Virgil laughed as he went first. When all the boys had gone, the doctor gathered all the tubes and went down to the lab. Gordon had tears in his eyes. He really hated needles. Alan congratulated him.

- Nice job, bro! You did not faint this time!

Gordon sneered, leaving the kitchen, irritated.

With the gathered samples, Abigail and Mei went to the lab. The bioengineer made the slides while the doctor examined the lot. She was relieved.

- Good. No contagion. I am relieved.
- The mutations are not natural. This was engineered.
- You know better, I am sure. Have you tested your own blood sample?

Abigail nodded. She was lying. Since Mei arrived, she hid her arm, putting a vest on. She had always worn gloves and even when it was time to change them, she hid her left hand. There were already enough people aware of her secret, she would not want a foreigner to know about it, most
of all a doctor. Plus, her nanites would destroy the bacteria in the nick of time, regardless of the strain. The doctor went through her material and got out an antibiogram set.

- Alright then. Let's work on finding a good cure. I trust you already did a bit of microbiology?

- Yes. I'll start working on the antibiogram.

Brains called. Kayo had awakened. Mei left the lab for the med bay. When she was out of the picture, Abigail called up the black box's database on the holo-computer. She began looking through some of the files. John suddenly appeared and her access was blocked. She knocked on the desk.

- Are you checking EVERYTHING I do?

- Tell me what you are doing. Aren't you supposed to work on the cure?

- That is exactly what I am doing. Give me back my access… Please.

- What is it you're not telling me?

- This is engineered. And I think I know where it comes from. That's why I need my notes.

- Okay then, let's read this together.

He gave her access back. She opened a folder named "Nuke-7". The bacteria were photographed under a more precise microscope and added to the file. It was fitting with the slide she was looking at. John asked:

- What is Nuke-7?

- A renegade US lab full of illegal Russian scientists. Holling commanded some research on biological weapons. Nuke-7 was named like this because of the seven idiots that worked in it. We all believe it would blow up one day. They did not observe security protocols properly. Some of them got sick, then one day we didn't get any more news. I thought it was shut down by the World Health Organization. Either that or…

- Or they died. And Scott got in contact with their corpses. Is it a plausible explanation?

- Yes. This bacterium thrives in human tissues. If Scott did get in contact with the infected, it explains all.

- I don't know the details. We saw him get sick after the mission. I thought it was the chemical. Plus, he had some weird fluid on him.

- That's plausible. But how did he discover it? Nuke-7 was inside a nuclear shelter deep underground.

- Could Holling have built his plant right above to make sure nobody would ever get to the truth?

- If he did not want anyone to find it, maybe. You cannot underestimate that man.

They heard footsteps. The doctor was coming back. Abigail switched the holo-screen off and motioned at John.

- Not a word of this to her. I don't care what she thinks, just don't tell her anything about Nuke-7 or the fact that I knew what this bacterium is.
He disconnected. Abigail quickly got a tray out and began working on the antibiogram. She knew exactly what to use. As the doctor came inside, the bioengineer turned around to face her.

- Kayo is awake. She has temporary paralysis of the lower limbs but she is back to her senses.

- Good. I have found the right drug.

She explained her approach to the doctor who was in awe.

- You are truly a genius. I do admire your talent in the field.

- It's nothing, really. Let's just give them the medication.

Mei prepared the dilution. The IV was set up. Now, they would have to wait.

It was almost midnight in England. Penelope had made an extensive list of names and was looking to refine it so that the guest list for her Garden festival would only include one hundred people. The past festivals did get about two to three hundred guests, but the absence of her father and the rising costs of food convinced her to keep it minimal. She would invite the World Council's dignitaries, most of their subordinates, and a few other people who were close to her. She had added Scott as the representative of International Rescue. She made contact with Tracy island in hopes of speaking to him about it.

As the call came in, the Tracys were still in the living room, indulging on Grandma's freshly cooked hors d'oeuvre she had whipped up with the help of Max. The Lady witnessed the lot and was greeted warmly by Gordon.

- Lady Penelope! What a pleasant surprise

- Greetings. Did I miss some event?

- No. In fact, things are pretty bad here.

Virgil eyed him and turned towards the lady.

- Were. Now all is okay. Scott and Kayo have contracted some life-threatening infection. They are now out of danger and recuperating.

The Lady's heart went pounding. That was a frightening statement. She smiled in relief.

- I am happy that things could turn out so well. By this, it means that Scott will not be able to take the lead of International Rescue for a while?

- He will have to rest. We'll take care of things. And John will take over his administrative duties, so all is well. Alan will be on duty for Thunderbird one. He's been secretly wishing this for a while.

The young man rose his fist in the air.

- You betcha! Can't wait for my first solo mission in that bird!

- That's not likely to happen this quickly. I'll be on your back for a while until I can make sure you're not going to destroy it.
- Fine!

Alan pouted. Penelope smiled.

- Happy to know you are keeping your spirits up, gentlemen! I have a cordial invitation to make. Since Scott is on forced leave, I will need one of you to attend a Garden Festival that will be held at Creighton-Ward manor. This means meeting with the World Council dignitaries. Holling will also be there.

Gordon was puzzled.

- Why a festival? That sounds expensive.

- It is a family tradition my father would perpetuate every year before he left for India. A way of renewing ties with our associates and close relations.

- A way of showing Holling you're still in the picture?

- Kind of like that, yes. It is a mark of respect, after all. We aristocrats have a duty to fulfill. Not only to show off but also to ease tensions.

She looked around to all the boys. Virgil responded.

- I can't go, neither can Alan. With Scott and Kayo out for a while, we need to keep the fort. I suppose you can always ask Grandma or Brains. Even Gordon needs to stay if there is ever a call.

- But it is but for an evening, Virgil. A few hours at best. Do not forget the person sent is the face of your organization.

She did not want to say more as Grandma was in the living room. The old woman pointed to Gordon.

- He'll go. That'll make him practice not swearing in public. Alan can drop him in the afternoon and get him later. I think it's a good idea. If we play this right, maybe Casey will stop being on Scott's tail all the time. You need to make us proud.

Mitigated between happy and annoyed, Gordon smiled politely. Just being with Penelope would be enough.

- Okay, sure. I'll make you guys proud. You'll see!

Penelope smiled.

- Good then, it is settled. I will follow up with the details once all is arranged. Until then, take care of Kayo and your brother. He will need you more than anything.

They nodded as she disconnected.
This is why war began

He could hear the faint sound of a regular beep. His head was swimming, he opened his eyes. Everything was blurry, he could make out some shapes. He tried to get up, but fell back down realizing that he was not in control of his limbs anymore. His hands felt swollen and his legs weak. As Brains heard him stir, he went over to his bedside.

- Scott, what a relief! I am so glad you are okay,

He tried turning his head around but was in so much pain he grimaced. Brains urged him not to move an notified Doctor Chang of Scott's recovery. He tried to speak.

- Brains… What happened?

His voice was faint. He was helpless and weak, that irritated him. Doctor Chang came towards him and grasped the hand he was deliberately trying to rise.

- Scott, hear me out. You need to rest now. Do not concern yourself with anything.

- I can't stay here…

- You have to. When you are better, I will let you get up. Pipe down and sleep. Don't make me sedate you.

She knew him as the most stubborn young man she ever came across. Not the most, maybe the second most stubborn, number one being Jeff Tracy. The apple did not fall down from the tree. She remembered the time she had to give him sedatives to stop him from walking on his broken leg. It was a safe dosage, even so, he was trying to get up. His father was there at that time and shook some sense into him. It was easier then.

Scott let himself go and laid on his back. Brains lifted the bed head with the electronic command. He was able to see Kayo at his side. He asked:

- Is she okay?

The doctor responded.

- Yes. She is sleeping. Rest now. You both need some time to recover.

- I feel so helpless...

- You are lucky. There are amazing people around here who acted just in time to save your life. A few hours more and you would have stopped breathing. Now don't let them down, rest and recover. They will need you.

He made himself comfortable and fell asleep. Brains was grateful.

- Mei, thank you! We could not have saved them had you not come here in time.

She wanted to accept all the praise, but she clearly had nothing to do with the discovery of the bacterial strain.

- You will have to thank the young bioengineer. She is the one who identified the threat and found the right antibiotic. I was merely here to assist and dispense proper care.
- Good then! We'll let them rest. Let's have a coffee together in my lab. It has been a long time! You could stay here for a few days also.

- That sounds like a good idea.

They left the med together, leaving the patients to their rest.

Three days had gone by. Scott had recovered and began walking around with an escort. He was a bit annoyed having someone by his side at all time. Also, nobody had told him about the festival and neither about the fact that Gordon was selected to be the frontman. He walked slowly to his father's desk and sat down. There were no more papers on it.

- Where did all the paperwork go?

Virgil, Grandma and Abigail were in the living room. John appeared and answered his brother.

- I cleared it out for you. How many times did I tell you I'm better than you to do this whole administrative stuff? It only took me a few hours. You can start fresh now.

- What else did you hide from me?

Virgil looked at his brother, seeing he was in a terrible mood.

- Alan is doing great with Thunderbird one. He took her out for a few test flights and all went well. You can relax, brother. Take care of yourself now.

- I'm still concerned about the fact that Holling will be at that meeting. And about what happened at the chemical plant.

He popped out the layout of the plant on his holo-screen. Abigail reacted.

- Holling must have cleared them out by now. It's useless to go back there. He is not dangerous in public. He will only try to outsmart people. He knows when to pick a fight. I doubt he will do anything else than praise International Rescue.

- Still. Gordon was not the finest choice…

Grandma went near him, putting a glass of her freshly blended kale smoothie in front of Scott. That smoothie was a swirly brown instead of green which did not look very appetizing. She put he hands on her hips and looked at the elder.

- Don't underestimate him. I have faith in each and every one of you. It's his turn, he needs to learn and I'm sure he will behave.

- How can you be so sure?

- He will be with Lady Penelope. Never underestimate feminine power over men.

He understood what she meant by that. He felt an urge to check on Kayo.

- I'll go rest then. Thanks, everyone.

He left towards his room, accompanied by Grandma. Abigail stood, stretching.

- Well, looks like a good time to hit the gym. I'm rusty.
- Sounds like a good idea.
- Maybe I'll go swimming after.
- Really?
- I said maybe.

They left, arguing in that same fashion.

Doctor Chang had remained at the island after Brain's invitation. She also wanted to make sure Scott and Kayo's health had improved before leaving. Grandma Tracy was happy to have her around. She usually joked about wanting Meiying to be her daughter in law and marry her son, which kind of put the doctor in an awkward position. She did have an interest in Jeff but her duty came before all, as his did too. She just laughed along with Grandma about it. They remained up late at night playing poker and Mah-jongg, one of the elderly woman's favorite money game. Turns out she was pretty good at it and managed to win a lot. Fortunately for the doctor, they were using tokens. After another win, Grandma went to fix some coffee. Mei asked:

- I was meant to ask where the young woman came from? The bioengineer? Is she a member of your family?
- Abigail? Nah. She popped up some time ago. The boys found her during a rescue mission.
- Found?

The old woman came back with two cups of black coffee. They both liked it bland.

- Yeah. Well, since you know much about International Rescue, I don't think it's taboo to talk about her also. She has some very nicely crafted cybernetics prosthetics. Brains told us cybernetics were illegal, so we're keeping her here for now.
- Doesn't she have a family? Friends? Anyone out there?
- Dunno. Guess not. Maybe she does but she can't get there anymore. The boys don't want the GDF implicated in this, and neither do they want to let her go. I guess she's stuck here for now.
- I see. At least she has a good entourage. I hope this life does suit her well.
- She helps around the house, I can't complain. Brains can't for her to start helping him out.

Mei nodded. She was listening carefully as she had quite an interest in the story.

- She is also a prodigy. I recall it was her quick thinking which helped with Scott and Kayo's sickness.
- If you say so. You guys really worked it out well. That's an amazing job.
- I will go relax in my room now. Thank you for this wonderful evening.
- Anytime, doc.

The doctor rose and went to her room, taking her cup of coffee along with her.
The next day, everyone had gathered by the pool. Scott and Kayo kept in the shade, as the doctor asked, and refrained from going in the water. Alan and Gordon were playing volleyball and Abigail was hesitating to take her clothes off. She rolled her pants hems to her knees and dipped both her legs in the water. She could not feel the temperature. That was always a blow to the heart. She wiggled her feet, throwing water at Alan. He shielded himself with his hands.

- Hey! Come in the water, Abigail! I'm sure you can help me win against him. You have a bathing suit, right?

She sighed.

- Yes. I have a nice one I bought a few days ago when we did the shopping thingy.

- The Virtual shopping session, right? What color did you buy it?

- Orange and green.

- I want to see it.

At first, she just wanted to leave. She became ashamed of her scars as she realized all the other humans around her were whole, and she was not. She felt safe only around the other engineers who had similar cybernetics. Yet she would have to face the truth and accept she could not go back to that time.

Virgil came from the kitchen, dropping his towel on a chair. He was done exercising. Noticing that Abigail had both feet in the water, he smiled.

- That's one step more. You can do it.

- You're overly optimistic, mister perfect body.

He jumped in the water, confiscating the ball from his brother's hands. He threw it at Abigail.

- Your turn. Think you can beat me?

"Hell yeah" she thought. Maybe that was the right time. But they would stare. And that was what she was afraid of. He motioned to her to come. She sighed.

- You will be very sorry about this.

She took off her shirt and her pants. Her bathing suit was a set of halter top and hipster bikini panties in a beautiful burnt orange with green foliage. But that was not what the people around saw. Other than the fact that she had a rather strong build, her left shoulder was scarred, with the blackish gray alloy of the cybernetic implant digging into her skin. It was the same for her legs. She took a deep breath and jumped in the water with the others. She knew they stared… but why should she care? She smashed the ball over the net in a quick motion, and Gordon bounced it back just in time. They resumed playing as if nothing had happened.

Doctor Chang went to sit down at the table, as all the youngsters were having fun. She studied Abigail, trying to get a good shot at her, secretly aiming her phone's camera towards her. She took a couple of good pictures and quickly withdrew it as she heard someone come over. It was Brains. He decided to join her for breakfast.

As they were talking about some physics, Mei got a call. She answered and motioned to Brains with a finger to wait.
- I am sorry, I will have to leave very soon. The clinic requires my help. Can you give me a hand with my tools?

Brains happily volunteered. He saw the doctor off as she went back to her aircraft and left.

Penelope had sent all the invitations for her event to be scheduled on the 12th of July. It was the ideal moment to hold the event. That left her with an entire week of planning. The answers came in faster than she expected. The summer period was a moment of respite for politicians of the World Council to enjoy some good time with family and friends. In all, she had roughly seventy-five confirmations on hand. This was more than she had expected. The traiteur was ordered, tables, runners, decorations, all the usual decorations were taken from the bowels of the manor and placed in the yard. It would be an amazing event. The pagoda and tents were set up in case of rainy weather. The time at which the dignitaries were going to arrive was at dusk when the roses would give out their most amazing scents. Then there would be a visit to the garden and a cocktail. It was casual, yet all could appreciate a time in the lush garden.

The day of the festival, Alan dropped Gordon off with Thunderbird 1 at noon. The young man was still groggy and needed some sleep. Penelope greeted him with opened arms. They held each other for a long time. Gordon rested his head on her shoulder.

- I'm so happy to see you, finally! I was so happy they let me go.

- So am I, Gordon.

- I'd spend all day like this.

- We don't have a lot of time. Quickly, come inside. The tailor is waiting.

Gordon proceeded to an adjacent room. A tall man with a thin mustache was waiting. He motioned to the young man so he would stand up on a stool while he took his measurements. Gordon was no stranger to have some tailored costume made for him. His father had insisted that all his sons wear tailored suit in specific occasions. He had done this a few times in his life. He stretched his arms. Penelope came in.

- A lot of other very important people from the Council will be here. It is your chance to make your presence known.

- Did Casey confirm her presence?

- Unfortunately, she could not make it. She will be sending her right hand, lieutenant Colonel Baker.

- That must be what you had wanted from the start?

- Yes. I am glad that happened.

- Casey has been acting weird lately. She has been pressuring Scott a lot.

- This is one of the many things I want to get to the bottom of. Is it really Casey or someone else pressuring her?

- We'll see this tonight.

The tailor put away his sewing kit and exited the room. Gordon stepped down and joined his Lady
on the couch. He held an arm around her shoulders. She smiled.

- So how fares your brother and Kayo?

- Better. They were able to walk around the house yesterday. Scott is so pissed! Virgil had to follow him everywhere to make sure he wouldn't strain himself. Kayo is resting. For once, she's not the one trying to resist.

- I believe she is maturing and becoming wiser. Scott needs a wise woman in his life.

Gordon smiled. Lady Penelope knew for a long time what was happening between Kayo and Scott. She had kept it a secret from Jeff. She rose as she looked at the time.

- There are many preparations left. Feel free to get some rest, you must be exhausted from all that jet lag. Make yourself at home.

He smiled as she left the room. He sighed, this was going to be a terrible evening. But he had to do it. He was the frontman of International Rescue tonight.

Doctor Chang was back at her home in the south-eastern Philippines. What she had witnessed today could be the panacea to one of her long unsolved problems. She dropped her material on the floor and went over to a small bar where she poured herself a glass of baiju, a strong Chinese rice wine. She sat down on her sofa and opened a private comm. An old man answered, in quite a cheery mood.

- Oh hello, Mei. How is the weather over at your place?

- Pretty nice. A shame I was on an emergency call.

- Did everything turn out well?

- Yes, especially. And, I came across a very interesting sight today.

- Do tell.

- I talked to you about my father's sixty million dollars botched investment, did I not?

- How can I forget? We all lost money on that project. My contribution was not as high as your father's but losing a million dollars is not less pleasant.

- I swore by my honor that I would right the wrongs that were done to my father in these negotiations. I hold here some important information.

The old man was clearly curious. He was all smiles.

- And what is that?

- Holling's prize. I found her.

- Her? You mean Athena?

She downed her baiju in one gulp and went for another one. The old man frowned.

- Where is she?
- Hiding. I'm not going to tell until I have found a way to get her. I have a feeling she was not aware that she drew that much attention.

- Hmmm… This will be a difficult task. Holling is not a man who likes being played.

- He is a malleable person. I know how to work him out.

- Let us hope that you can, or both ours heads will roll. This is not a game.

- He played us. Now he pays. I will get him.

- I pray that you do not fail, then.

The man cut the communication. She smiled, going through the pictures she took that morning. Now, she only needed to find a way to drag Holling on Abigail's tail and find a way to get her father's money back. What if International Rescue should get in the way? She preferred not to think about this. After all, they were guilty of sheltering her, so why feel bad about collateral damage?

The servants were dressed for the evening in black and white suits with red and pink ties. Parker was no exception. He would also be in charge of tailing Holling and try to spy on him. Gordon was to remain mostly at the aristocrat's side as he knew none of the dignitaries and would require to be introduced. He was going to keep an eye on her also.

Penelope had donned a beautiful pink and white silk dress with a delicate embroidery on the hem, a fine silken scarf hung from her elbows embellished with hand painted roses and her hair high in a fancy bun. Gordon fixed his tie as he was getting ready to enter the yard. Some guests had begun to arrive and he wanted to be there to greet them with Lady Penelope.

He was first introduced to the minister of World defense and a General. Both praised International Rescue in many ways, trying to learn a bit more through very though questions. Surprisingly, Gordon evaded nicely and remained polite and courteous. They applauded his quick wits. Yet, he felt that the minister was concerned about the organization's calling. He insisted in the fact that they would always remain in constant collaboration with the GDF. That had seemed to appease him. He had similar conversations with a lot of other important heads of the Council and had done a very good first impression. He was praised also praised for his handsome looks. He felt proud.

Meanwhile, Penelope was greeting her guests. When she came to the Lieutenant Colonel, they withdrew from the mass and found a seat in a more tranquil place further in the garden paths.

- Dear Laura, I am so happy you have made it here. How fares thee?

- Busy as always, Penelope. I am glad the Colonel asked me to come in her stead. There is a lot going on I could not talk about inside the headquarters. We are under heavy surveillance since the Janus incident.

Laura toned her voice down a bit.

- The Colonel has a young daughter. She has an incurable illness. To think that today's science cannot even save a young girl's life… Her husband left her three years ago, unable to bear between the girl's problems and his wife's station.

- Oh dear! Is this why the Colonel is so hard on herself?
- There is more. There was once a time I overheard Holling and her talking about finding a cure. That day was the first time I saw her smile in a very long while. He has asked her for a few favors. Ever since then, she knows that if she ever upsets him, she might lose any chance to see her daughter cured.

- Are you certain he possesses such a cure? Or can he possibly have the people and the material to research it?

- He has a lot of resources, I give him that. Intel has told me that he has laboratories, factories, and even employs doctors and nurses for pharmaceutical research. His R&D department of Holling Military is enormous. His bank account also is ever since he has been cleared of all suspicions by the Council.

Penelope began looking around. Some guests were making their way along the stone walkway

- This is rather distressing news, Laura. Thank you. We will have to talk again later. I need to tend to the guests.

She rose and went back to the steps of the manor, ringing a small bell held by one of her servants.

- Ladies and gents! I, Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward, welcome you to this edition of the garden festival on behalf of all the Creighton-Ward household. Today, we shall first have a toast to our wondrous leaders, armed forces, researches and every single actor who works hard in making this world a better place for everyone.

She rose her glass as the crowd did the same.

- To prosperity and peace.

As she ended her sentence, the rumbling of thunder was heard in the distance. She was startled and dropped her glass. The audience turned to watch the sky as menacing clouds began to gather above. A servant quickly picked up her broken glass and gave her another one. The dignitaries raised their glasses and took a sip, honoring the half-failed toast. They resumed their discussions when the Lady announced.

- There might be a bit of rain, ladies and gents. We shall move the hors-d'oeuvres inside the grand ballroom and wait until it subsides before going back. Just a very English setback.

The dignitaries laughed, quite happy to get inside. Some of them were annoyed while others had gotten used to England's rainy weather and did not mind at all. The servants began moving the tables inside and picking up the platters of food. Gordon went closer to Penelope.

- I have not seen Holling yet. Do you think he's late?

- He did confirm his presence. I doubt he will miss an occasion to show off. Let us wait.

Marcus Holling arrived a little passed eight o'clock. It was raining outside, so a servant went down to greet him by his car with an umbrella. He buttoned his fancy black velvet embroidered coat as he made his way up the front stairs of the manor. As he came in, many women greeted him, mostly wives of some of the dignitaries. He was one handsome and charming man, after all. He kissed their hands and exchanged a few greetings before proceeding through the hall. Gordon caught a glimpse of him as he was having a discussion with the representative for the World Wildlife conservation. She was a pretty young woman, about his age, and they exchanged a lot of common knowledge about oceans. He excused himself as he walked towards Holling, addressing him in a
polite matter.

- Greetings mister Holling. It is a pleasure to meet you in person.

- The pleasure is all mine. To whom do I owe the honor? I do not recall you from any previous meeting?

- It is actually the first one. My name is Gordon, I represent International Rescue.

- Holling smiled. He grabbed a drink from a passing servant's tray and went back to the young man.

- This is interesting. I do recall your organization saving the workers in one of my factories recently! I am very grateful to have had the chance to witness your prowess.

- We answer to those in need, Sir. It is our duty.

- Yes, it is important to cling to such a duty, is it not? Lest you become lost and wander through unsafe areas…

- Begging your pardon?

- An expression, mister Gordon. Your job is to save lives…. I do recall your crafts to be one of the most technologically advanced and powerful flying machines ever built by men. This is no small achievement. Not anyone can take a glimpse at those marvels.

- True. Our technology is advanced. But it is no obstacle to any smart mind who wishes to work hard and discover even better technologies. And we encourage that.

- You do know how to dodge a question. Nonetheless, my trade is not aircrafts but mainly defenses and medical science. A lot of new breakthroughs have been done by our research divisions. It is no less impressive than your Thunderbirds.

Gordon had made up his mind about Holling. Pointless chatter with an arrogant expression, a sneering face, all that in one. He knew the man had tried to push him a few times to make him overreact but he handled nicely.

Parker was just behind them, melting in the crowd, serving food and drink to the guests. When Gordon and Holling parted, he followed the man all the while. He had seen him stop to admire the various paintings hanging on the walls. As he was sometimes stopped by one or two guests, he resumed his advance towards the corridor where the art gallery was. Parker followed him as he went inside, admiring the artifacts. He watched him for a while, as Holling remained inside the gallery and contemplated the collection of rare museum pieces that had been gathered by Lord Creighton-Ward.

Penelope was entertaining her guests and lost track of time. Eventually, she caught up and looked for Holling everywhere. Gordon was tailing her but had lost himself in the crowd. She was alone. Even Parker was nowhere in sight.

She had more than one trick up her sleeve. During events, she usually asked Parker to wear a tracking device to be able to find him in case she strayed or was dragged along by others guests. On her wrist, she wore a bracelet of pearls and metal ornaments. One of these ornaments was a proximity scanner. She noticed Parker was near the art gallery. As she drew closer, she noticed her butler's presence.
- Is there a problem, Parker?

- M'lady, Mister Holling is in the gallery. Do you want me to get him out?

- No, that would be rude. I will see to him myself. Make sure you stand guard at the door so nobody comes in. I will try to get something out of him.

As Penelope entered the gallery, Holling contemplating her father's collection. He turned around as he heard her come inside. He bowed politely.

- My lady.

She went up to him.

- Mister Holling. I would have thought you would remain in the ballroom with all the guests.

- Your father, Lord Creighton-Ward, had once bragged about his collection of artifacts. As eager as I was to witness it with my own eyes, I could not wait. I do realize now that he was not taking it lightly. It is a marvelous collection.

He walked slowly, admiring most of the paintings on the walls. She walked alongside him.

- My father was a man of virtue and also a very important person during the war. He salvaged some treasures and has asked the Council to be their curator. That is most generous of him.

- Yes, quite. Your father was a man of good taste. But not very good with his finances…

- What do you imply?

- He had a tendency to let go of his money easy. He did fund part of one of our most esteemed projects, but unfortunately was left unable to fulfill his claim completely. This is most saddening as the project had fallen in disregard after this.

- Are you talking about the veteran project? We both know how this had turned out.

- If only we did not lack so much funds! And it was reported that the failure was not on our behalf. The man chosen to wear our implants had heavy drinking problems and narcotics addiction. Diabetes is what killed him.

- Are you sure about this? That was not what was stated by the news.

- Journalism is a fantastic way to get attention, not to display facts. If they had consulted with our team of scientists, they would not have perpetrated such a ridiculous claim.

- And what about now? What do you intend to do?

He turned towards her, smiling.

- You are awfully curious, my lady. How does my company's work concern you?

- If you require funding, I would gladly be of assistance.

He laughed.

- Judging the state of your dear father's finances, I would not make such a claim. After all, you do rely on his money to live. Aristocracy requires you to keep up with trends and now, it is not the
time for a Lady such as yourself to invest in research they barely understand.

She was reddening with anger. He kept smiling, looking at her sporadically.

- Would you turn down some funding? That is pretty inconsiderate of you.

- Not turn down. Simply selecting who my business partners are.

He eventually arrived at a display in which some jade artifacts were displayed. Penelope followed him silently. He stopped and admired the content of the glass box.

- Ahh! Han dynasty. Was that not an amazing time to recall?

- Quite, Sir. This was a very important part of Chinese history.

- What is your favorite part of that story, my lady?

He had turned the subject around completely. She was still mad but she searched her mind to recall the manuscript she read when a teenager. She could not come up with something to outsmart him. He went on.

- I see you did not share such an interest as your father's or mine for the matter. Let me tell you about my favorite part. The Han period was the golden age of Chinese antiquity. But at one point, the Emperor died, leaving his young son unable to rule. Countless people disputed the throne: all were abusing their stations. They were taken down by the courageous lords of the realm. This had brought a small respite to the kingdom but then, a tyrant was summoned to rule. He offended the emperor, the court, the officials and was untouchable. Yet, do you know what undid him?

- I can only suspect that again rose another brave lord to dispose of this despot.

He clapped his hands.

- Almost. He has been undone by the most unlikely individual.

He did not let her time to finish. He went on.

- A woman. Afterward, the empire sank into a whirlpool of battles and incessant power struggles. The realm was plunged into darkness, people suffered from famine and were left to eat the bark off trees or resort to cannibalism. Fields were strewn with the corpses of entire armies. You see, Lady Creighton-Ward, this is why war began: because of a woman.

He got closer to her and lifted her chin making sure she was looking right in his eyes. His hand was firm, he was hurting her. She dared not move.

- Do not take my advice lightly: if your plan is to prove me wrong, you shall be met with strong opposition. If I find you meddling in my affairs again, you will lose your so precious seat on the Council. Did I make myself clear? Lest you want to be the reason for a new war to break, I strongly advise you to refrain from insisting.

At that moment, Gordon came inside. Holling took back his hand in a quick theatrical gesture and exited the gallery, getting a glimpse of the young man as he left. Gordon frowned at him as he went over to Penelope. She was standing straight, in a defiant stance, her chin red from the pressure of Holling's finger. Gordon noticed. That made him angrier.

- Penelope, are you ok?
She was squeezed her fist tightly. Gordon took her hands, trying to calm her down. He knew he could not hug her in public and refrained from any emotional gesture. He looked at her in the eyes. She responded.

- I despise that man so much. He threatened me, yet I cannot do anything!

- We'll find a way to get to him. Let's work on that.

He offered her his arm. They went back to the grand ballroom. Parker caught up with them.

- M'lady. Mister Holling left.

- I guess it's better that way. He only came in here to deliver his warning. We will keep an eye on him…

The rain had stopped. The festivities could resume.

The office of Marcus C. Holling was draped in earth tone colors. The sofas were a brownish red padded leather, ornate with mahogany wood, the carpet a dark greyish green and the walls were painted in light brown. There was a bay window in which he could have an amazing view of London's most busy venues. He had good taste: statuettes of horses, Greek gods, busts of well know mathematicians and some other artefact were laid out on bookshelves and tables.

Marcus sat behind his desk and he turned his holo-computer on. There were a few messages received through the night. It was mostly normal since his business was conducted everywhere in the world. One in particular caught his attention. The network address was masked. He made sure to check it for potential threats. Seeing none was declared by his software, he opened it revealing solely a short message, a contact number and an attached picture. It read "I know what you want. Hear now what I want". Very few individuals used portable phones these days, as holographic communications were more common. He opened the picture, revealing a cropped image of Abigail from her left profile. He was clearly capable of seeing her left arm and part of her legs. Holling smiled. He put on his earpiece and made a call. His only words were:

- She is awakened. It begins.

He hung up. Looking at the picture, he could not make out the surroundings. The image was cut so tightly around Abigail that he could not see anything else. He took out a mobile phone from one of his desk drawers and signaled the number. The voice at the other end was electronically masked and he could not even track it.

- I am listening.

The voice was silent and the signal quality was bad, as if from far away.

- I know where to find her

- Tell me then.

- Not like this. I want a refund of my investment.

- Is that so? Tell me who you are. Then we'll talk business.

- Meet me at the Boulevard Hotel in Lima, Peru, tomorrow at noon. Send me five million dollars to the following bank account: 598735, bank of Sweden. If the money is not here, there is no deal and
no meeting.

- Very well.

Holling hung up. He laughed. Things were getting heated. He made another call.

- My trusted associate! I have a job that requires your talent. Yes. We have to meet with someone at a hotel in Peru tomorrow by noon. I will send the necessary funds and all the details to you. Make sure you take care of this person and get this precious information. It is your chance to win back my confidence. I am waiting for your report.

He ended the call, rearing back in his chair and joining his fingers, satisfied. Things were beginning to get interesting.
Reflections

I would like to thank everyone for reading so far. Thanks you for the reviews, they are much appreciated.

Warning: depictions of violence in this text.

After the festival, Penelope had to escort all the guests at the door and make sure the servants would pick up the remainder of the party before going to bed. Even after all this excitement, she was not tired. On the other hand, Gordon was exhausted. He found a comfortable sofa in one of the Lady's apartments and fell asleep on it. As she came in, he was snoring aloud. She smiled looking at him. Holling's words resounded in her head as she was trying to make sense of all of it. If he did consider himself a tyrant, she could not stand and wait. Yet, how can she take him seriously, if none of what he said made any sense? She completely forgot to turn on her communicator and get a recording of Holling's threats. Next time, she would not be so reckless.

She did not want to wake Gordon, he would need to get some sleep before the journey back home. As he had only gotten permission to stay for the evening, he would need to leave very soon. Penelope donned an evening gown and undid her hair. As presentable as ever, she called Tracy island. John picked it up and forwarded it to Scott who was by the pool reading a book.

- Hello Lady P! So, how did the evening go?

- Hello Scott. The evening was quite entertaining to say the least. Most of all, the presence of mister Holling. Also, I have learned something important about Colonel Casey you might want to hear.

- Give me a sec, I'll go to the office.

He switched the communication towards the living room's central holo projector. Alan tagged along when he saw his brother coming inside. The elder sat at his father's desk and resumed.

- Tell me about Casey. I'm eager to hear what she has been up to.

- I don't know what you were expecting but she does not do it to be a nuisance.

- Why then? What good explanation is there?

- Casey has a daughter. She is sick. Holling has promised her a cure.

- He owns a lot of shares and has a company in pharmaceuticals, so he can make that claim all right. I understand now. She really does believe he will cure her daughter?

- It seems. He is targeting her vulnerability in order to get what he wants from her. I will need to dig deeper to see who else is in his claws. This will be harder than we thought. Most of all because he knows I have been meddling in his affairs and has threatened me.

Scott frowned.

- What did he say?

- He warned me that should I continue looking into him, he would make sure my seat on the Council is revoked. I wouldn't put it past him to put his threats to actions.
- Who knows what he can do… Don't do anything rash. Make sure you keep us informed about whatever you do. We are behind you in this. I'll ask John to keep an eye on your communications and movements.

- Thank you. Are you going to come and pick up Gordon soon?

- I guess it would be better if he stayed at your place just in case. We'll manage if there is a mission.

- Thank you, Scott.

- Nah, we thank you, Lady P. You've done a great job. Stay safe.

He hung up. She was relieved. Having Gordon with her might ease her worries a little. She laid her eyes on him and noticed he was waking up. He rubbed his eyes and stretched, getting up from the sofa.

- Did I miss something?

- Nothing dearie. Let's get to bed, shall we?

- Wait, I'll have to contact Scott first.

- No need, I have it covered. He agreed for you to stay. Let's get to bed now.

He kissed her on the forehead. He stretched out his hand, helping her to rise. She smiled, joining him.

The weather in Lima, Peru was sunny and scorching hot. Meiying did not plan in staying there for very long. Sitting in her room with her tablet computer on her lap, she was waiting to see if any transfer had been done. It was almost noon and nothing had appeared. She continued to wait, going to the window often and looking shyly through the blinds. She began to realize it was stupid to approach Holling in such a way. What if she had gone through directly to him without remaining anonymous? Would he have been open to receive her? No, this is the best way, she thought aloud. She would get money and he would have the information. What he was going to do with it was his problem afterwards.

Her father meant a lot to her, and she had told him on his deathbed that she would make sure his honor would be safe. He was troubled by Holling's inability to deliver project Olympus in whole when it was supposed to launch. The sixty million dollars were suppose to secure him a place in Olympus if anything went wrong, but Holling cut all ties with the investors when he was caught. At first, they thought of him a proud and courageous man to take all the blame on him but became disillusioned as he never came back to them when he was acquitted. Chang Zhongshe had passed away with the conviction that Holling had wronged him and his daughter wanted to go through with seeing that the money would come back. She was also a little low on funds, an investment would not hurt. She did inject a lot of money in communities and projects and had to support enormous expenses each year.

Noon passed one. There was a deposit in the account with a notice included in the comments. She looked at the message. A total of 1 cent was registered. The message read as follow: "Contact me. We need to talk". She immediately called Holling, masking her voice again.

- Is this a joke?

- First, I do not answer to threats. If you need money, and can supply relevant information, I will
gladly receive you personally. Do you accept?

She hesitated, becoming nervous. He was not as malleable as he let it show.

- Suggest a place and time.
- Give me your name. Then you will be brought to me.
- I require a proof of good will first.

The tablet made a "ding" noise. A total deposit of 2,5 million dollars was registered. He went on.

- Now it is your turn. You shall go downstairs in the hall and wait. A man will come bearing a sign with your name on it. You will follow him and we shall talk.
- Call me Sun.
- Good, Sun. I expect you to be there in less than ten minutes.

He hung up. She was so nervous she wanted to cry. Picking up the only bag she had brought along, she looked in the mirror to see if her outfit was okay. Black pants, a black blouse and a black coat, very large designer shades and a black leather bag were her only belongings. She even made sure to wear flat soles not to draw attention.

Meiying sat in the hall and waited. A short man with black mutton chops and a large mustache came inside. He was wearing a driver's cap but his attire did not quite fit with it: leather coat, dark washed-out jeans with hanging hems and cowboy boots. He stayed by the door and held a small carton with the name "SUN" written in an horrible handwriting. Mei hesitated. She had no choice. She got up and met with the man who did not even say a word. He held the door for her and showed her to a parked black sedan outside the building. The tinted windows prevented anyone to see inside. She stared at the man as she sat down in the vehicle. He shut the door when she was inside.

The car's engine was started. They took off. The driver was not visible, a tinted glass screen separated him and the passenger. On that same screen, Holling appeared. Mei kept her shades.

- Ahhh… A lot more comfortable, is it not? Now that I can see you, let's talk.
- Were you not supposed to be there to greet me so we can talk face to face?
- Unfortunately, I have some urgent business in the office that requires my presence. But, I am listening.

He was seated in a large leather sofa, his legs and fingers crossed. He seemed like he was waiting for something. She had no choice but to reply, as he was staring at her through the screen.

- I know where Athena is.
- Oh? Do you? How can I be sure you know?
- Isn't that picture enough?

He smiled.

- One picture means very little. How can I be sure you took it?
- I did. And I know where she is.

- So, tell me then!

She hesitated. If it was meant to be that easy, she wanted to make sure nobody would go back up to her. Snitching was not her stuff, yet, she could not turn down money.

- She is on a private island on the southern hemisphere. I am not saying more unless I get my entire payment.

- This is not how it works. I ask, you talk. The money is proportional to the precision of the answer. Until then, continue.

Mei bit her lip. She was in trouble. She did not think it would go that way. In every meeting she attended with her father, Holling was the righteous and good man. He even got walked on by a lot of rich businessmen and aristocrats when he presented his pharmaceutical projects. He was turned down more than once but kept going. She knew he could be easily baited from what she remembered. Something had snapped in his mind, he was not the same man as before. More confident, arrogant to a point where he was simply irritating, with a sickening smile. She was the one getting played. She would have to deliver all the information and try to be convincing.

- It is a private residence. They told me she washed ashore.

- Who are "they"?

- A family I am taking care of. They are not worth mentioning. I have been their doctor for a while now.

- Tell me "Sun", what if something happened to this family? What would you do?

- What should I do? Carry on with my life.

- That easily? You? A doctor who has been caring for them? How many years have you known them, really? I'm interested in knowing why someone like you would give up information about a family she was caring for in exchange for money? You are a terrible practitioner and a despicable human being.

- That is not for you to judge.

She was starting to have stomach cramps. Where was he going with all his questioning? The whole situation was getting out of hand. She needed to find some way to get out of this. She took off her glasses. He clapped his hands.

- You do have eyes! How pretty! Now tell me your real name, Sun.

- Chang.

- Now I see it. You are Chang Zhongshe's progeny. As I thought, you are as ruthless as your father. A bit more careless, though. Let's have it: why betray your patients?

- They are only wealthy customers. And the money I bring in while giving you this information will permit me to fund my charities and organizations for ten years. I need this.

He slapped his thighs.

- Why didn't you say so earlier? That is one good deed I will gladly finance! The money is yours, if
you can bring me Athena. Do you have any idea how you will deliver her to me? Or do you expect me to knock on their door and claim my due?

She paused. She had not thought this through yet.

- No, not yet. I think I might be able to take her away from there.
- How, I wonder? Do you have an infallible plan?
- Not… yet.

He laughed.

- So, you came here, thinking I would jump around in excitement and give you five million dollars for a cropped photograph? Miss Chang, I am a very busy and very important man. I do require some help in taking care of things, as I cannot do everything myself. And you come here with no plan, expecting me to help AND pay? That is not how we do things. Money is something hard earned. If you want it, you need to work for it.

- What do you expect me to do, Sir?

He raised his fist near his lips, in thoughts, staring at Mei. He then raised his head, indicating he was done.

- Since you were honest, or I believe you were, I will send you the five million dollars. But…!

He rose.

- But, I know you are hiding things from me. I hate secrets. This is why I am offering you to participate in a fun activity.

He took a small grey remote from the side table in his hand and pressed a button. The back of the car was filling up with a weird smoke. Mei tried to reach the door controls, but there was neither a handle to open it from the inside, neither a window control. Her lungs were filling up with the gas, her head became dizzy. She heard Holling speak as she was slowly sinking in unconsciousness.

- You still have not yet met my expectations … …

It was nighttime on Tracy Island. Scott was making a lot of progress in his recovery. He felt different than usual towards his brothers, he was a lot colder and less inclined to open up. Not even Kayo or Grandma could get him to talk about it.

That night, he took an old rubber LED lantern, a keepsake from when he was a kid, and went through a crude path at the end of the pool platform. Through the rocky formation, a crude passage had been dug, going down the mountain towards a cove. When the tides rose, the water filled the base of the cove, leaving a ledge untouched by the water. It was only ten feet deep at best. He had dropped his lantern in by accident when he was younger and had witnessed the beauty of the water reflection on the ceiling. It was truly a relaxing sight. He then went there often when he needed some time alone, tied his lantern to a string and put it in the water.

As he was watching the moving lights, he heard some noise. Virgil had followed him down. He had waited an opportunity to have a chat with his elder.

When he arrived, Scott was watching the undulating lights, ignoring him. As he went closer, he noticed that his brother's eyes were filled with tears. Scott began:
- You have no idea how powerless that made me feel. I could not move, not even think.

The second eldest went closer and delivered a warm hug. Scott went on, clutching at his brother:

- I was so afraid… It made me realize how frail we are, how easy it is to be on the edge between life and death.

- It’s all over now, brother. I understand it must have been hard. I was afraid to lose you.

- You always keep a cool head, what would you have done if I passed away?

- I… I don't want to think about that.

Virgil's eyes also filled with tears.

- Every time we go out on a mission, I convince myself that nothing is going to happen. That all is going to be fine. But if anything goes wrong…

They wept quietly, holding each other tight. Scott then released his brother and looked him in the eyes with a serious look on his face.

- Promise me, if anything ever happens to me, you will take the lead of International Rescue and make sure you continue Dad's legacy.

Virgil sobbed, wiping his eyes and taking a deep breath.

- I promise. I'll make sure our younger brothers are okay and carry on.

He sighed, realizing the weight of his words.

- This is cruel. How can we even imagine life without you, Scott?

- The same way we didn't expect it for dad. But we must carry on our duty and save lives.

- Yet who will save ours if anything goes wrong?

There was a silence. People were grateful once International Rescue came. But what if they botched a mission? They had learned through previous failures but never had seen anyone die on their watch. Scott looked back at the lights then at his brother with a determined look.

- We are not going to let that happen, right?

Virgil smirked, he had regained some confidence. Doubt had dissipated from his mind.

- Never.

- Good. Let us go back then. And, thanks for following me. I could not have spoken to anyone else than you about this.

- Anytime, bro. Let's put you to bed now. You still need to rest.

Scott laughed, picking up the lantern from the water and leaving the cove with his brother.

The loud cracking of thunder resounded in the distance. The weather in this part of the jungle was a lot more turbulent than in the city. The roads were bumpy and the water had gathered in monstrously deep puddles. Sheinor cursed the entire trip. Joseph Herring was waiting for him on
the end of the paved road with an all terrain vehicle. The rest of the way would require a sturdier set of wheels.

Sheinor spat as he set foot on the muddy ground. He grabbed Meiying from the backseat and dragged her along in the rear of the truck. He threw his soaked driver cap aside, lighting a cigarette as he sat in the passenger seat. It was nighttime and there was no light other then their car's headlights.

- Damn that Holling. Why'd he need that chick anyway?

- Calm down.

The small scraggy man punched his colleague's arm, irritated. Herring laughed as he was twice his size.

They drove through the jungle for about two hours until they came up to a small shack. There was little furniture and no windows. The door was steel lined with a single slim slot to look through. Only the dim light of a lantern hanging from the ceiling was casting shadows around the place. They carried Mei inside and left her in a corner, binding her hands and feet with plastic ties. Herring dumped a large sports bag on a table. Sheinor reached a front pocket where he found some white powder. He prepared it, making fine lines with a knife before snorting them. He wiped his nose and drew a bottle of rhum out of the bag. He and Herring began making fun of the woman before installing her on a chair. Sheinor kicked her in the side. Mei began to regain her senses. She was groggy and her ribs were now hurting.

- Hey sleeping beauty, 'bout time.

He smiled at her, his crooked yellow teeth showing. She did not understand what had happened as she had not regained all of her senses yet. He took a sip of his bottle then offered it to her.

- Want some? Cuz' you're gonna need it soon. I tell ya, this sip'll be good for ya.

He put the bottle in her mouth and raised it. She swallowed the first shot but then coughed as the liquid overflowed. The rum had spilled all over her from the sides of her mouth. Herring laughed. Sheinor was pissed.

- Don't spend such good rum, bitch!

He sighed, taking another sip. She was starting to understand where she was.

- What do you want from me?

Herring was laughing again. Sheinor drew a chair and sat down in front of her.

- Sir Holling wants us to get the truth from ya. He doesn't trust scums such as you. I'm eager to start.

Sheinor opened the bag and took out a pair of leather gloves. He put them on before slapping Mei across the face.

- So, where's the girl?

Mei did not answer right away. She wanted to find some words that would make sense.

- I told Holling already. On a private island. She has washed …. 
Sheinor did not wait until she had finished to slap her again. She stopped. He asked again.

- Whatcha said?

She was recuperating from the hit, dragging her head forward. He hit her again, with clenched fist this time. Her mouth was bloody. Herring held Sheinor's arm before he could hit again.

- Stop now, dumbass. She needs to be able to talk.

Sheinor was mad. They argued for a few minutes before he turned back to Mei. He drew a table between them, putting some money stacks, cocaine and rhum on it. Mei spat some blood. He sneered.

- Where's she at?

- A private island. I'll give you coordinates. Just… leave me…

- Ahhh, tots. That's not how things go 'round here.

Herring was setting up a holo projector. He installed it on the table. Marcus Holling appeared, seated in his same leather seat as previously.

- Gentlemen, don't tell me you have started without me. This is not very appropriate.

- Sheinor's been at it, Sir. He's stopped now.

Mei looked at Holling.

- I told you everything. Why do you do this?

- Money is something to work for. Is it not too convenient for you to deliver me such a secret and expect a reward without having suffered a little for it? That is not how things are done. Call it progression. First, you give me an information, then, you expect money. As I weight this information, I am inclined to giving you this money, but!

He got up from his sofa, the projector followed his moves as he walked around in his office.

- As a businessman, I always verify my sources. And before going on with it, I like to be conscious about all the risks. You are my investment. I must make sure this investment is going to be profitable and not ruin me. Thus, I require more information.

Sheinor stood behind Mei. He was wrapping a rope around both his fists. He said to Holling:

- She said she'd give the coordinates to that place. Spit them out.

He kicked the chair as to urge her. She licked the blood from her lips.

- 30 degrees and 49 mins South, 152 degrees 52 mins west. A small private island. You won't find it on maps.

Holling seemed to tap on a keyboard at his side. He popped up the area, clearly showing Tracy island.

- Very good. That is the first step. Now this: why are they keeping her? I don't want theories, simply the truth. Why have they not surrendered her to authorities?
- I don't know.
- Really?
- I cannot say why they have not.
- This was going so well, pity.

Sheinor swung his fist thigh rope under Mei’s chin and began to pull her towards him. She was struggling to grab the rope as it was strangling her. She tried to get up, with no balance from her tightly bound feet and the chair was still between her and Sheinor. He stopped after a minute. She slid on the floor.

- You know, I really hate to repeat questions. You are a smart woman, and my question is simple. Why keep her?
- They… don't want the GDF to know…
- And why is that?
- I don't kn….

Sheinor tried to lift her up but she resisted, holding her legs near her with her bound hands. She continued.

- They told me they did not want the GDF to know! She has illegal cybernetics, they don't want to be implicated with her in any way.
- If they followed the law, they would have no choice but to denounce her. Other than being criminals themselves, or trying to take advantage of the situation, who else would keep a highly prized genetically altered human for themselves?

Sheinor grabbed her by the hair and lift her back on the chair. She screamed as she had no choice to cooperate. Holling was watching the entire scene, undisturbed, waiting for his answers. Mei knew it would be the end of her if she did not spit it out. It was no time to have a moral dilemma. Her claim on life was worth more. As the henchman was going to strangle her again, she screamed.

- International Rescue. It was International Rescue!
- Oh!

Holling was more than surprised. He did not expect that answer. He lifted his hand and Sheinor withdrew. He smiled.

- You are not making this up, are you? International Rescue? Really?

Tears ran down her cheeks. She sobbed loudly.

- Yes. They have her. And they don't want the GDF to find out…
- … or they might be in even more trouble than they already are with the Council. I know the rest, Miss Chang. Nobody can sense their true motives, and every dignitary is afraid of them. But when there is a disaster, they are oh so happy to have them. This is juicy. Are you really telling me the truth?
- … yes… please… no more…
- Are you eager to be released? Then, why don't you call them in to help you? You must be so dear to International Rescue to carry their secret.

Holling smiled. Mei was breathing fast; her heart was pounding. Sheinor kicked one of the chair's back leg. The wooden peg broke and went bouncing on a wall. Mei fell on her back, still crying. He dropped a small communicator at her side. Holling continued.

- Call them. But be careful of what you say, if you value your life.

He disconnected. Sheinor and Herring left the room. She was alone, the sound of torrential rain still resounding outside.
Blood on your hands

Thank you for your reviews and comments so far! This encourages me to continue!

Sorry for the delay as I usually update on Wednesdays. It was a very busy week!

Enjoy!

Aboard Thunderbird five, John was enjoying some time with Ridley. It had been a while ever since they saw each other. Their relationship was progressing slowly into a little more than friendship. Unfortunately, she was affected to surveillance of a region near Venus so they scarcely had time to enjoy each other's company.

A call came in as they were playing chess. It was faint, interference was masking the voice. John asked Eos to focus on the signal.

- In… … Rescue.. Help me… please, help! John, can you hear me?

John listened carefully. He could not make out who's voice it was yet. There was no visual and the signal seemed faint.

- This is International Rescue, who is it? Can you identify yourself?

- Chang… Mei…. Please, you have to do something! I am trapped!

- Hold on, we are going to scan for your location Mei. Keep talking, what happened?

- Some goons caught up with me. They brought me here…

- What do they want from you?

There was a silence. Mei was breathing heavily. John heard she was also sobbing. He waited a few seconds before asking again.

- Mei, what happened, tell me! I'm locating you right now. We'll send someone over.

- Be careful, John. They… they're…

The communication suddenly stopped in a terrible crackle of electronic noise. A cold shiver ran down John's spine as the communication fell silent. Ridley approached him while he kept working on pinpointing the signal.

- Is everything all right, John?

- No… Someone I know is in trouble. I will need to contact my brothers.

- I'll leave you to it then. It's better for me to go for now.

- If you prefer. I'm sorry things don't always go as planned.

She smiled. As she passed close to him in zero gravity, she kissed him on the cheek. He blushed.

- That's how our exciting lives are meant to be. Would you want it otherwise?
- Nah. I like it like that.

She made her way to the airlock as he was working on the computer. As the location came up, he called home. Virgil intercepted the call. He was in the kitchen accompanied by Brains and Abigail.

- Hey, John! What's up?

- I just received a very disturbing call. Mei is in trouble. I don't have much more details. I have her approximate location.

- I'll get Alan right away.

- No need, I rang him already, provide that he is not still asleep at this time of day.

Alan arrived in the kitchen at that moment. He joined the others in at the table, stretching.

- I'm here. So, what's up?

John was concentrated on his search.

- I can't seem to be able to pinpoint her exact location. The signal died out before I could get a link. The communicator was basic too, no visual, it's a lot harder to track. She has better gear than that. Plus, the region surrounding the jungle where she's at is dangerous. A lot of steep mountains and cliffs. I don't have any idea how she made it there, but she must have traveled quite a while to reach that spot.

The space monitor projected a map. Virgil and the others studied it.

- It's a little too uneven all right. I won't be able to land in Thunderbird two. Get Alan on the case. We'll follow close behind.

Alan answered his brother.

- Won't that be a little overkill for a simple rescue mission? What will the GDF say?

- We don't know what we'll need.

John was startled by another communication coming through.

- Hold on a minute…

The call was in a foreign language. John used a filter to be able to understand. There was a silence at the island. Everyone was waiting for him to speak.

- Bad news. We have trapped Russian miners in a collapsed shaft in Siberia. About sixty of them. We'll need to get them out.

Scott was not around, John instinctively turned over to Virgil to issue a command.

- I suggest Alan goes for Mei. I'll ask the GDF for help. We will rescue those miners and get back to you.

- That is a good idea, Virgil. But we're short staffed now, how can we supply help to both teams?

Abigail looked at John.
- I'll go. I can help a little. Just have to tell me what I gotta do.

John frowned.

- Are you certain about this?

Virgil answered.

- Not much choice. We need all the help we can get. Brains, be ready if we need anything. We can't ask Scott or Kayo to fly yet, right?

He looked at Abigail. She answered.

- Still too early. They are still experiencing weaknesses and dizziness when trying to train. Can't rush their recovery. In a week maybe they'll be ready.

- Okay, meet me in Thunderbird two.

She smiled.

- FAB! Or, whatever you say. Brains, my suit! It's still in that lab of yours.

Brains jumped off his chair

- Right away!

The first light of morning shot through the barred upper wall. Mei had tried to get up and was now standing in a corner of the shack, using the wall to remain stable with her feet still bound. The small communicator she called John was now unusable, she hoped he would have gotten her message.

During her captors' absence, she had rummaged through the bag trying to find a sharp object or anything to help her break free from her bindings. She stumbled only on drugs, money, and rum. Herring had taken the holo projector along with him.

Sheinor and Herring were in the car. They remained there for a whole hour, then went back inside the shack. They looked at Mei as they entered. She reared towards the wall and crouched. Sheinor got closer to her.

- Ain't got funny ideas, toots?

She kept silent. Whatever she thought of saying would only anger him. She motioned with her head a clear no. He looked at her while Herring gathered their belongings on the table.

- No matter. We're leaving now.

He got out, followed by his acolyte. Mei tried to get to the door fast, jumping.

- Wait! I'll pay you handsomely if you bring me back! Please.

Sheinor stopped and turned around to look at her.

- Sorry, toots! Can't do that. Boss said to ask yer friends!

He climbed in the vehicle with his colleague and left quickly, leaving the woman alone. She cursed
as the vehicle turned around, trying to find something to break her bonds. She managed to find a rock and scrape through the ties. She rumbled through the abandoned shack looking for anything useful, but there was nothing. Some screams were heard deeper in the jungle. She decided to flee and find a safe place to hide. Her only wish was to get out of this nightmare quickly.

Alan flew to the location given by his brother. He did not find a suitable spot for landing close to it so he had to leave Thunderbird One outside the jungle in a clearing where the terrain was not too steep. He set out, looking for the location of the signal, using his brother's jet pack. It was not very clear as to where it came from, only approximate coordinates were available. The jungle was not so lush but yet was dense enough to impact his sight. John contacted him.

- I have done a sweep of the area. There is some activity inside the jungle. I found the outline of what might look like a settlement to the northwest. There is a particularly strong magnetic interference in that zone.

- Where do you suggest I go first? I'll search the area then go towards the settlement, is that okay with you?

- Good idea. That will give me more time to search thoroughly pairing your sensors with mine. I also have to guide Virgil in his mission. I'll ask EOS to provide you with an update as soon as we find something or get any news from the GDF.

- FAB.

The youngest went on with his search.

After about one hour, he finally reached the abandoned shack. He tried contacting his brother, the communication link was very faint and punctuated with white noise. He entered, pushing the metal door slowly.

- John, I found a shack of some sort.

- Do you see Mei? Could she be anywhere around?

He entered. There was nothing inside. As he circled around the shack, he noticed a heavy fabric tarp covering a mound of irregular shapes held in place with rocks. As he lifted a corner: a hand slid and rested, lifelessly, on the ground. He quickly turned in the opposite direction. His face was pale.

- John!

- I saw, yeah. Can you get a closer look?

Alan gulped.

- I'll try…

He went closer. He removed the fabric to reveal two bodies, both men, that had been shot in the head. They did not show any sign of decay, they must have been killed recently. He closed his eyes, not being able to withstand the sight of them anymore. John calmed him.

- It's okay, Alan. Neither of them is Mei. Try to sweep from your side too. Something is keeping me from doing a thorough scan.
Dark clouds had gathered overhead. Rain started to pour down on Alan's head. He lifted his eyes up, turning around.

- I have to rush it, John. The weather is getting worse. Under such conditions, it will be harder to find Mei.

- FAB.

He resumed his search, studying the scans his brother had given him of the area. He decided to go towards the settlement, hoping he would find some answers there.

He succeeded in finding some human life signs ahead and was able to map the area further. As he tried to send his latest findings to Thunderbird Five, he realized he could not communicate anymore. He was completely alone and nearing the settlement. He tried to stay out of sight and look around. There were a few all-terrain vehicles, jeeps to be precise, erected buildings made of wood, mud, and lime, resembling the shack he previously came across. Zooming in with his helmet's camera, he caught a glimpse of two men coming out from one of the buildings, both armed with assault rifles. He dropped down rapidly to his knees, afraid. Fortunately for him, the combination of the pouring rain and foliage provided him with enough cover to walk away crouching.

He was startled by some noise close by. He turned around, hoping to see an animal or something inoffensive but noticed the outline of a figure less than two meters away. He zoomed in with his helmet and saw Mei, exhausted and in tears, leaning against a tree. Her clothes were drenched, sticking to her body, and caked in dirt. Alan approached her slowly and addressed her in a low voice.

- Doctor Chang!

She turned her head to the familiar voice, frightened. She was so exhausted and afraid she could not get up on her ow. He asked:

- Can you walk?

- I... I don't know.

He crouched near her and put her arm around his neck. As he rose, muffled shouts came from the compound. Two armed men came closer, aiming their weapons at them. He saw them a second too late and tried to duck and take cover to evade his attackers. Mei screamed has the bullets went flying in their direction. They had to make a run for it. As he tried to get up, more bullets were shot towards them. He felt a sudden burning sensation on his right arm which sent him on the ground, twisting in pain. He grabbed it and he noticed that he had been shot twice. Blood was running down his suit at an alarming rate.

The armed men ran towards them and encircled them. Alan tried to contact his brother one more time: There was still no answer, only white noise. Mei was trembling and crying as the men dragged them away towards the compound.

John was trying to keep tabs on Alan and on Virgil's mission at the same time. EOS was lending a hand but could only scarcely help out. He turned towards his elder and directed the Siberian rescue mission while the youngest was sweeping the area under the rain. He noticed Alan's communicator losing connexion. He immediately contacted Tracy island after being unable to re-establish the link.
Scott was waiting for the reports. He tapped his fingers on his father's desk, impatient. He should have been the one to set out but he had not regained sufficient strength to head out on a rescue, let alone fly a supersonic aircraft. He confronted John:

- How long has it been since Alan contacted you last?
- About an hour. There is a lot of interference. I'm trying to reconnect. The weather forecast is not very good in this region. Severe thunderstorms might contribute to the problem.
- I am worried. This is his first mission alone and also a very dangerous one. I should never have let him go…

John kept on trying. He succeeded but the communication was cut off quickly.

- No good. It keeps disconnecting.
- I'll board Thunderbird Shadow and meet him there.
- You should not strain yourself. Virgil told me he was almost done. I'll send him over there.
- Okay, but make it quick. If I don't get news of Alan in thirty minutes, I'm flying there myself!

John sighed. He was truly hoping nothing had happened. EOS flashed.

- John, I have found something on a foreign newspaper database.

EOS translated the file and projected it to John. As he read it, he became more and more anxious. He immediately called Scott.

- This is not good.
- WHAT?
- The settlement which he neared might be connected to some drug dealers. The area seemed to have been taken over by criminals a while back. I hope he did not stumble upon these guys. I'll call the GDF again and explain the urgency.
- I'm coming right now in Thunderbird Shadow.
- You can't. You need to recover.
- To hell with recovery if my little brother is in danger!

Scott rose rapidly and headed for his chute. As he grabbed hold of one of the lamps, he got dizzy, releasing it immediately and leaning against the wall. John looked at him, angry.

- You are not going anywhere. Let me do my job! We will get Alan, I promise.

Scott slid down against the wall, sitting on the floor. He realized he was still very weak. Getting angry or worried did not help him in any way.

- I truly hope he is okay or I'll never forgive myself if anything went wrong.

He cursed as his brother disconnected.

---

Alan and Mei were made prisoners in one of the shacks. One of the mercenaries stripped the young
man of his sash, helmet and gauntlet computer, leaving him with nothing to try contacting his brothers. Mei pleaded for some medical supplies but was given dirty rags smelling of oil and a canteen of stale water. She made a tourniquet to stop the bleeding, ripping off her own clothing to make bandages. Alan’s face was pale, he had lost a lot of blood. She bound it so thick he grimaced and tears ran down his cheeks. He shivered. She tried to keep him awake as he was going to pass out from the pain.

The door slammed open. A tall man wearing a military cap came inside. He was armed with a pistol on his hip and a knife in his boot. The others stood outside. He shut the door behind him and looked at the two prisoners. At first, he addressed them in Spanish. Seeing that they could not understand much, he began speaking in English.

- Why did you come here? Did you kill my men?

Mei stood near Alan. She answered him.

- I did not kill anyone! There were two goons: one with the mutton chops and a tall Irish one. They kidnapped me and abandoned me here.

- And what about this young man?

- He came to save me! Can't you see he is not a threat?

The man watched as Mei hysterically screamed at him.

- Let us go! We didn't do anything! He needs proper medical care. I beg you!

- The man exited the room. Mei went after him, banging on the door with her fist and screaming.

- Get us out! Please! PLEASE!

She went on for a few minutes. Nobody came. She sobbed as she went back to Alan and held him close to her. She was so ashamed of herself for having brought him through this whole appalling situation.

Virgil received the message as he was wrapping things up. Abigail had taken the mole pod out while he went inside with his Claws to remove the debris and set up some beams to secure the tunnels to get the workers out. Their mission had gone so swiftly, they had finished the whole job in a little less than two hours. They hurried back in the cockpit and set out for Alan’s location.

John explained the situation:

- There is a severe thunderstorm in the area, be wary. Also, there is not a lot of uneven terrain, you won't be able to land your ship. You'll need to find another way to get closer.

Virgil suggested:

- We'll configure a pod and go down there. Is the GDF coming?

- They are assessing the situation as we speak and contacting the authorities in that area. This is pointless, we are losing precious time waiting for them.

Abigail was consulting the maps John had given them.

- You said this might be a drug lord's base? You know these guys are usually armed, don't you
John?
- I have seen plenty of movies about that, so yes, they might be.

Virgil frowned.
- We are not equipped to deal with such situations. It's dangerous to go after him.

Abigail seemed to be noting some things on the map.
- Virgil, you are not going down there, I'll go. Winch me down, I'll take care of the rest.

He gave a quick look at Abigail in the back.
- What? You're not going down there alone. I'll think of something.
- Trust me.

John smirked.
- We don't have any other choice. But what about their weapons.
- I have a few tricks up my sleeves.
- Oh, yeah, that. I trust you then.

Virgil had no idea what John was referring to. He waited for Abigail to finish.
- I need to get close enough to the encampment to note the life signs. I'll forward my information to you and get him out before they had time to understand what happened. Let's hope he is there.

As they approached the site, Virgil flew near the mountain range. He refrained from passing over the jungle. Thunderbird one was down underneath them. John said:
- Alan had to walk about one whole hour to get to the settlement. If you can go just a little closer, you'd be able to reach it in no time.

Abigail stood, putting her helmet on.
- Think you can drop me close enough?
- Sure. I'll put Thunderbird Two on remote and get you down there. You really can't fly?
- I did, once. It was a disaster. If you value your pods, it would be better to take me there.

Virgil smiled as they entered the pod bay. He configured a simple flying pod while Abigail attached a harness to be lowered in the forest below. He launched, keeping his craft steady by remote control. The canopy so was dense, he had trouble descending. They were far away enough from the encampment not to be heard, the noise of the pouring rain hiding the beating of the helipod's propellers. Abigail detached the harness as she touched the ground.
- Stay in this area. Make sure you don't go closer. This will be the pickup point.
- FAB. Are you really sure you will be okay back there?
- I'll have to disable communication to activate my camouflage. I fouled the sensors at your base, won't be hard to do the same with these guys.
She activated augmented reality: an interface consisting of various parameters appeared on her helmet's visor. The interaction with this UI was made using her gauntlets, as it required a conductive item to accept choices. She could do the same with her left hand but never really got the try it without her outfit, except for that one time at the base. She activated some features of her suit: optical camouflage, she changed her heat signature, toggled night vision on and overlapped it with infrared detection, activating the map last and keeping it on, walking the in electronically generated outlines as if it was a real life maze. She began running in the direction of the compound, making sure she would evade water puddles and mud as much as possible. Even that advanced camouflage had its flaws, as the environment could betray her position. Raindrops bounced off her shoulders and helmet, making faint drip noise as they fell. She had to remain in the dark not to arouse suspicions.

Nearing the camp, she noticed a group of patrolling guards. She backed up on a shack wall, remaining under the cover of darkness as an electronic sweep of the area was triggered. There were twelve people detected in the encampment. Counting Alan and perhaps Mei, hoping they were there, this would not be a difficult task to perform. She took a deep breath, this was the first time she would dive in the skin of the keeper Athena in a very long while.

The two guards turned around the building, approaching dangerously close to her. She picked up a rock and threw it at the edge of the jungle. The two men pointed the area and went to investigate. She approached them from behind, delivering a sucker punch to one of them with her tightly clenched left fist. The cracking of bones echoed as he fell. The second man turned around to notice his colleague collapsing in a muffled noise. He hailed him and tried to wake him up as he looked around, clueless about his own fate. Abigail stood behind and knocked him to the head. He turned around, bewildered, searching and aiming his weapon in all directions. Abigail grabbed his hands and thrust at him with his weapons. He fell on his knees, lacking breath. She quickly chained a punch and he was out cold. Rummaging through their equipment, she found a pack of grenades, ammunition and a few other useless trinkets. She grabbed the explosives and went inside the camp.

One of the doors was wide opened, letting out a beam of light. A tall man in a military suit was standing in the door frame, smoking a huge cigar. Abigail could detect five other people inside the shack from their infrared signature. There also seemed to be a strong interference coming from it. She decided to go around and search a little more before engaging that lot.

Mei had been holding the tourniquet on Alan's arm all this time; her hands were shaking from the strain. She shook Alan every few minutes, strictly forbidding him to fall asleep. He could speak to her but eventually lost his train of thoughts. He was weak, light headed yet the bleeding had stopped.

- Alan, tell me how you managed to go around the sun again.

He smiled at her.

- I've already told you this story twice. It's okay, I won't sleep. My brothers will be here soon, they won't leave us like this. I know they are coming. Hold on, Mei.

He was the one wounded and still cheering her up. She was on the brink of breaking down, shaking like a leaf. He caressed her arm with his unwounded hand, comforting her. "He is so young yet so mature", she thought.

Breaking the silence of the night, the guards at the door spoke aloud and began moving towards the rear of the shack, their footsteps splashed in puddles of water along the way. The front door opened and closed suddenly. Mei was startled as nobody came inside. She heard very light
footsteps coming closer, the dust lifting slightly from the ground. She felt a hand and fingers tightening on her mouth. She paled, unable to understand anything, rearing towards the wall. Abigail removed her optical camouflage, following Mei and holding her hand on her to prevent her from screaming. She put a finger in front of her helmet, motioning her to keep quiet. Her dark visor changed to a clear color: Mei calmed down at the moment she saw her face. The young woman crouched down and looked at Alan, speaking in a low voice.

- Can you walk?

- I guess

- Good, keep your strength. You'll need it. I'm breaking you out.

She noticed he had neither his sash nor his helmet.

- Where is your gear?

- They took it, my gauntlet computer too. Can you get them for me?

She nodded then gave them instructions.

- You will hear explosions. Don't panic. Go outside and turn right, there is a garage. Hide inside, I'll meet you there. Make sure you nobody sees you. I'll destroy the signal jammer to ensure contact with the others. They are worried sick about you.

- FAB.

She activated her cloaking again and hurried outside before the guards came back.

Only fifteen minutes had passed since Abigail had gone down in the jungle. Still, John and Virgil were anxious as ever, not to mention Scott's constant calling that pressured the lot of them. As they tried to contact Abigail and Alan again, without success, they decided it was time to make a move. Virgil had studied the map of the compound intensively.

- John, I think I could get closer. Just in case.

- I don't believe this is a good idea. Wait another five minutes for Abigail to contact us. I'm sure she'll work things out.

- What if something happened to her down there? We're dragging her in this whole mess that's ours to fix. Are we rushing her to her death?

- Trust me, she can do this. If I hadn't witnessed her abilities beforehand I would not have vouched for her. And remember, she volunteered.

Virgil surveyed the horizon.

- Still no word from the GDF?

- Some, yes. They said they had to delegate to the local militia as it was not considered a crisis. No word from these guys. We are totally on our own.

- The work of Casey?

- Can't say. I don't think so yet. I'd rather not talk to her now. What if she orders us to leave?
There was a sudden explosion in the distance. The brothers could pinpoint it inside the compound. It was followed close behind by a second one, a third, and a fourth. Both brothers were startled. The white noise cleared, Abigail's voice came through the communicator.

- John, I will secure Alan and Mei and bring them out of the jungle. We can't evacuate by pod, Alan's condition is not stable enough. Tell Virgil to take the pod back and be ready to pick us up with Thunderbird Two.

John answered quickly.

- Abigail? Is Alan all right? And what were these explosions back there?

- Cover. Yes, he'll manage, but hurry.

Virgil overheard the message. He asked as he returned the helipod back to his ship:

- Give me more details.

- Alan has been shot. He can't use his right arm. We're taking a vehicle and leaving. Expect us in less than fifteen minutes.

- That short?

- We're not going to do some sightseeing. It won't be long before these guys realize we're bailing.

Scott went through to John at that moment. He was irritated, having no control over the situation. He overheard all the discussion. He took over the comm.

- Abigail, I don't know what you have in mind, but if my brother has been shot because of you, I'm going to…

- Sheesh. Find some other way to thank me later.

She cut the communication. He was fuming with anger, letting out a roar and banging his fist on the desk. Virgil knew he had to intervene.

- Brother, calm down. Getting mad as hell won't do you or us any good. Have confidence.

- Confidence?! We barely know her and she's running errands for us now! What's more, she's engaged in battle with mercenaries! Don't you think I have enough reasons to be worried?

- I'm the one who took the decision. If you want to be mad, then so be it. But take it out on me. Now, let me do my job.

Virgil hung up. It was the first time he ever did this to his brother. He sighed, thinking there might have been others means to talk his way through it. He was hiding it, but he was too nervous himself to try anything else.

The camp was plunged into chaos as the explosives went up in different locations. The guards went running, expecting an attack. It bought enough time for Alan and Mei to get out and seek refuge inside the garage. They heard gunshots in the distance. Abigail came in, carrying Alan's gear and dropped it in the back of a jeep. She helped Alan climb inside and asked:

- Mei, can you drive?
- Y.. yes, Of course.

- Good. I'll make sure we're not followed.

The young woman reached behind a seat and drew out an assault rifle. She began loading it with such an ease it made Mei uncomfortable. Alan was in pain, struggling to remain awake, clutching at his wounded arm the whole time. Armed and ready, Abigail ordered Mei to start the engine and hit the accelerator.

They busted out of the garage, sending water and mud flying everywhere as they drove onto the uneasy terrain of the dark jungle. Alan tried to keep hold of one of the bars on top of the vehicle with his available arm; he was having trouble keeping himself steady as the jeep bounced around. Abigail kneeled over him, using her leg and knee to hold him in place. It did not take long for the mercenaries to begin the chase. John entered into contact with them. Alan answered.

- Alan! I'm so glad you are safe!

- We're not out of trouble yet, bro. I'll issue a command for Thunderbird one to take off now, that'll give Virgil some space so he can pick us up.

The mercenaries were catching up. Abigail activated a targeting mode in augmented reality and started aiming at the pursuer's jeep. She shot a few rounds. John was startled

- What was that? Who's shooting you?

Alan answered

- Abigail. She is using cover fire... I hope. We are being followed.

He shrieked in pain as the jeep bounced violently again. The young woman standing over him took hold of a bar, but let go of the rifle to catch her balance and not fall on Alan. It dropped outside the vehicle. She swore under her breath, angry as their jeep was losing speed. She ducked to cover Alan as the mercenaries began shooting in their direction. The young man stared in awe as three bullets hit her chest before bouncing off her suit and dropping on the jeep's floor. She hissed in pain and bowed lower over him to avoid another round.

The jungle was becoming thinner, they could see the clearing and hear Thunderbird two's massive engines overhead. It came as a relief. The mercenaries were still after them. Virgil was prepared. As he saw the jeep hurrying out of the jungle, followed by the mercenaries, he positioned his craft and shot a magnetic grasp at the villains, toppling their vehicle and providing enough distraction for his friends to take place in the rescue seats. Mei and Abigail carried Alan and signaled Virgil once they were all clear. The green giant left the scene, accompanied by his sister craft following close behind.

Alan was carried to the med bay where Mei began tending to his wounds. A bullet was still lodged in his forearm and the wound showed signs of infection. Medical equipment was limited inside the ship, she could do as much as administrate some pain killer and remove the bullet and clean the wound. She could not help but feel terrible guilt, her eyes were filled with tears, as she rushed the procedure with what little energy she had left.

The young man she had supported for a long time, he who felt but too deeply the loss of his mother. She remembered holding him in her arms as he cried for her. Every time she was called in to check on him, they shared a heartwarming hug. Now, that same little boy had come to save her from a horrendous situation she brought upon herself and got caught in between. His blood was on
her hands. As she finished her last stitch, she dropped down on the floor and began crying. This whole mess was her fault.
Bad omen

As soon as Thunderbird two landed, she was greeted by Scott, Grandma, Brains and Kayo. They had been waiting impatiently for the crew to arrive. The pod bay door opened and Alan was taken on a stretcher to the medical bay. He was groggy but not asleep, the painkillers had done their effect. Mei seemed to have regained her composure, even as exhausted as she was, and followed close. Her work was far from over. She conducted blood tests and set Alan up on IV before tending properly to his wounds. Brains assisted her while the other members of the family stayed at his side. Grandma was clenching his unscathed hand tightly. The young man was smiling, turning his head towards his Grand.

- Grandma! I'm ok. Don't worry.

- Now, kid, you worry about yourself. I'll be worried if I want to. You ain't going to tell your ol' grandma what she needs to do!

He was smiling during the whole procedure. Mei seemed concerned with something, looking at Scott and Grandma alternatively before letting go of a sigh. Scott raised his head.

- Something wrong?

Mei answered as she went on with her work.

- Nothing…

Scott could not stop but look at her the whole time. Her hands were shaking and her eyes still wet. He saw she was fighting to keep her reason. He went around, putting a hand softly on her shoulder.

- You are not okay. Mei, you need to get some rest. Let Brains take over. He can, right?

He looked at Brains who acquiesced. She shook her head.

- No. I'll finish this. It's the least I can do to make it up to you all for saving me.

The elder had so many questions in mind. Who were those people? Why did they take her? He wanted to ask them all at once but kept silent. There was a time and place for that and it was not here in front of his wounded brother.

Mei finished the stitches. The wounds were closed, dressed with clean bandages. Grandma had rubbed Alan's face clean with a wet cloth. He tried to motion her to stop, but she kept on with it. Eventually, she left to prepare dinner. Kayo followed close behind. Mei went to analyze the blood tests, Brains cleaned the medical supplies and set them for sterilizing. Scott was left alone with his brother. Alan looked at him. His smile had faded into a frown, his eyes filled with tears.

- It's the first time I've ever been so afraid for my life, bro. Even that time I went around the sun… I never thought something like this could happen. I…

Scott sat down beside him. He slowly lifted Alan towards him and gave him a heartwarming hug. Alan cried. He sobbed loudly as his elder held him tight, rubbing his back for comfort. He kissed his head, just like when he was a little boy. Alan still felt like this to him: a little boy, so very smart yet so fragile. He had not seen him cried like this since his mother passed away. The sobbing became faint, the young man had passed out of exhaustion in his brother's arms. Scott smiled, clutching onto him still, caressing his hair. He felt anger rise inside him. If anything would have
happened, he would have become frenzied. Slowly, he laid Alan down, tucking him up in the bed sheets. The elder sat back in a chair, standing watch.

Mei came back with the results of the blood tests. She went directly towards Scott. He greeted her by standing as she approached.

- Mei, you should go rest! Please, take some time to recuperate.

She ignored him completely. Her eyes were red from fatigue and swollen from crying. She talked as if nothing happened.

- Alan will require a blood transfusion. His hemoglobin levels are low, he needs. I went through your medical files to find a suitable donor. Only you and Virgil are qualified. Considering your recent infection, I do now want to take a chance. We need your brother as soon as possible.

- I'll have him summoned right away.

- Thank you.

Scott rose, leaving Mei to tend to Alan.

Abigail exited the craft hangar and headed upstairs. The area where the bullets hit was throbbing: she was sure to have large bruises at these spots. "What hurts more than an assault rifle bullet?" she remembered a soldier ask when she was in training, another had responded "A shotgun at point blank...". It was intended to be a pun but now, she could relate to that. The impact left her breathless for a few seconds. Her suit was bullet proof yet it was so close so the skin that it could not resorb all the energy from the projectile. It was the body which did, and it had been made such considering the Keepers' ability to heal faster. Something cold would help to lessen the pain until her healing process would take care of these surface wounds. She grabbed a small bowl and filled it with ice and made her way to her room.

She crossed Scott's path as she went on her way. He had a determined look on his face and was walking at a fast pace. She hailed him.

- Is everything ok? Do you need anything?

He turned, looking around.

- Have you seen Virgil?

- I think he went to shower. Why?

- Crap! We need him. I'll send him a voice message.

As he turned on the kitchen's holo-computer and left a clear message motioning Virgil to come down to the med bay, Abigail asked:

- Is it about Alan?

Scott took a deep breath. He did resent the fact that Abigail set her brother and Mei on a wild chase in the jungle and could not see past this. His anger got the better of him. He answered.

- Yes. And we don't need you. Weren't you supposed to be escorted to go around the house? You are lucky, if it were me, I would not have sent you on this rescue mission. Especially knowing you shot back at those guys. You could have gotten someone hurt.
She frowned and replied angrily:

- It was necessary to cover us! Those guys would have made swiss cheese out of your brother and the Doc had we not gotten them out of there!

- We'll talk about this later. Go back to your room and wait there.

He turned around and went back the way he came. Abigail watched him leave, muttering "asshole" under her breath. She went back to her quarters and slammed the door shut.

She removed her suit slowly, all of her movements hurt. Grabbing a towel, she placed the ice inside and formed a bag, clutching it as she applied it on her bare skin. She sighed in relief as she laid on the bed in her underwear with the cold compress on her chest, closing her eyes to relax for a second. She heard a beep: John was calling. He immediately appeared without notice. She quickly pulled a sheet on top of her.

- GO AWAY!

- Oh.. I'm … I'm sorry.

John blushed. He covered his eyes with his hand. She was irritated, covering her breast properly with the bedsheets.

- Don't you know how to wait for a signal before appearing? What do you want, space man?

- I wanted to check on you. I heard what happened in the kitchen.

- I did my job and that's how your brother Scott thanked me.

- Please, try to understand. He was anxious, worried, and nervous. He had no control over the situation. When he calms down, he won't be the same.

- I saved his life you know. Never thought the head of International Rescue would be such an ungrateful bastard.

Getting angry made it worse. She relaxed her muscles not to feel the throbbing. John witnessed.

- Are you wounded? Do you want to have Mei check on you?

- No need, they're just bruises. It'll go away in a day or two.

- Just don't hesitate to let us help you. I am very grateful that you saved our little brother's life and Scott's too. Virgil was right; you are not a bad person.

She began laughing but stopped. Laughing hurt. She smiled at the irony.

- I always told myself I'd work for the greater good. I've ended up in a shitty situation, working for a megalomaniac and creating so many problems. If this can help me redeem myself and appease my conscience, I'd gladly do anything to help you guys.

John smiled.

- Good. I'll let you rest then. Do you want me to ask Grandma to ring you for lunch?

- I'd like it, yeah. Thanks.
He disconnected. She had at least found some allies in the others to balance the fact that Scott did not like her very much. There she was, back in her jail. She sighed, resting on her back, the cold towel easing her pain.

Virgil had gotten his brother's message as he exited the bathroom. He traded his wrapped towel for a pair of sport pants and a simple t-shirt before going quickly down to the med bay. He entered and noticed Alan resting with Scott on his side. He joined his elder brother, approaching him in a low voice.

- Will he be okay?

Scott pointed towards the lab on the other side of the room. She was setting up the material.

- Alan needs a blood transfusion. Seems like you are the only suitable donor. Up for it?

- I'll help in any way I can.

Virgil sat down near the elder, clasping his hands and resting his forearms on his knees. He asked:

- This was one hell of a mess. I'm glad Alan is safe.

Scott remained silent. His brother turned to look at him. The elder sighed. Not another word was spoken. Mei came closer.

- I am ready. Shall we begin?

Virgil rose and met her in the lab.

She had set him up for the collection. He did not particularly enjoy needles, nobody really does. He learned to ignore the sting, it was the only thing that made it difficult to tolerate. While Mei was supervising, he asked:

- What happened there, Mei? Who were these people who took you?

Her face changed but she did not answer. He went on:

- Alan got hurt, it's important to let us know.

She smiled faintly. He was such a nice young man but she could not tell him anything. She would have to make up a credible lie or tell the truth and be banned forever from Tracy Island. Lies are always less hurtful. She answered simply:

- I wish to gather my thoughts before speaking. Right now, I... I am exhausted and not thinking straight. Alan needs care, and I will make sure he gets it before I rest.

He did not say more. She removed the needle from his arm and clamped the blood bag before getting it directly to Alan. Virgil watched her leave, pressing a cotton wool on the needle mark. He met with his brother as the doctor was setting up the transfusion set. Scott was staring at his younger brother, in thoughts. Mei was sitting on the other side. The brothers could see her struggling to keep awake, concentrating on Alan's vital signs on the monitor.

There was a broadcast on the holo-screen. Grandma called everyone in for lunch. Virgil got up, motioning to his brother; Scott declined by waving his hand. He was still angry. Watching over Alan might ease his anger but going back to the events would have him fuming.
- Scott, please stop. Come upstairs and have something to eat.

- … not hungry.

Virgil sighed. He went over to Mei, laying a hand on her shoulder.

- Come, Mei. Scott will look after Alan.

Mei's eyes were filled with tears. She was shaking and on the verge of breaking down. She stood slowly, grabbing her chair not to fall back.

- I will… I will get some rest instead. Thank you for the offering.

Scott watched them leave, arms crossed, not moving an inch.

Grandma had cooked a decent lasagna that night, thanks to the help of Max. The sauce was chunky but just right, the noodles a little bit over cooked and the cheese crispy on top but that was as close to perfection as it could be by her standards. Everyone had joined in except Scott who remained with Alan in the medical bay and, obviously, Mei. The atmosphere at the table was pleasant, Virgil helped to cheer up the lot. Alan was safe and back home, he would need some time to recover. Grandma kept bringing up the notion of curse; as if the family had suddenly been struck by a wave of bad vibes like a pharaoh's curse when opening a coffin. At that notion, Abigail felt as if Grandma's words were targeting her. She finished her meal quickly and left the table as Kayo and Brains witnessed the whole scene. Virgil turned around and watched her as she went back towards her room. Grandma put her fists on her hips.

- What's up with her?

Virgil answered.

- What you just said. Bad things have been happening since she showed up.

- I see. I did not intend to be rude towards her.

- Well, I'll go make sure everything is all right. I'm curious about what happened down in that encampment during Alan's rescue.

He finished his lunch along with the others then got up and left. As Kayo was helping in the kitchen, a call came through. Both Lady Penelope and John appeared. The young woman turned and addressed them.

- Hello Lady Penelope, John. By the looks in your faces, I'd wager something is up?

Penelope took the lead.

- Yes. Just to let you know, Gordon is on his way towards the island as we speak. John contacted me to ask for his return. Parker has set out about one hour ago. And I would require your help, Kayo.

John acquiesced with his head. Penelope went on.

- There is something bothering me, and I require help in the matter. Would you be able to run some errand for me, Kayo?

Kayo crossed her arms and leaned against the kitchen counter.
- If the doctor says I can, of course. I've been itching for some action.

- Good! There is a charity I must attend. A small community of people organized a lunch and a fundraising for six widows in their town. They have been hard hit by the losses of their husbands and have called upon me to attend.

- Something tells me it is not all.

- Exactly. With the help of John, we ran some background checks on the husbands. It is customary to make sure we do not end up with a fraud.

John showed the files and took over.

- Each of these men has something in common. They were all working at one of Holling's manufacturing plant in northern England. The six of them vanished within a two-month period. Nobody knows what happened to them.

Kayo raised an eyebrow.

- You think Holling's responsible?

- I don't know. But it's very weird. Their records are flawless but for some history of alcohol abuse. That's common in rural sectors. No drugs, criminal records, nothing. They had families so the hypothesis of the man running away is not so far fetched, but six of them? I don't think so.

Penelope continued.

- We need to infiltrate the plant and gather all the information we can. I will assess the situation on my side through the charity.

- Sounds fair. I'll make sure Mei can give me authorisation to go.

- You look like you have recovered nicely.

- Yes. I took the doctor's recommendations seriously. Can't say the same for Scott.

- This is rather sad. He his pressuring himself too much. He will have to consider taking a break at some time.

- Try suggesting him that. He's stubborn as a mule.

- Well, that is all for now. John will patch you in with the information about the mission.

- FAB.

Penelope disconnected. John was working on the file. He transferred it to Kayo.

- Here. This is all you need: facility layout, guard shifts, surveillance camera locations. You will have to tap in the computer and give me access so I can hack and download everything. Ask Brains for a remote access card. I'll move in towards the location with Thunderbird five to make sure you don't lose the signal while you are infiltrated.

- Good. I'll study this tonight. I will contact you as soon as I get clearance.

- FAB.
He nodded as he logged off. Grandma came behind Kayo.

- This Holling guy means serious business.

- He does. Putting him down won't be easy, but I guess we are doing the right thing by trying to expose him.

- Well, If Lady Penelope says he is a threat, we can't just let him go about his way, right?

- Holling is dangerous. How much, I can't say. But what I know is he has done a lot of wrongs and hurt a lot of people. We can't just let him do that.

- Be careful, kid. I have a feeling he will stop at nothing.

- True that. I'm always careful.

Grandma let go a laugh, going back to the dishes as the young woman lent a hand.

The night was lighted by the sight of the full moon high in the sky. Ghostly shadows of blue and grey were everywhere as the exterior lighting was turned off. Abigail was sitting on a chair near the pool, watching the sky. She had brought a wet towel to apply on her wounds and a fleece blanket to comfort herself. She sighed, her mind was full of scenarios about being left to fend for herself in the world. Even if this was to be expected, the young woman did not want to have any fancy ideas about remaining at Tracy Island. She had to be ready to accept whatever fate had in store for her. Nonetheless, she had to find the three main laboratories, so she brought her tablet computer with her to access the files. John and Brains had highlighted those they had read, a whole lot of the files had been reviewed. She sighed as she went through more, keeping her mind busy not to think about anything else.

Virgil proceeded to meet with her. She was bundling up when she saw him. He smiled.

- Looks comfortable.

She sighed, turning her head towards him.

- Why are you always positive? You're enjoying life too much. One day, it's going to get to you.

He laughed. This made her even more annoyed. He sat down near her.

- This is what I am. Life is beautiful. Why bother feeling down all the time? The past is full of treasured memory and things that build up experience, not something to reminisce and be sad about all the time.

- You're awfully cheery for a guy who almost lost his brother.

- We have you to thank for saving him. That is what I meant to say by coming here.

She shrugged.

- At least you are grateful. Can't say the same of your brother.

- Scott? Don't mind him. I'm sure he is. He's got a temper.

- Some shitty excuse for him behaving like an asshole. I don't need thanks, just… not be treated as such would be enough.
She closed her eyes for an instant, then opened them and looked down.

- You have been nice enough to fix things around for me. I can fend for myself, you know.

- I'm sure you can. Rest now. This was a very proving day for everyone.

She looked at him, showing no emotion.

- Yeah. You should get some rest. I'll stay here.

He looked at her, perplexed.

- I meant if for you. After all, what you did was an amazing feat. None of us could have pulled that alone, not even Kayo under the circumstances.

She sneered.

- That was not even hard. I've been through worst.

As intriguing as she was, he never did ask any questions to learn about her. He was speaking with her often alone but never went as far as to go in depth about her past. Yet, he was curious about how this whole rescue operation seemed so easy for her. Even with proper military training, an extraction of that sort would require more than one person She had her suit, which helped her, but that was not all. He asked:

- Say, I was curious about what happened down there. We didn't have any visual or infos until the interference was lifted. You said very little also. What happened really?

She smiled as if waiting for this question for a while.

- It was easy with digital camouflage and augmented reality mapping. I had to punch two of them and create some confusion. There were only ten guys. Your brother and Mei were held captive in a shack. I broke them out and we left in one of the vehicles. I covered our escape… that was mostly it.

- Where did you learn all this? Your military training was enough for you to enter a camp full of armed men and be able to get people out safely? I don't buy that. You can't set out like this and hope to escape unscathed, least of all, alone.

She accessed her tablet computer and opened a file labeled "Project Olympus". She lent it to him.

- I hope you like reading.

He looked at the file and folder names as she rose slowly from the chair. She was going to leave when he stopped her.

- What is this?

- All you need to know. I don't have to tell you what kind of monster I am. Find out for yourself.

She went back towards the house, leaving him with even more questions than before.

The guest room was ready to accommodate Mei. The sheets had been freshly laundered and had a light citrusy smell. She crawled on the bed and dropped her body, burying her face in a pillow. She cried, not out of fright for what had happened, but out of guilt. She could recover easily from the
situation that affected her, but it had become even more tense when Alan was involved. She could have gone over it if Scott or Virgil had intervened, they are mature enough to know the extent of their actions, but the youngest Tracy was not. He still lacked some understanding of the world and in other things, he was too trusting. Plus, the fact of being saved by Athena still gave her shivers. She had tried to sell her out to Holling but Abigail used her array of skills to save her life, giving her mixed feelings. Was she really dangerous?

She took a deep breath, rolling on her back. There was someone waiting for her to manifest, she had to contact the man whom was involved with her in this whole situation: doctor Gregory Hawkinburg. He was an associate of her late father, a man in whom he had placed his trust. When her parents divorced, her mother found solace in his arms. He had been there for her while her father was not. He was a good man, understanding and kind. Unfortunately, he was also implicated in the Olympus scandal, having donated a good amount of money to the project. Holling offered him a position but he refused, preferring the tranquil life of university professor. As his family was financially comfortable, he could afford to remain an underpaid scientist and do what he loved in life.

She hesitated at first to contact him from Tracy island. It was necessary to let him know she was safe. Mei opened a private untraceable connection. The old man answered formally, not knowing who was calling.

- Doctor Gregory Hawkinburg speaking.

- Greg? This is Mei.

His tone of voice changed, he was in shock. She could tell he was worried.

- Mei! I had no news from you! Oh, my dear! Are you safe?

- Yes. I cannot talk right now but I am not in danger. Please, can you arrange a pickup for my aircraft at Lima international airport? I would not want it to be seized knowing I did not pay the fare for so long…

- Of… of course! Where can I meet you? Are you coming home soon?

- Not now. I have a patient that requires my full attention.

- How did you… I mean, did you get what you came for?

- Not entirely. We will talk when I get home to you. Do not tell mother about this.

- She does not know a thing. I pray you come back home safe.

- Will do.

She ended the conversation, taking a deep breath. She closed her eyes and let sleep carry her off, completely exhausted.

It was almost noon when Alan woke up. Scott sat in a chair at his side, resting his head in his arms on the bed. He slid his fingers in his brother's hair, hoping to wake him up slowly. It had the opposite effect: Scott jumped and grabbed Alan's hand. Realizing his brother was awake, he got up quickly and released his grip. Alan was startled.

- Woah, Scott, don't jump like that. Did you… did you stay there all night long?
The elder smiled.

- I could not leave you. I feel guilty for letting you go. This is all my fault.

Alan frowned.

- Stop it. I'm an adult now, Scott. I need to experience things for myself… like you did in the past. I don't want to be in somebody's shadow all the time.

- You are not!

- Yes, I am. Everyone says I'm a good astronaut, but it's only because of dad. And now, as a first responder, I can't even go out on my own without needing permission, and when I do, I'm still being checked on… Do you have confidence in me?

Scott looked at his brother, saddened by his words.

- I… I do have confidence in you, Alan. That's not it. If anything were to happen to you, I don't know what I would do. I could not forgive myself. Dad entrusted me with your safety, with everyone's safety and I need to make sure you all remain so.

Alan looked away. He tried lifting his wounded hand, grimacing in pain. He answered his brother:

- Dad is gone, Scott. We are on our own. We have each other and that's the most important thing in the world. Please try to have faith in me. This whole incident means nothing, it could have happened to you. You think we would not have worried as well?

He kept trying to move his fingers but could not. The pain was crawling up to his elbow. He looked at Scott.

- Can you call Mei in? I think I need some more pain killers to ease the throbbing.

Scott got up and called the doctor from the holo-communicator. At the same moment, Kayo came inside. She walked passed Scott and went towards Alan.

- You look better now. How are you feeling?

- In pain. Otherwise, I'm happy to be back home.

She smiled.

- We are happy to have you back. That was one hell of a ride you had back there.

- Yeah, it was. I must not forget to thank Abigail for it. She's the one who freed us and got us to safety.

Scott took a deep breath when he heard his brother. He turned around, having ended the communication with the Doctor, and came back towards Alan.

- Abigail also exposed you to bullets.

- They already had shot me. You think this happened while she was in the camp? That's not how it went. These guys shot at Mei when I found her. I got caught as we tried to make a run for it. She has nothing to do with my wounds.

- You got chased by armed men; things could have been even worse had Virgil not intervene to
stop them. Still, I'm not going to change my mind. She is a hazard.

Kayo took Scott's hand, drawing him close to her.

- Ease your anger, it will do you some good.

He removed his hand and move away in defiance. She remained there, looking at him.

- Yeah, well… no. I think I know how to handle myself, thank you.

- That was just a thought. Calm down.

Scott did not even bother to look at her. She sighed, as she realized he was still the same as ever. Angry, anxious, controlling, stubborn. That was what she liked in him, his stubbornness. He tried stopping her before but after both of them hooked up, she calmed down. On the other hand, he had become more erratic, like if he suddenly felt a need to become overprotective. She thought it had started when she had gone after her uncle and was almost shot down by his henchmen. Scott never talked about it, and when she brought it up, he simply replied he had not changed and nothing was wrong. She sat down near Alan.

Mei came inside. She felt the tension between Scott and Kayo and went straight towards Alan.

- You two should go have that argument elsewhere. Alan needs some rest.

She motioned for them to exit the room. Kayo asked before leaving:

- I'll need to see you afterward, doc.

- Your checkup, yes. I will get to that after I change Alan's dressing.

Mei diverted her attention to Alan as the young woman left. He was clearly suffering. The doctor took his temperature: it was rising. She quickly set him up with antibiotics on his IV and a pain killer. After about five minutes, his vitals went back to normal. He smiled at her.

- Thanks, Doc. Feels better now.

He pushed himself upward, his back and legs were stiff. Mei helped him get into a more comfortable position. He accidentally laid some weight on his wounded arm: a spasm of pain went through his whole body, bringing tears to his eyes. He could still not move his fingers; they were pale and cold to the touch.

The doctor undid his dressing. He was rather curious and began watching as she removed the bandage. The blood had clotted on the gaze sponge; she had to dampen it with sterile water. As she removed it, she noticed his forearm wound had worsened. The tissues around were showing signs of necrosis. She covered her mouth, trying to hide her emotions. As she had thought, it was too late. His fingers and hand were already a cadaveric blueish gray. Even with the proper care, she gave him once they arrived inside Thunderbird two, she could not revive the limb in time. She knew this would happen and hid it from him. Now, she had to bring it up. Alan did not understand when he looked at the doctor's face. She finally met his gaze: he was worried, tears in the eyes.

- Mei… Please tell me this is… this will heal…?

She motioned a clear "no" with her head, sobbing as she breathed deeply. He started shaking. His voice rose.
- Don't… don't tell me I'm going to… NO PLEASE!

Scott had heard his brother from the other room and bolted inside. He went towards the bed, looking at Mei, frowning. His voice was severe.

- What is wrong?

He grabbed Mei by the arm. Alan was crying as Scott pulled her arm and shook her back to reason.

- Tell me! WHAT IS WRONG?

Kayo came in, alarmed by Scott's tone of voice. She witnessed the scene and approached slowly. Mei looked at Scott with a serious tone of voice.

- Alan's forearm wound will not heal. The blood flow does not reach the extremities. There is no way around this…

Scott did not understand, his brother was crying, clenching his teeth in both anger and sadness, overwhelmed by the situation. The elder looked at Alan's wounded arm and went back to the doc. He squeezed the doc's arm in anger, losing patience.

- What does that mean?

She frowned, grabbing his wrist and trying to break free.

- If you want me to save his life, he will have to be amputated.

Scott released her. Another bad omen had struck the Tracys in so little time. He roared and punched through the nearest wall, exploding in anger. Kayo walked up to him.

- Scott, stop it!

She grabbed his fist, blood glistened on his knuckles. He tried to shove her aside but she took a step back and evaded. He left the med bay. Kayo joined Alan devastated by the news. He would need comforting and, most of all, the presence of his loved ones.
Take for granted

There was noise coming from the gym. Cursing, roaring, punching, objects sent flying. Scott's anger had turned to madness as he learned about Alan's fate. He could not bear hearing such news. He had to take it up on something rather than someone. This was not the first time he went on a crazy rampage like this: last time was after Jeff's disappearance. He had tried so hard to keep the family together, his stress overwhelmed him.

John had been in touch with Kayo who explained the situation. He tried to contact his elder brother, but in vain. He went towards Virgil, the only one who could put up with Scott and calm him, whether with words or by force. It would not be the first time an argument would have turned to blows; they all had been teenagers, and most of them grew up without their loving mother's presence. They had missed her, and even if Grandma did try to take her place, it was never the same. She was a lot more distant, they were not her direct flesh and blood. Lucy was a passionate, caring woman with a heart to love a hundred children. Her death struck the family as a calamity. It took years to ease the pain of her passing, and even after all that time, the thought of her still haunted the boys.

Virgil was browsing through the Olympus file on the tablet. He had found a few hair-raising facts about Abigail and the others who shared her fate. He even came upon a video depicting blood chilling scenes of the Olympus program's engineers being beaten and dragged away. Many events were caught on visual, some of them so gruesome he did not bear to watch them until the end. He understood even more her will to remain silent about herself. He came upon one titled "First Trials". The video was filmed through a first-person camera. Commands were being issued through a communication network but most of the video was silent. He saw three people standing in front of the camera. The setting was very dark, he could not see their features correctly other than the fact that their surroundings was a dense forest. They were all three dressed in the same type of suit than Abigail was, entirely white with dark glove and boots. Theirs helmets were slightly different. Noise came from the side, the camera turned around to face the direction. There was nothing. A screen of some sort seemed to appear in front of the camera, activating parameters such as night and infrared vision. The light shifted to a greenish background, the forest's layout was clearly visible. There seemed to be some presence all around, in the bushes, behind trees and hidden in plain darkness. There was a loud explosion noise, the camera went totally blank for about five seconds. He witnessed a battle between the suited individuals and a group of armed men resembling a military infiltration unit. The camera caught some of them being dispatched by the bare hands of the suited men. The camera holder also did tackle a few, sending one flying as he was punched and another seeing his visor destroyed as his attacker's fist went through his helmet.

In total, about fifteen bodies laid around, the camera had looked upon the casualties. The last issued command was "Return to base". They plunged into the darkness of the forest, disappearing in plain sight.

He laid the tablet down and rubbed his forehead. What did that all mean? Was Abigail one of these people? Could she really dispatch battle weary soldiers with her bare hands? It was hard to believe.

He got up and stretched, realizing he had been watching the videos for at least a good part of the morning. It was passed midday. He was startled by a call. It was John, who spoke in a nervous tone.

- Virgil! Scott's at it again. He lost it and won't speak to me. Gordon has rushed to try to calm him down but… you know how this usually ends up…
Virgil sighed. He knew this was bound to happen.

- Where is he now?

- In the gym.

He set out. Gordon was outside the gym door. He turned around when his brother arrived.

- Geez! I'm gone for a few days and this is what happens? What is going on?

- Scott is mad and, by that, I mean crazy mad.

- Did he go over the top like last time? What are you going to do now?

- The same thing I did last time, talk some sense into him.

- That's not what happened last time. He had a black eye…

- Yeah, that's when words don't have the intended effect.

- Well, don' be too hard on him. He's only doing what he thinks is right.

- I won't fight him unless I absolutely have to. You know me better than this.

Gordon nodded. He was affected by the current situation; his usual smirk had melted into an anxious smile. He left the hall, leaving Virgil alone to deal with his brother.

The door was locked. Scott had changed the password again. John hacked into it and reset the entire mechanism, granting entry to Virgil. The elder was inside, jabbing a punching bag. He had thrown whatever he could around the room: weights, benches, towels. His fit of rage had not yet passed, he did not even turn around when he heard the door open. He was breathing fast.

- Gordon, I told you to get the fuck out of this room, dumbass!

Virgil approached him but remained a safe distance to be able to react if he tried anything.

- Who are you calling a dumbass? Turn around and let's talk.

Hearing Virgil's voice, Scott stopped. He turned around slowly, a defying look in his eyes.

- What do YOU want? I don't need you here.

- You do. Look at this mess you did. What's gotten into you?

- I don't have to explain myself to the likes of you. Now get out.

- Not going to happen. You have to stick with me and have a chat. I want to know why you are in this state.

- Why? I'll tell you why? Because fuck all this, that's why! Alan is wounded because of me and now…

- Now what?

- … his arm won't heal. He's going to lose it. Have you ever seen a crippled astronaut? Well, now we have one.
Virgil was startled.

- What? Why did you not talk about this instead of going nuts?

- It was my job. I had to protect him. I had to go… but he went in my stead because I was too weak! This is unacceptable. I won't live with this…

He stopped for an instant, massaging his temples. Virgil went over to him.

- It's not your fault. You are not invincible, Scott. You could not prevent this from happening…

Scott rose his head and pushed him back.

- Don't touch me! I could have prevented it by jumping in Thunderbird Shadow and meet you there! If John had not stopped me…

- … but he did, for your own good. We did what we could. He's here and alive…

- Alive without an arm. Dad would have been so pissed!

- Stop bringing dad up all the time! He's not here anymore, Scott, you have to get over it! Don't try to justify your actions with what he would want or not, think for yourself!

Scott got angry, shoving his brother back. Virgil retaliated, not wanting to be bullied by his brother again. The elder went forward and delivered a straight punch directly in his brother's jaw. Virgil took a step back, putting his guard up, blocking the blow.

- DO NOT EVER TELL ME THAT!

The two brothers engaged in a brawl. Scott was trying to deliver strong blows to his brother but could only catch his guard. Virgil tried to get a hold of him and pin him down, even if he knew that would only get him even more enraged than he already was. Instead, he waited for his brother to falter, which he did. The elder could not keep up with punching erratically and with such strength for a long time. Even if he was strong, he did not have the endurance to back it up. Virgil tackled him with his shoulder and pinned his shoulders down on the concrete floor. He held him, grabbing both his fists and sitting on top of him. Scott's face was flushed red, he was breathing heavily. The elder tried to break free but could not Virgil was angry, and when he was, everyone was afraid of him. He squeezed his brother's fists so tightly, the elder grimaced. He spoke in a slow tone of voice, pressing each word, a tight grip on his brother.

- Now, you STOP. This has gone far enough. I won't say it twice and I'm not going to put up with this shit from you all the time. Dad is gone. All we have left is each other. Stop thinking you are some frickin' hero or something. You need us and we need you. Man up and face the fact that we can't control everything. Alan's accident is terrible but we will find a solution to it. Stop living in the past, dammit!

Scott calmed down. He stopped fighting back, closing his eyes. Tears ran down his cheeks as he remained lying down, his back against the cold surface. He said, in a trembling voice.

- I'm so sorry.

Virgil looked at him, his face had gone back to a neutral mood. He released his brother and got up, helping him.

- Don't be. Instead, find solutions. There is always something we can do. Always.
Both brothers shared a hug before parting. The elder began picking up his mess. His brother stopped him.

- Get some sleep. I'll take care of this place. Make sure you are fully rested before coming back to the living room. Take some sleeping pills if you need to.

Scott nodded as he left the gym and headed for his room, following his brother's orders.

The surgery lasted three hours. Mei was assisted by Brains who had a hard time coping with the situation. He was so deeply affected by Alan's cries, this whole situation felt unreal. Grandma was waiting outside the operating room pacing around, trying to get her thoughts together.

As Alan was waking, the first reflex he had was to lift his right arm and wipe his face. It was gone. He did still feel as if he had a hand, the phantom pain was playing tricks on him. He screamed: Grandma came to his side, wiping his brow with a wet towel as he was heavily sweating from the pain and fright. Mei administered him a heavy dosage of pain killer. He piped down eventually. The elderly woman remained on her grandson's side, anxious about his well-being. Mei went to check on him and remained with them.

Brains left the med bay for his lab. The was in deep thoughts about that whole situations and knew he had to try to fix Alan's handicap quickly. International Rescue cannot afford to lose its astronaut and neither can they take the time to find someone else. Scott was comfortable with space rescue missions but he lacked the training required to launch Thunderbird Three safely. In the meantime, they could ask Captain Taylor to pilot the craft, if Scott could tolerate his incessant yapping. In the mood he was in right now, he would not even give the veteran a chance.

He began researching information about how to build an efficient prosthetics for Alan to use. All the marketed models were very simple and could be made using a 3D printer, unfortunately, the response time was a lot longer than a real hand would. He required something that could permit him to have sharp reflexes and make sudden changes without suffering from the latency.

That is when he remembered the contents of the files in the black box's database.

He began reading the data about the cybernetic implants in depth. He had already gone through most of that section but read it quickly, omitting the technical and medical sections. This time, he went through all and focused on the precise measurements. The document was well detailed but a lot of data was missing. He rubbed his forehead: if he went along with this type of gear, Alan would probably be questioned by the GDF if it was ever publicly displayed. The youngest Tracy seldom went off the island other than on rescue missions, so if he was to wear one, it would go unnoticed. He could always fit him with a latex sleeve over afterwards if he ever needed to.

He reared in his chair, thinking. Unethical as it was, he could not think about a better solution. Unable to make up his mind, he summoned Abigail in. She was in her room, browsing through the database, still searching for the labs. John had popped up a few times to check on her since Scott had ordered her to stay inside her room. As inclined as he was to tell her to ignore his orders, he did not want to put up with Scott's bad attitude and simply asked her to politely remain in her quarters.

She made her way to the lab, grabbing a coffee on her way. Brains greeted her warmly as she entered. He explained the whole situation. She asked:

- Are you really going to do it? I mean, if you ask me, you should make sure Scott is okay with all this before anything else.
- I know. Judging on the recent events, I think we must not ask him too much. He's overwhelmed.

- Yeah... Let's make a deal. I'll help you if you shield me from him. If you are the one to bring this up, he won't have such a strong reaction.

Brains nodded. That was not such a bad idea. Abigail went on.

- Consider a fact: the cybernetic implants are linked to the bone, tissues, nerves and skin. He won't be able to remove it and he will require additional augments to make it work properly. Are you ready to go through with all of this?

- I would like to. Please, tell me, what else would be required?

- The whole deal. If we do this procedure, Alan will require the nanites to heal faster. That way, there will be fewer chances of rejection. This augmentation will change his blood composition as well as his compatibility factor with all other non-augmented people. He basically becomes alien.

- And this is 100% safe?

- With the nanites, yes. Otherwise, there is a whole lot of complications that may occur. I've gone through this so many times, I know the drill.

- I have confidence in your abilities. It is worth a shot.

The engineer was excited. He would take part in the creation of an intricate and most technologically advanced piece of equipment. What excited him most was that it was not of his design. He would want to understand it better to eventually improve it even more. Abigail broke his reverie.

- Have you spoken to Alan about this?

- No, not yet. You are right, I think it would be better to speak to him quickly.

- I'll take care of it. Be back in a few.

Half a day had passed. The med bay was a cold and soulless place, with its white epoxy painted walls glistening in the artificial light. Slim windows on the top of the walls was the only thing that let sunshine in, and only a few hours per day. The rest of the time, the strong white LED lights shone inside, like terrible burning spots to the eye.

Alan longed for the comfort of his own bed. Mei promised him he would go back to it once his condition was judged satisfactory. What she meant by that, he did not know. If it was that he needed to stop crying his lungs out, he had stopped when his throat was burning and his other hand hurt from hitting the side of the bed too much. It was childish to continue on with it. He asked Grandma to be alone. He was now staring at the ceiling, thinking.

His stump hypnotized him. There was nothing where his hand used to be. Chopped about two inches above the wrist, he could feel phantom pain and numbness as if his limb was still there. He lifted his arm, feeling heavy strain. When he mustered enough courage, he touched the bandage. His eyes became teary immediately. How was he going to go on being a part of International Rescue? Will he be replaced? No, he could not. He was one of their pilots, their astronaut, the only one who can take the rocket in space.
The door opened. Abigail came in, saluting him from afar. He frowned.

- I just want to be alone. Please.

She nodded.

- Very well. Tell me when you are going to be in a mood for chatting.

As she turned back, he looked at her. She was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, exhibiting her cybernetic arm. He changed his mind.

- Wait! It's okay.

She smiled as she turned back and sat down near him, taking a look at his bandage.

- I'm sorry about that… I wish I could have been quicker.

Tears began flowing on Alan's cheeks. Abigail felt bad. She took his remaining hand in hers. He looked at it, detailing the palm with his finger.

- Abigail, can you… can you make me one of these?

She looked at him.

- Are you really sure you want that one? I mean, you know what it implies: this is an illegal cybernetic implant.

- I don't care…

- He turned to look at her in the eyes.

- My brothers are always checking on me. I'm maybe the youngest but I can make enlightened decisions and know what's best for me. I don't need Scott or anyone else's approval.

- Do you know the consequences? You know you might not be able to fly on a commercial flight anymore. Any kind of scanners or other types of security can lead you to be arrested. Your medical data will need to remain secured and untouched, you might even have to bribe a doctor not to talk about it to authorities. Ok with that?

- Yeah. I rarely fly off the island other than for business and I don't think I'll have to go through any type of security. Mei keeps our data secured and I'm sure she can omit to talk about that incident if we ask her. I got it covered.

- Very well. How will your older brother handle this?

- I'll take care of him. It's my choices, he does not have anything to say about it.

- Actually, I came here to see you in Brain's stead because we have been talking about this. Not that I did not want to have news or anything.

- You had this planned all along?

- Kind of. I'd hate to let you down if we have the best existing way to fix you.

Alan smiled. He was not even mad at the fact that Brains had thought of the same thing.
- Thanks. I owe you one.

Abigail smirked.

- I don't need anything. I'll make sure you are back in service quickly.

The young woman rose and went towards the door.

- We'll start tomorrow. Better be in shape. Measurements à 8 am. We have a lot of work to do.

- FAB, doc!

She left, sighing. He really had no idea of the impact his decision would have on his life.

The old English manor was silent as it was bathed in the English sunset. Thunderbirds Shadow landed near the driveway, camouflaged not to arouse suspicions as to what it did there. Kayo was welcomed by Parker at the door who brought her directly to the Lady.

Penelope was waiting, having tea and biscuits. As the young lady appeared, she was greeted warmly by the Lady of the house and offered a cup of earl grey. They talked a few minutes about the recent events. Kayo did not really want to talk, as she just left the heavy ambiance of Tracy island to take her mind off things. She dispensed information scarcely, preferring to come back to the matter at hand.

The young woman popped up maps of the factory layouts and explained her plan. The Lady listened and nodded.

- The factory has an evening and a night shift. Entering will be easy since the security is light at that time. Judging by the aerial photographs taken by Thunderbird Five's probe, there is only a guard station at the entrance, the rest is pretty much open terrain until the facility. There are at least a hundred people working there at night.

- Would you require Parker's help to get inside?

- No need. I'll go through the fence and enter through the fire exit on the second floor of the western side. The computer room is north of there. It looks like there is only storage on the upper floor. I'll download the database and go back the way I came.

- Won't cutting the fence rouse suspicion?

- There have been reports of teenagers squatting the area. Should be easy to find an existing hole or a patched one. It is a small plant, after all.

- Sounds like a good plan. In the mean time, I will attend the charity and gather information about the wives. Let's hope we get substantial information from this. I do not want Holling to find out about us, else he promised me trouble.

- I'll cover my tracks. That's what I'm best at. Thunderbird Shadow will be waiting not so far away to pick me up, so there is no need for an additional player in this game.

- Very well. I will be getting ready to go now. The lunch is in forty-five minutes.

The lady stood, hailing her butler. Kayo finished her tea before leaving. They parted both on their way.
During the flight, Penelope rehearsed a discourse as she was asked to speak in front of an audience. These charities always made her nervous as she never really knew what to say other than talk about the recent events and reassure the people that everything was taken care of. This time, however, she had to omit the Holling variable; no good word came into mind as she thought of him or his enterprises. She would have to improvise when necessary.

She had gotten information about the fact that the businessman offered a monetary compensation to the widows and offered to pay full tuition fees to their children. This was well received as the families' wages were not very high. All theirs kids could enjoy a worry-free tuition in the school of their choice, often far away from their families. She sighed. Parker asked:

- Everything all right, m'lady?

- Yes. The simple thought of getting in Holling's way again makes me nervous.

- Pardon me, m'lady, but won't this be the right thing to do than to oppose him?

- It is. Holling is a powerful man… I fear we might have to go slower than anticipated to try to expose him. We might have to wait for him to commit an error and work on that.

The driver nodded as he approached for landing.

The lunch was held in a small reception hall, nothing out of the extraordinary. Penelope was greeted by a few of the volunteers at the entrance and shown inside to the six widows.

Out of the six women, two of them seemed to be very young, one of the two was deeply affected: she was sitting down not far away from the lot, wiping tears from her eyes. She was with child, the size of her belly betrayed her. The Lady offered her sympathy to each of them and sat down near the young widow last, offering her wishes.

- I am deeply saddened by your loss. Please accept my most sincere apologies. What is your name?

The young widow sobbed loudly. She rested her head on Penelope's shoulder. The Lady hugged her. As they parted, the young woman seemed better.

- Marle, ma'am. My husband and I moved here from the north. He got this job payin' good money. I just can't… I can't believe he just bailed like this!

She cried again. Penelope rubbed her shoulders.

- He left? Did he say anything before leaving?

- Not at all. Said… he was going to work. Had changed shifts for the night. Better money for our family. He was not a bad man! I swear! He worked hard, and he was so excited about us having our third child.

- I see. Take some time to recover from this emotional ordeal and contact me. I would be interested if you can tell me more about your late husband. Consider this: I am ready to offer you patronage in exchange for information. Is this interesting?

The young woman's face enlightened. She looked at Lady Penelope with a smile, tears still running down her cheeks.

- Ma'am, this would be the most generous thing someone ever did for me. Yes, of course. I have no close relatives, I'm on my own now. If you can help me, I'd be in your debt!
- Let's keep this between us, shall we? Can I meet you somewhere more private?

The young woman took out an old smartphone and began fiddling with it. She transferred her information to Penelope's communicator via proximity link.

- I sent you my address. I'm there most of the time.

- Very good. Thank you.

Penelope smiled as the young woman tried to do the same. She then proceeded to the podium to speak to the assembly. There were a few representatives from local organisms ready to help the women in need. The Lady was representing King George's charities, a program initiated by the king himself to help local Englishmen in need. The widows were to receive a monetary compensation from the charity to help with lodging, food and clothing needs. The locals had already amassed many types of good to distribute. The rest of the evening was calm. Penelope met with Parker outside, waiting by the car.

- Home Parker. We have an appointment tomorrow and we need to rise early.

- Yes, m'Lady!

The illuminated sign of Hezra Synthetics stood alone in a barren field, announcing the compound ahead. It was five hundred meters away where tall fences surrounded by barbed wire protected the large perimeter. A single guard post and a gate protected the entrance, surveyed by cameras. On the far left of the entrance was a large containment building with red and yellow signs exhibiting "Keep out" and different warnings about hazardous materials. The place was well lighted, to Kayo's disbelief. This was supposed to be a small plant; to require that much security was to either make it look obvious that something was hidden, or that the place was very dangerous. She did one last background check in order to find out more about the production of that particular facility. Listed in the International business registry was the simple mention of "pharmaceutical products". The radioactive sign was everywhere, but there were no environmental warnings about the plant manipulating such products. The bird's view from the probe John had sent did not get this information from the air. It annoyed her to see such negligence, but she could not let it get to her.

She had landed Thunderbird Shadow in the wilderness, preferring to keep it camouflaged in a valley far from the road. It was equipped with proximity sensors so she would get notified if anyone tried to get close to her craft. She ran towards the compound in the darkness, activating her helmet's night vision. There was less lighting in the back where the fire escape stood on the second floor. She proceeded to find an existing hole in the fence. She was in luck but the circumstances struck her as weird. Either it was recently cut and had not been patched or it was negligently kept like this, but there had been a lot of coming and going through that breach. The grass that grew near the rest of the fence seemed to have been scraped off and the dirt was beaten. Recent footprints could be seen under the scanner. Somebody had used that exit not so long ago. She hurried inside, not wanting to see if these people were still around.

There was a security camera on top of the building, watching the staircase leading up. There was no way she could evade it. Brains had cooked up some short range EMP disruptors, some type of signal jamming rig that could impact high frequency data transfer. Images were usually shielded from that type of jamming, but the engineer took extra care to adjust the unit to affect these as well. She contacted John and advised him of her move. Her communication would be cut for the duration of the jamming. He kept an eye on the compound through satellite imaging as she went up the stairs. A guard patrol went by, walking slowly and talking. They pointed out the hole in the fence and began investigating it. She crouched in front of the door not to be seen. Her cover was
good, but she could not keep the disruptor up for too long lest it would also work on the guard's communicators and arouse suspicion. The massive metal door was locked by an old magnetic lock with a data pad. She readied her lock hacking device before switching off her jammer and working on the code. It took less than five seconds and she was in, making sure to close the door silently behind her.

The storage room was completely dark. There were no lights whatsoever. Through night vision, she saw various sealed plastic crates laid around the room with warning stickers on them, mostly information about the contents and biological hazard of the product. All crates contained the same thing. She made sure to scan one and store it in her computer before continuing. She contacted John.

- John, it's Kayo.

- I hear you. What do you need?

- Can you analyze the product data I found? I don't know how useful it can be but just in case.

- FAB.

- I'm going in deeper. I'll call if I need anything else.

She cut the comm and proceeded to the other end of the room. An old elevator and a forklift stood near a railing. She heard the regular noise of machinery in the lower part below the shaft. After a quick look through infrared vision, she noticed the elevator led directly on the assembly line. There were too much light and people to go unseen. She searched further to find a suitable place to go down, scanning the place with the help of John. There was a hidden shaft obstructed by a few of the boxes. Since it was the only safe way through, she had little choice but to try moving them to access it. A light rattling of glass could be heard inside the containers. She pushed slower to make sure not to disrupt the silence.

The shaft led in a service duct for servicing ventilation. She crept inside the dusty conduit and eventually came up an exit on the end. It was a ceiling grate, she would have to drop down several feet to get to the floor. Luckily, there was nobody inside the room, and only the dim light of the holo screens was casting shadows inside. She unclipped the grate, making sure to catch it before it fell and slid down. The railing holding the duct was not very sturdy, it shook, sending her to her feet quicker and louder than she would have wanted. The trap was too high to reposition the grate, she left it near the wall. It was a small office with a few desks and chairs. There were two computers: these might contain information she was looking for. She inserted the card in one of the consoles and began transferring the content. John came in touch with her.

- Kayo, EOS is going through the files as we speak. There is nothing about employees or any type of personal data. The information might prove valuable, but it's not what we are looking for at first hand.

- I'm going to look around a bit.

- There must be a mainframe or something else that contains more data. Find it but be careful.

- As always.

The only door in the room led to a corridor. She scanned with her infrared filter to find a few heat signatures. Two people were moving out and one was at the far end of it, in another room. A large concentration of heat was perceptible in an adjacent area, suggesting either machinery or a
Since she was in a rather recluse area far from the center of the plant, it could be a server room. She proceeded to that particular place, making sure nobody would see her and keeping under the dead zones of the cameras. She managed to access it quite easily. Unfortunately, her escape would be cut, as the room only had one exit in the direction the two individuals went. In the room was the security control console displaying every image from the plant's cameras. In one corner stood a bunch of data consoles, the wires clumsily installed in a chaotic bunch. It clearly indicated the work was done by a negligent amateur. A tablet computer rested on top of the console desk laden with crumbs and empty chocolate bar packaging. She hurried and inserted the chip card, beginning to copy the database to Thunderbird five's.

After a few minutes in, her gauntlet computer flashed: someone was coming in the room. She could not stop the copy as it could corrupt the existing mainframe. Instead, she hid behind the console, tucked between it and a wall. A terribly fat man came inside, carrying a box of what seemed to be hot dogs and a coffee. He sat down in front of the console, his poor chair squealing as if it was in pain. He began browsing on the different screens, not even noticing the transfer that was executing in background. She could hear him burp occasionally in between two rapid and loud breaths. He picked up the tablet computer and started playing loud porn videos on it. The loud moaning and groaning of the videos made her uncomfortable. The young spy looked at her gauntlet: the transfer was about to be finished in less than one minute. She waited for at least five more to make sure, but the man did not look like he was about to moon anytime soon. If she wanted to get out without being seen, she would have to take him out or at least try to.

The man laughed loudly as he turned up the volume. Kayo made sure to turn off her camera and communication to spare John from those horrible fake noises. Her idea was not the best and could expose her to danger, but that was the only thing that came in mind. She took off her helmet, undid her hair and unzipped her suit down to her breasts, showing a good amount of cleavage. She rose slowly from behind the console, keeping her helmet in hand, approaching the man. At first, he did not see her, but once she came closer, he lifted his head and bounced from his chair, almost falling on his back. She cocked her head and spoke in a sensual voice.

- Hey there, sugar. You up for some action?

The man's face was so surprised, he looked like he had never seen a woman in his life. Probably never a beautiful woman willing to show him some skin. His eyes were drawn to her breasts. She took a quick look at the cameras while he was at it and noticed two other guards were coming their way. She sat on his lap, his breath stank of mustard and sausages. He did not know what to do. She asked:

- Are your friends coming along? It would be a shame if they interrupted us. Mind sending them away for a few minutes?

He motioned a quick yes and took his communicator nervously. While he was contacting his colleagues, Kayo picked up from her sash an inhalator in which was loaded a powerful anesthetic. This would put him out for about an hour while she made a run for it. He sent both guards to investigate the storage facility then turned back to her, gripping her waist with his greasy fingers. She smiled and approached her hand to his mouth, releasing the small valve. He breathed the entire dose and fell down on his back, trying to grab Kayo on his way. She jumped back away from him zipping her suit up and replacing her helmet. Removing the card from the computer, she still had some time left. She disabled the cameras for fifteen minutes, putting the entire security system on hold while she was escaping the facility.

As she boarded Thunderbird Shadow, John contacted her.
- Kayo, I've found the employee files and all the data Lady Penelope asked for. The problem is, I don't see anything wrong with it.

- What were we searching for exactly?

- Proof that could incriminate Holling in the disappearance of these men. Other than being a copy of their original file, I don't see what else is new.

- Great. So, I went through all this for absolutely nothing?

- There are some interesting finds. For example, that crate you scanned. It contained a chemical that is not registered on the International Pharmaceutical database or the Chemical one. There is no mention of it anywhere.

- You mean to say Holling has been making his own drugs?

- Could be. There is no composition, no dilution ratio, nothing. It's as if it was made to be delivered to someone who know what to do with it. I'll make some more research with the data from Cradle Alpha. Maybe I'll find something in it.

- Let's check that out when I get home. There is bound to be something we can find browsing through all this.

- Agreed.

She set course for Tracy Island.
The setting sun had engulfed the living room in an ardent blaze. It was hot, comfortable and beautiful. Gordon had taken Alan away from the med bay and brought him upstairs to enjoy the view alongside him. The youngest Tracy was grateful, but he had showed signs of weakness when walking around. Doctor Chang had insisted that he get up a bit and sit down at his bedside but he refused, preferring to go with his brother for a stroll. He was fed up being kept in bed, and even if she tried to explain to him the extent of the side effects of the anesthetics, he insisted in getting up. He took a lot from Scott, she told him, and also issued a warning about it. Nonetheless, when Gordon arrived, he was delighted. His brother would bring him upstairs if he asked him too.

Gordon leaned against the railing while Alan breathed in the fresh hot saline air. He could not help but look at his bandage where his hand was before. It was not like him to be so silent. His brother turned to him.

- What's wrong?

The aquanaut was awakened from his thoughts.

- I was thinking. What are you going to do now?

- Don't worry, I got this covered.

Alan's attitude was rather calm and he spoke with ease. His brother regarded him perplexed.

- Are you thinking about getting a prosthetic? There are some pretty neat things people do with 3D printing theses days.

- Something like that. I don't want to remain a liability for International Rescue so I made a decision.

- You sound so formal, tell me.

- I asked Abigail to outfit me with cybernetics.

Gordon's jaw dropped.

- You... you what?

His younger brother turned towards him.

- You heard me. I want to have a cybernetic replacement for my hand. I remember seeing what prosthetics are, and it's nowhere near efficient for what we do.

The aquanaut did not know what to say. He was shocked. He could not believe that his brother sought after something illegal for the benefit of the organization. He had to talk him out of it.

- This is a joke? You do know it's illegal, right? The GDF won't let you have that. Who squeezed that idea in your head? Do you realize what it'll do to you?

Alan was calm and sighed. He knew his brother would go all out in trying to make him change his mind.

- I'm old enough to know about the consequences. We wear gloves during missions, so nobody will
notice it. Besides, I never go outside the island and I don't need to. I have everything I need here.

- But, you don't understand! It's your future we're talking about. You'll be stuck with this forever. Does Scott know about your decision?

- No, he doesn't. I want to speak to him myself so refrain from gossiping around. I want to make this official and announce it to the whole family together.

Gordon never saw his brother so determined. He could see a hint of Scott's stubbornness in him. Realizing that whatever he said had no effect whatsoever, he let go.

- I can't believe this. It's like if you didn't have any consideration for yourself!

Alan turned around and faced his brother.

- Can I ask you something?

- Yeah, sure.

- When was last time you made a life changing decision?

He thought for a minute.

- I don't remember. Well, apart from rethinking my career as a professional swimmer, but that was different. We take such decisions on missions sometimes.

- That has nothing to do with missions, it's your life. This is my decision and I have to make it now for the sake of the organization and my sake too. I'm confident this is the right thing to do.

Footsteps came from behind. Grandma had heard the brothers talk and was coming to join them. Gordon wanted to tell him about Alan's decision but refrained, knowing he specifically asked him not to gossip around. The old woman came closer and hugged Alan.

- You don't know how happy I am to see you home. I was worried sick! Don't you dare ever frighten your old grandma like this ever again, you hear?

He responded, trying to break free with his remaining hand.

- I'll try.

- You'll have to do something about that stump of yours….

- Yes, yes, I know...

- Good.

Grandma released him and joined them watching the sunset. After some time, Alan asked:

- Grandma, do you have faith in me? I mean, do you trust me in making good decisions.

The woman turned around and looked at him.

- Of course! Well, I mean, it depends on what decision you have in mind. I trust you understand what that implies. Choices are important, and when you become an adult, you must make sure that you understand well the consequences attached to them.
Gordon smirked. He hoped that what Grandma told Alan would at least make him think twice before making his choice. The youngest Tracy simply replied:

- I'll keep that in mind.

- Good then! Let's have dinner, shall we? I'm going to fire up the oven and make something nice.

Both boys looked at her, then at each other, understanding that she was about to do some kind of experimental cooking. They both nodded and left towards the pool while their grandmother headed for the kitchen.

During the meal, he thought it would be a good time to talk openly to everyone. He struggled a little with his left hand but ended up not making a fool of himself. Grandma had already cut his food like when he was a little boy and she made sure he would not need to pour himself anything to drink. His brothers helped him also, only Gordon kept looking up, expecting him to speak any minute now. He kept silent the whole meal, listening to what the others had to say. It was just small talk. Nobody was doing anything special. It was a usual day on Tracy island. He was happy to be there, regardless of what happened.

When everyone was done, he decided it was time to make his announcement. All of the inhabitants of Tracy island were there except Kayo and John. He called the space monitor to make sure all the Tracys were at the table. He stood to talk.

- Guys, I wanted to say I am proud and happy to be back alive thanks to your combined efforts to get me and Mei out of that hellhole. This incident was bad, but I won't let it drag me down. That's why I made a decision.

The whole table was silent. They were waiting for him to go on.

- I am old enough to understand the implication and the dangers of going through with this. I don't want to be judged or anything. I will live with it.

He paused, looking at Scott who was all ears. He did not try to interrupt, to his surprise.

- I want to continue being part of International rescue, keep on piloting and be an astronaut, so I want to be outfitted with a cybernetic prosthetic.

The lot looked at him. Brains was waiting for Scott's feedback and Abigail escaped any eye contact with the elder. Mei did not say anything, while the others were all surprised. Alan looked at Scott and waited for his answer. The elder felt all eyes on him. He took a deep breath, he did not want to become angry again. His response was simple:

- No. You won't. This is not a game, Alan, it's your life. I won't have a member of International Rescue outfitted with something illegal. I know you want to come back in the fray quickly but that's not how it works.

Alan tapped on the table with his left hand.

- I'm perfectly capable of deciding for myself! I'm an adult, dammit! When are you going to realize I'm not three years old anymore!

His eyes became teary as he expressed his anger. Scott's voice rose.

- I will not sabotage all of dad's hard work invested in International Rescue only to see it be
dismantled by authorities when they learn about you. This is not what we do. Whoever put this idea in your head should be ashamed.

Scott eyed Abigail resentfully. She did not stare back not to anger him. Seeing how the situation was escalating, Brains raised his hand to speak. The whole crew looked at him as Scott turned his gaze towards the engineer.

- Scott, I am the one who suggested it to Alan.

It was a habit of Brains to take the shots. He was used to being picked on, so it became his defense mechanism. the Tracy boys usually became ashamed of their fault when he took the blame. This time, however, it was his suggestion that sparked the polemic. He kept his head high and went on.

- I have spent the day making some research about laws and regulations regarding cybernetic implants. The articles speak of the use of augments in military research and on the battlefield. There is little-known use of these special prosthetics in civilians. The law targets people whose limbs were replaced on purpose. There was also an entire chapter on brain modifications after the learning chip incident, which means that the stand-alone prosthetic is not to blame, the attachments are. Abigail's wiring is highly illegal since it runs through her entire body, but Alan's would not be.

Scott turned his head towards Mei.

- Can you confirm?

She eyed him: he was frowning and listened, arms crossed, to Brains' entire monolog. When the whole assembly turned to her, she felt like she had no choice.

- don't know much about laws. What I do know is that cybernetics are expensive, not many people can afford them, so it is a rather undefined matter. Being outfitted on purpose is illegal. It had been done a few times during the last war and sparked so much controversy about ethics that world leaders decided to ban it in whole. To restart the debate would be to get into long and tedious procedures.

Mei finished her sentence. Scott sighed. He was angry still but did not want to show it. Virgil was checking him and he knew it. He already had made a scene, there was not need for another. He reared his chair and got up. Alan watched him and frowned.

- Are you just going to walk away like this?

Scott was trying to keep his composure. He looked at his brother quickly, addressing him in a cold and ruthless tone.

- The answer is still no.

He left the kitchen as everyone watched Alan melt down in tears. Brains was also mad: Scott had rebuked his idea without a second thought. He kept his feelings inside, unable to voice them adequately. Gordon went to comfort his younger brother.

- See? I told you it was not going to work. Alan, please! There are still a lot of things you can do like being space monitor or even help Brains out by learning engineering.

Alan looked at his brother, his eyes filled with hatred.

- I won't have it! I won't be content with the leftovers if I know I can do better!
- That's not very nice, talking about John like that!

The astronaut pushed his brother, mad at his reaction. Grandma jumped in to intervene.

- STOP! Now you two sit down and listen. I may not be an active part of this organization but I help build it. And you don't go anywhere by just sayin' no. You have to weigh all of it in whole. Jeff had to bend some rules to get this place working. Lest Scott forgets it, he has to take some risks sometimes.

Alan calmed down and sat, wiping his tears. Grandma smiled as she went on.

- There are good and bad people in this world. Good ones are forgotten but bad ones remain. We tend to make rules that punish the good and hamper the evil. What if the good ones could have a chance to prove themselves and work it out?

The old woman looked at Abigail and nodded.

- I trust you'd be the first one who would like a try, right?

Abigail smirked.

- Yeah. But that would be hard. Seeing what the world thinks about me...

- Either way, I think we should go along with the project. After all, you guys don't want Captain Taylor back here, right?

Virgil laughed as his brothers motioned a clear « No ». Taylor was a bit too much, as he did little effort to listen to the boys and rather bragged about himself and Jeff's accomplishments. Grandma went on.

- So, where are you guys at with this whole project?

Brains describe all of his research and reviewed what he had come across in the Olympus file. Everyone listened. When the engineer was done, Gordon added:

- Are you really going to go along with this and disregard Scott's decision?

His Grandmother looked at him.

- Yes. Jeff wouldn't want to see any of you suffer. He would have agreed, I am certain about it.

- How can you be so sure?

She frowned.

- Kid, I gave him the opportunity to walk the path he chose. That's what made him the man he is today. He did the same for you boys. Now, you only need to gain the experience to back it up.

He went silent after that. He could not argue with his grandmother, after all, she was right. He maintained the idea that his father would still not have agreed to this, listening to the whole conversation. He could always snitch the info to Scott later.

The discussion lasted for a little while as Brains described what he had planned. Grandma summed the whole thing up as everyone agreed to do their part.

- Abigail, how long will the measurements, drawing, and formatting take?
- About sixty hours if you count the lab work for the nanites. That makes about thirty hours each.

- Good. Brains, engineering the design, printing it and finishing work on the part?

- About three days. If I get some help, we can cut the time.

Virgil volunteered.

- I'll lend a hand. That's an interesting project. I can help Abigail to cut down her workload too.

Grandma smiled.

- Perfect. Now, Mei, how long to attach it?

- Six to eight hours of surgery.

Alan listened through to the end. His mood seemed to improve as the discussion unfolded. At the end, he was thrilled.

- Thanks, Grandma. You sure sound like dad when you're planning like that…

The old woman smiled. She surprised herself how much she did.

- Let's get to work now, shall we? I'll talk to Scott and reason with him. Alan, get some rest. You went through a lot of emotions and I don't want you to exert yourself. Got that?

- Yes, Grandma.

They adjourned their meeting.

It was late night at Tracy Island when Kayo came back from her mission. She had been in contact with John the whole time. He had been researching more deeply about the six missing men and their relation to Holling. Nothing substantial came out from the data, and most of it was simple matters like employee files, pay rolls and personal information. He detected no discrepancies in all the files. The other data was more valuable: the name of suppliers figured on the list including prices and shipments. Some destinations were undisclosed, the area left blank but the goods were marked as delivered. That would have to wait, they had a more important task at hand.

He concentrated his research on the labels. With no ingredients, he had a hard time finding out about the product. The label read "Acidosemine" with various warnings about medical usage but no clear indication of how to use it. Looking for matches in the black boxes' database, he came upon an information regarding the Olympus keepers and the use of the drug. Not much was detailed, but he could understand that it was a drug used for sedation. There was a written warning about trials on regular humans he smiled. It read "Do not use on people who are not augmented with nanites lest you want to trigger a zombie apocalypse". From that anecdote, it was clear that this product was dangerous.

Kayo entered the living room and sat down. She called John.

- What else have you got?

- It's late, don't you want to turn in? You'd best check on Scott, too.

She sighed.
- I hate it when he reacts like he did. I can't do anything, he just won't listen.

- He's calm now. Virgil helped out.

- Good. I won't bother him then. Do you want to continue this tomorrow morning with Lady Penelope?

- Sure thing. G'night then.

He disconnected. The young agent was about to leave the room when she noticed someone on the terrace. She knew Abigail usually sat down and watched the stars for a long time but now, it seemed like if she was working on a tablet computer with a stylus. She approached her to take a look. Abigail noticed, looking over her shoulder and coming back to her work without paying her much attention. Kayo sat down near her.

- Hey there. Thanks for what you did for Alan. It was an amazing feat. I wish I could do something like that.

Abigail raised her head.

- It's nothing, really. I just did what I thought was the right thing.

- Drop the modesty, it does not suit you.

The young woman smiled as Kayo raised her head to the sky above.

- I read the surveillance logs. You come here often and I haven't noted anything wrong with your routine. I'll drop the curfew, you deserve it.

Abigail was glad. "Finally", she thought.

- It is much appreciated, I assure you.

- What are you working on?

She turned the tablet computer and showed her work to Kayo. She was working in a computer assisted drawing program and designing a hand prosthetic.

- This. It's for Alan. He asked us to outfit him with one. I'm making the same design as mine.

Kayo did not know what to think. Was Alan so desperate to request a cybernetic implant? Her feelings about the matter were mixed. She questioned Abigail:

- Are you going to go along with it? I mean, you know yourself what it implies.

- Scott said no. Grandma took over and told us to get the project going. She said their father would have agreed.

- Alan is a smart guy. I know he already has thought this through before asking and he won't back out. But does he really understand fully?

- He wants to be able to save lives. Crippled as he is, he could never qualify for space missions or any other type of supersonic piloting, his reflexes are not sharp enough. He saw me act during our flight from the jungle. I bet he did not even give it a second thought.

- I'd like to agree also, but I am worried about his future. How will he fare in the world with this?
Abigail shrugged.

- Could be worse. Unless your boyfriend kicks him off this island, that is…

Kayo gasped and blushed.

- Scott is not my boyfriend! I mean, there is nothing official between us.

The bio-engineer was about to say something dirty but refrained, biting her lower lip. She contented herself to laugh nervously instead. The agent was perplexed.

- What? What's funny?

- Nothing, really.

Kayo frowned. She wanted to know what Abigail meant by that.

- No, please, I insist.

The bioengineer bit her lip knowing she screwed up. She had to say something to save herself from that embarrassing situation.

- You two are cute together. I think Scott just doesn't know what he's missing. Guys don't talk a lot about their feelings.

- Thanks, but I don't need that kind of advice.

Kayo ended the conversation abruptly and got up, leaving Abigail to her drawing.

The air was heavy with dew when Penelope set out in FAB1. A typical English morning with the grayness of the skies setting the mood for the day. She had to meet with Marle and was eager to hear what she had to say. Finding more information about the disappearances and having a living witness would be a good start for her case. She only hoped Holling would not try to buy the young widow to his side: she needed money to raise her children and his offers were always attractive.

They arrived on a country road. The indications led to a small brick cottage surrounded by an old wooden fence covered in ivy. An old truck was parked in the driveway, a 2040 model or somewhere around that year. The lady motioned to Parker to wait outside; he began looking around the house, his attention mostly drawn to the vintage vehicle. As Penelope knocked, Marle urged to open the door, a young child in her arms.

- Come in m'lady. Sorry about the mess. Hope you do not mind it.

The house was lightly decorated but had all it needed to be cozy. The wooden interior made it look small but comforting. Looking around, she noticed the widow must be quite skillful in handicraft. The aristocrat stepped on the woven rug, noticing it was also quite a work of art. The young lady went directly to the kitchen.

- Take a seat. Let me make some tea.

Penelope entered and sat down at the table. Marle put down the child and whispered to him; he left to the adjacent room, sitting down to play with some toys lying around. She began preparing the beverage as the Lady was examining the interior. There were a lot of documents lying on the table; legal papers, mostly, and insurance claims for her late husband. The young woman seemed to struggle to fill them. Penelope engaged conversation.
- It is a wonderful place you have here.

The young woman was very pleased and smiled.

- Thank you! It was a bargain, we were lucky. We got it from a succession sale, the previous owner passed away. My man and I had always been lucky before all this...

She brought the tea to the table, putting a cork coaster under the hot pot. She served it while Penelope asked:

- I see you have a lot of legal documents to fill out. It must be a real puzzle for you to go through all this.

- It is. Been asking for help over the phone to a city clerk, he's a nice chap. But even with his help, it's not easy.

- Tell me now about how it all happened.

Marle nodded. She crossed laid a hand on her belly and began. Her eyes were teary.

- We were happy, y'know. There wasn't anything wrong with our lives or our money, all was paid. I made sure to manage our savings the smart way and stash some for vacations and for the kids. But, one day, my husband came back from work early saying he had some pain in his mouth and would not eat. Said he saw the plant dentist for a broken tooth and he got fixed.

- Is there something unusual about this?

- It did not strike me at first, but he became sick after. A bad rash in his throat he said. Nothing I gave him seemed to make it go away. So, he went back to the dentist and asked him about it. He took some drugs and it began to go away but… he changed.

- In what way?

Penelope drank as she listened to Marle. The young woman took a sip of her tea and continued.

- He was focused on his work. Did not want to play with the children, said it gave him headaches. That was not like him. He came home one day and told me he had a promotion. I was thrilled but he did not express any joy. It was like he had lost all will to live. I tried to talk to him but he said all was fine, nothing had changed. He… disappeared a few days after.

She burst into tears. The aristocrat took her hand to console her.

- Do not worry, dear. We will find him. Do you still have that medicine he took?

The young lady regained her composure, nodding to confirm. She got up and went to an adjacent room, bringing a small brown bottle to Penelope.

- T'was this they gave him. Some kind of syrup. I thought I'd keep it for when the kids get sick.

The Lady examined the label. There was a dosage, directions, and symbols, but no name for the contained product. She scanned it and sent the information to John via her video link. She put the bottle back on the table and came back to the discussion.

- Was there anything else you wanted to tell me about?

- No, that was all. It… it all happened so fast…
Penelope took both of the young lady's hands.

- Please do not concern yourself with this matter now. Be there for your children, they need you. You shall be sponsored by one of my charities and I will send my personal lawyer to help with all these papers.

The widow was moved by the Lady's generosity.

- This is a lot, m'lady. How… I could never thank you enough for all of this.

- All I ask of you in return is that you do not talk about our discussion to anyone. We shall keep it to ourselves and I will be looking into it personally. Do you agree?

The young woman nodded without hesitation. Penelope rose from her seat.

- Good then, I shall be on my way. Do not hesitate to call me if anything else comes to mind.

Marle saw Penelope at the door where Parker was standing watch. As she boarded the car, the Lady saw a dirty box on the floor. She inquired to her butler who was driving them away.

- Parker, what is this?

The man was a little nervous.

- I can explain, m'lady. I stumbled upon it behind a shed in the yard. It was half covered in dirt but the corners were sticking out. I think you will find some valuable information inside.

She opened it, trying to keep it away from her clothes. The box was filled with papers with written driving directions. There was a ribbon inside with the letters L-K written on both ends. One of the papers looked like a series of rules and guidelines "Do not bring weapons", "Make sure you wear dark clothes", "Do not have anything on you that can identify you" and one very disturbing line "If you value your life, never ask for anything". She raised her head and asked:

- What does this mean?

- To me, m'lady, seems like someone's secret. Can't remain anonymous much on mainstream communications these days. Been using this kind of tricks myself back then. I'd think the mister might have gone to do something and did not want it to be known.

She smiled.

- Parker, you are a real genius! I will have John look into these papers and find out more about it.

- Thank you, m'lady!

Parker showed his pride with a smile as the Lady came through to the space monitor.

- Yes, Lady Penelope?

- John, I have more things that may interest you.

She scanned the papers and sent them to him. He began looking through them.

- I see. This is very interesting. You'd think that quiet father would be anything else than a criminal. The theory of him leaving is even more credible now.
Let's not jump quick conclusion, shall we? We are still lacking a lot of information.

You're right. By the way, Kayo brought back a copy of the plant's database. I'll make it available for you to check it out. It's massive, I won't be able to browse through it all alone.

Very well. Thank you, John.

She disconnected. A message prompting for a response appeared. Penelope acknowledged it and a link was established directly to Thunderbird Five's database. She browsed for the rest of the flight, reading the various files. There was nothing very unusual about all they had gathered but a thorough search would be needed to be able to point out irregularities.

Once back at the manor, she accessed the files in the comfort of her boudoir. She resumed her research using some private databases available only for World Council dignitaries. John appeared about fifty minutes after she had begun.

Have you found anything new?

Unfortunately, nothing substantial. Even with the help of the World Council's database, I cannot find anything.

Can you search something for me?

Of course. What is it?

Kayo came upon a drug in the facility. The ingredients were not labeled but there was only a name on the boxes. It read "Acidosemine". Can you look it up?

Right away.

She began looking into it and found two documents regarding the matter. There was a technical data sheet and a report from the GDF. She made all the material available for him and they both began reading.

The GDF report was what Penelope was most curious about. The report stated that a large quantity of the drug had been seized. John realized the dates of the report were fitting with the raid on Cradle Alpha. He notified the Lady.

I think this may have something to do with Holling after all. Working with the black boxes' database, there is a correspondence. The GDF seized the drug when they raided Cradle Alpha.

Please explain. I do not know much about all this story.

All I know is the GDF raided it. They confiscated a lot of material and Holling had to relocate the lab. It was Abigail's.

We should speak to her about this whole thing. Her knowledge might prove useful.

I have a feeling she knows a lot more than she let us believe. I wonder if she is not hiding information on purpose.

Let's speak to her before jumping to conclusions. It is useless to speculate otherwise.

Penelope opened the technical file. Most of the information was complicated to understand; it was far from her field of specialty. There was, however, the name of the scientist who created the drug. She pointed it out. John smiled and said:
- Just as I thought.

The name read "Abigail Shaw".
Cruel realities

The first light of day was perceptible on the horizon. A mix of pink and bright orange light lifted the heavy curtain of the night. Abigail realized she had been working for too long when she raised her head. She had fought against sleep to make sure she would have made enough progress on her work to relay it to Brains.

She got up and stretched; her back was aching from sitting too long on the concrete terrace. She made it for her room and was greeted inside by the light of day creeping up the walls. The real reason behind her staying up this late was not only to enjoy her freedom. If she would wake during the night, she was usually frightened and could not go back to sleep often experiencing night terrors and flashbacks. All that had happened during her captivity kept flooding her mind. She tried hard no to scream in her sleep, lying her head face down on her pillow or even putting another one over her head. She did not want to wake anybody and also, not spark any questioning about her affliction.

She set herself up for sleeping. The only thing worrying her was that someone might come knocking. She made sure to leave a message on the door's holo-pad « working overtime, please don't wake me ».

She seemed undisturbed for a while. Eventually, she woke up or at least she thought she was awake. She was not on Tracy island anymore. She was surrounded with hills and grassy plains; the sky was of clear blue and the air smelled fresh. Further away, she could see the other engineers of the Olympus project, sitting down and enjoying a quiet time in nature. She went closer to join them but her legs felt heavy. As she tried to walk towards them, the ground was collapsing and the whole pasture became black as night. The engineers faded into nothing, their image melting down in a pool of gooey liquid and oozing towards her. She felt a sting on her neck, her body became numb as she collapsed on the once green plain. The ooze came closer to her and began engulfing her. Voices are echoed from everywhere around her:

« You are not fit for this job... »

« You will drag them down... »

« Things will never be the same, get over it! »

« Stand up, you incapable! Don't you see you are making me waste time? »

The weight of all the words seemed to make her sink more and more as she struggled to keep her head out of the goo. She tried to kick and scream: her body was heavy and nothing was coming out of her mouth. As the ooze covered her eyes, she awoke in sweats, gripping the pillow at her side. She had tossed and turned so much the sheets were entangled around her legs. The holo-pad emitted a beep, there was a communication request. She clicked on it, disabling the visual.

- Abigail, it's John. Are you up?

She rubbed her eyes and took a few seconds to catch her breath. Looking at the time, she saw it was already noon. She remembered telling Alan about meeting him at eight in the morning for the measurements the day before; she cursed in her breath, having missed the scheduled appointment. She hesitated before replying:

- More or less, what's up?
- There is something I need to talk to you about. Get your visual back on, please.

She replaced the sheets quickly. It was messy but acceptable. Her attire was decent, a tank top and a pair of boxer shorts, so it would not be so bad if he saw her like this. She sat down in the bed and reactivated the function on her comm. John appeared as she rubbed her face again and replaced her hair.

- What is it?

She could tell there was something wrong by the look on his face.

- I heard some noise coming from your room earlier. Are you sure you are all right? I thought I heard you screaming.

- Bad dream, that's all.

- Brains told me he heard you talk in your sleep from the hallway the other day. I kept the audio on to listen and noticed you were mumbling and kicking in your sleep.

She frowned.

- You've been spying on me?

- That's not it. I want to know what is wrong. Is there something you are not telling us? We want to help you. Don't hide anything, it will only be worse. I went through parts of the files, I know what they did to you. It would not be smart to keep some valuable information from us.

She sighed.

- My computer augment plays tricks on my brain. Memories, images, all become vivid and lifelike. I keep getting weird dreams and I react to them. It is a direct side effect. I don't think I can ever have a full night's sleep. It's even worse when it's completely dark.

He listened to her carefully.

- What can we do to help you overcome this?

- Nothing. Can't have it removed, it will kill me. I guess I'll just have to fight my dreams every night.

- You can't do that. I'm sure we can come up with something.

She laughed nervously, her lack of sleep was showing.

- I don't think hugging a teddy bear at night will make me better. Don't waste your time. There is no solution for this.

He frowned.

- Stop being so negative. There must be a solution.

She sighed and looked away. He resumed.

- I'll talk to Brains about it, we'll manage something to help you. Right now, there are a few matters I wish to discuss with you.
- Is it going to take long?

- That depends. I’ll patch Lady Penelope in. She has a few questions for you also.

She stretched. Penelope appeared, looking at the bioengineer.

- Well now, this is a rather unconventional venue to greet you guest.

- Let’s get to the point. I’m in no mood for courtesies.

The Lady was a little startled by her comment. She did not let it show and went directly to the point.

- We are on a case implying six disappearances. Do you know of anything about it?

- Give me more details, maybe? I don’t read minds.

- Six workers disappeared from a plant. It is in a rather small village so it is very disturbing to see six men gone at once. I have a feeling Holling is behind this. We need your help to determine how and why.

- What infos do you have?

- I was able to speak to one of the widows. She told me her husband changed after he had gotten an intervention done at the dentist, believe it or not. He was also given a drug to ease his pain which contributed in a drastic behavior change.

John pitched in.

- While researching, Lady Penelope came upon the fact sheet for Acidosemine. It seems you are the inventor of that drug.

Abigail sighed, still rubbing her face and mumbling "I would have loved coffee before beginning such a discussion". She proceeded.

- Acidosemine is a neuroactive drug used to sedate people who have active nanites in their blood. Consider them as tiny robots destroying foreign particles in the body like drugs, diseases, even poison. They never stop. If you watched the videos, you have seen the scientists injecting us with it and doing… things… to us. The drug is ignored by the nanites and acts like a strong pain killer. The problem is, it keeps us conscious. It's like having an operation and being completely aware of it, but you don't feel any pain.

She paused as they both listened carefully. John asked:

- But what is the relation to these men? Why would they give them this drug?

- That "dentist" you speak of was a guy from the facility, right?

Penelope nodded. Abigail continued.

- He was not a dentist. He was a doctor or scientist working for Holling. Some of his implants are so small they can be inserted in the brainstem through the mouth with a simple needle. My guess is, this guy was given an implant and reacted to the chemical medium used to send it in his neural system.

John did not understand. He frowned.
- But why would they give him a drug made for people with nanites if he has none? I don't understand.

- Acidosemine is a neuromodulator active on the Cholinergic system. It helps with learning. They put up the implant and use the drug to make sure the learning is done properly by the body and without pain. The problem is it is highly addictive in people without nanites.

- If they all had gotten an implant, that means they were hooked on it severely?

- Yes. It blocks all pain reception and emotions. You basically become a zombie. Depending on your motivations, it can be very dangerous. Imagine a killer on a rampage; just a few milliliters of the drug are enough to last him hours.

Penelope was taking notes.

- This is very interesting. Even more considering this plant is actually manufacturing it.

Abigail was startled. Her voice stepped up a notch.

- You mean they are chain producing it?

John was the one to respond.

- It seems so. The crates in the storage depot all bore the inscription. Whatever they are doing with it, I don't know. Lady Penelope, did you have a look at the distribution files?

The Lady responded.

- There has been no marked shipment. I am wondering if they are distributing it legally. All the shipping is set for another facility in southern England.

Abigail got up while she was speaking and went to the bathroom. She put on some fresh clothes and brushed her hair, coming back quickly to address her two speakers. She added.

- They are obviously doing something with it, I'd like to know what.

- What about the disappearances?

- I can't say if they were removed to another location or simply taken care of. Holling did drug a lot of his own workers who had chip augments in the past. What do you want to do now?

Penelope wanted to dig deeper but refrained from making the suggestion. She waited for the space monitor to reply.

- We will wait until something comes up. I don't think it would be very smart to start digging in Holling's personal information again. He might become suspicious and this will be dangerous. Is there anything else you want to tell us about, Abigail?

The bioengineer responded negatively with a shake of the head. The Lady finished her notes.

- Well then, I believe we are beginning to have a clearer picture. This is interesting. Thank you very much for your cooperation, Abigail. I am happy you can share such valuable information with us.

Abigail smiled.

- Not a problem. Like I said before, if anything bothers you, just ask.
Penelope disconnected, leaving John alone with the young woman. He turned towards her.

- I don't want to be mean or anything, I'm just making sure you are collaborating fully with us. If your presence here is known, we are in trouble. We are doing you a favor, remember that.

- I am well aware. I won't disclose all the information unless you require it. You know what is dangerous, and it's not me. It's what I know.

- Yeah… That's true. Thanks for helping.

- You're welcome. Don't think I'm hiding things from you in bad faith. Just knowing some of the stuff would make your skin crawl….

- … like the torture videos. I have seen them. I know somebody else has had access to them, who was it?

- I showed them to Virgil. He was a little too optimistic…. I wanted him to know what goes on in my head when I don't smile.

- You two seem to get along with each other.

Abigail was surprised by John's sudden comment. She remained neutral even if he could detect a faint blushing on her cheeks. She replied quickly.

- We have similar interests and I enjoy working along with him. He's a nice guy, a good team player. Don't get any funny ideas about it.

John smirked.

- I won't. Just, remember, he is a sensitive guy. A word of advice: don't break his heart. He has already had enough bad experiences already.

She sat down on her bed and cocked her head.

- Like what?

- A lot of girls played him. You know how it is always the good guys who finish last? Well, he's the best example of it. Had his heart broken more times than I can remember. Now he seems to have taken a liking to you. Make sure you be careful.

- I will, thanks for the advice.

She waved her cybernetic arm around before twisting her hair between her artificial fingers and smile.

- Are you really certain about him even liking me? It's not like if I was anywhere near pretty…

John did not want to answer that. He changed the subject.

- I'll make sure to keep you updated about the case if anything comes up.

Before leaving, he added:

- Let's just say he is concerned with the well-being of people who are dear to him. And, he is concerned about you so far.
He disconnected. Questions began sprouting in her mind; "Why would he bring that up?", she asked herself. She had spent a lot of time alongside Virgil but had never had any other thoughts about it. Did he speak to his brother about this? It was rather delicate; she did not want to address directly with Virgil, she preferred to wait and see how things would unfold. He was cute and handsome yet, flirting was not her top priority right now. She had to go to Alan and make up for being so late. Hopefully, the others would have taken over and looked at her work.

The GDF headquarters were bustling with activity. The tall building resembled a hive as hundreds of workers flooded the floors, working tirelessly on matters as different as national security, world conflicts, revision of laws and regulations, military deployments, peace missions and a lot more subjects that could not be publicly disclosed. Colonel Casey finished her work early that day: she had made a promise and wanted to keep it. As she took her raincoat and was getting out of her office, she bumped in Lieutenant Colonel Baker who saluted her properly.

- At ease, Lieutenant. I was about to leave. Please do look into matters during my absence.

- Yes, Colonel. Are you off to visit Tabatha?

The Colonel nodded. Her daughter, Tabatha, had been diagnosed at a very young age with an incurable disease. Her bone marrow was mutating and made her legs twisted and weak. Her spine also became affected, giving her a hard time to sit or even lie down. She had to be put in a care facility as she required more attention growing up. Now, at the age of fourteen, the doctors were only giving her a few years to live. Her only escape were the books she read, a new one every day. She wanted to read all the books in the world. It was a funny dream, but she made it her goal and had begun reading entire collections of English classics. Then, it was science, politics, philosophy and much more subjects.

Tabatha was a very smart and beautiful; it pained her caretakers and mostly her mother to see her like this. This is why Casey had reached to Holling to try and find a cure for her daughter. None of the treatments had worked so far. The Colonel kept hope that one day, one of these experimental treatments would be effective. The Lieutenant Colonel smiled.

- Have a nice day then, ma'am. Give me a call if you require anything.

- Will do.

The small country hospital was surrounded by greenery. The air was so pure here, you could not even believe being in the suburbs of London. The Colonel entered and saluted the personnel: they were accustomed to her presence, and they were all acquainted with Tabatha. She reached her daughter's room to find her sitting near the window, a book in her hand. Her chair was specially designed for her illness, it had to restrain her at several points to make sure she would not slip of fall. It looked particularly uncomfortable, but the teenager appreciated it as it made it possible for her to read.

- When her mother entered the room, she smiled and greeted her.

- Good afternoon, mother. How was your day?

The Colonel sat down and began talking as the young lady closed the book in front of her. They spoke and laughed, Casey loved to see her daughter smile. It was the most precious thing she could ever have. Tabatha eventually asked her:

- Am I to try another experimental treatment soon?
- Only if you are ready. I had word that they changed the formula, you will not get as sick as you were last time.

Tabatha looked away.

- It's no use, nothing is working. The doctor said my spine has still twisted about two millimeters. There has been no improvement.

Casey laid a hand on her daughter's, she looked at her in the eyes.

- Keep hoping, honey. Please. It will work eventually.

- Mister Holling came by yesterday. He promised it would work this time. Do you really believe him?

The Colonel waited a second before replying:

- Of course, I do. He is our best chance of making you better. Don't despair, Taby, it will work. I am sure of it.

Tabatha looked away through the adjacent window.

- I see some kids go by on roller skates every day. I'd love to be with them. Just setting foot outside would bring me so much joy, mother. I do hope it will work.

They remained near the window, having tea and playing a few virtual board games. It was well passed midnight when the Colonel decided to leave with a heavy heart. She had put her only child to bed, singing her a lullaby as Taby dozed off. Her throat was tight, she did not want to leave.

She drove towards the place she called home: a small three room apartment she seldom inhabited herself. The maid made regular visits to ensure the place was tidy and safe. The Colonel was always traveling or on duty and even when she had a few days off, she spent time working. It kept her mind off her situation and her daughter's inevitable fate. It was not the best course of action to take as she could spend more time with Tabatha at the hospital but every time she came back home, she cried. Tonight, it was no exception. She lied on her bed head plunged in a pillow as tears were running freely. She was tempted some time ago to resign and concentrate on her family. It was the advice many colleagues gave her. She did not listen; she was determined to go higher in the ranks and prove to herself that she could. It costed her marriage and her only child was cursed with a horrible sickness. She did not regret her choices; however hard they were but wished somebody could help her cope with the pain.

At that moment, her communicator rang. She identified the call being from Laura Baker. She regained her senses and picked up.

- Colonel Casey here. I am listening.

Laura would not call if the matter was not urgent. This would take her mind off her problems.

- Ma'am, I... I was meant to call you to ask if everything is okay?

The lieutenant's voice was hesistant. Casey responded.

- All is well, Lieutenant, should it be otherwise?

- No, of course not. But as you left to meet your daughter, you were rather concerned.
- Aren't there more important matters at hand to be discussed, Lieutenant.

- Listen, I am not calling for work. Jaclynn, how long has it been since you took a break?

The Colonel was surprised. It had been a long time she had not heard her first name pronounced. She understood Laura was calling as a friend. She dropped her formal tone and sobbed.

- Laura, I can't stop. I cannot explain what is going on but I assure you, all is well.

- I don't think so, Jackie. How is Taby? Did something happen?

- She is fine. A new treatment that will begin soon. We have high hopes for that one.

- Do you really believe this will work?

The Colonel wanted to cry. She knew deep inside it wouldn't but it was too late. She did not respond. Laura went on.

- I'm worried about you, Jackie, and about Taby, too... Holling is misguiding you. I am afraid of what he can do...

- That's enough! Even with his shady past, he is human. He understands distress, pain, exasperation. I will take any help offered my way to help my daughter!

- I just hope you do not realize it too late. I am very sorry for bothering you. If you want to take the day off tomorrow, please do. I'll cover for you. Good night.

Laura hung up. Jaclynn was upset; she did not need anyone nosing around in her problems. Holling was not all clean, yet, she had no choice to remain in his good graces if she wanted him to help her daughter. He was her only solution and promised help where others failed to. His pharmaceutical research was sure to come up with a cure for her daughter's illness eventually.

The scorching heat of midday was taking its toll on everyone. While most of the residents of the island were inside tending to their duties in the comfort of the house, Scott decided to have a swim before getting back to his duties. It was the first time he would go back to his desk since he had been stricken by the debilitating infection. As he entered the living room, he heard the sound of the piano: his brother was practicing some new songs, some of them he had never heard before. He smiled as he sat down silently behind his father's desk and turned on the holo-screens.

John had made sure to keep the administrative work up to date. He was a lot better than his elder at this. Scott browsed the different files and read Penelope's last entry in the Tracy database. She explained her findings and her discussion with Marle with all the proof and valuable clues she had gathered with the help of her access privileges. Kayo's entry was not final, but she had described most of her important findings during her infiltration mission. It took him a few minutes to read the entire file but managed to get all the details before jumping to another matter.

Virgil was browsing through music sheets and playing a few. He was arranging some, correcting the notes to sound better. Mei came to the living room, approaching the piano. She looked at the musician and smiled.

- This one sounds interesting. What are you playing?

He lifted his head and smiled.
- Some scores I want to transfer from guitar to piano. I have looked up some new pieces too.

- Can I hear one?

- Sure.

He began playing a fun ballad. She remembered it as a popular song made for acoustic guitar. Scott smiled: he liked that one. He taped silently with his fingers on the desk, following the rhythm. Virgil finished his piece, having made a few wrong notes along the way, but satisfied with the results.

- It still needs some work. By the way, Scott, you'd want to pick up that guitar and practice a bit. I'm calling for another cabaret night soon.

Scott seemed thrilled. He loved playing alongside his brother.

- Sure thing! I'll start tonight. Right now, there are a few things I need to do.

He turned towards the doctor.

- Mei, I will need to have a word with you.

She went closer to him. His brother interrupted the music but the elder motioned for him to continue playing. He addressed Mei, boldly.

- I want you to tell me exactly what happened in the jungle and how you came to be with these people.

Virgil played but slower and pressing lighter on the ivories, listening to the discussion. Scott's eyes were on Mei, waiting for her answer. She had to find and explanation and fast.

- I was visiting one of my patients and got caught by these people. They mistook me for somebody else. I did not know them.

She looked at him straight in the eye, sounding very convincing. She astounded herself how much she could be a good liar sometimes. He answered:

- You had no idea who they were? Alan told us you gave the militia a brief description of the two men. Can you tell me about that?

- Their faces are blurry in my mind. The adrenaline was the only thing keeping me alert back then. They were not natives, that I'm sure. I don't remember their faces.

- Are you positive you cannot remember anything? Any distinctive feature or clothing? Even the color of their hair?

She crossed her arms, the simple thought of what had happened made her uncomfortable. He noticed she was uneasy and stopped insisting.

- If anything comes to mind, tell me. I want to know who did this to my brother. Mei, please, dig deeper into your mind.

The doctor nodded. She felt the weight lifting as the attention was drawn towards the instrument, closing her eyes to appreciate the music. As he was practicing, Virgil received a call from Brain, interrupting his piece.
- Virgil! I n... need you in the l... lab.

- Sure thing.

The musician rose to the disappointment of his brother. Scott commented:

- I was looking forward to hearing more.

- Take a look at the guitar arrangements I sent to you when you have some time. I'll talk to you about it later.

Virgil left the room. Mei followed him out, seeing an opportunity to go away from Scott. She did but was intercepted by Grandma as she was passing the kitchen.

- Did you want to share a tea, Mei?

- No, thank you. I'd rather go rest. This ordeal has taken its toll on me.

- Take your time then.

Scott was alone in the living room, browsing the music scores on the holo-screen. He had time to do it since the last of his work had been cleared out by John. The only thing remaining was to see to the family's royalties on Tracy industries. Grandma Tracy joined him, bringing a tray on which was a teapot and two cups. She laid it in front of Scott and began to pour tea in the cups. He knew something was up: tea was a beverage she served when discussions were serious, he heard his Grandpa say one day. She sat down and looked at him straight in the eyes.

- We need to talk.

- Yes, I expected it from that ceremony you just did.

The tea smelled of bergamot with a hint of lime. It was a calming aroma.

- About that discussion at dinner yesterday. There was something I wanted to tell you concerning your father.

- He frowned and listened. He hated when people questioned his decisions.

- Do you remember the first flight of the Thunderbirds?

He nodded. It was what had fuelled his dreams to become a pilot. Grandma continued.

- At that time, all the big shots of the World Council were afraid of the rising of private militias. After the war, trust was something hard earned and your father could only count on a handful of his high ranked friends. He met with the minister of defense at that time and was refused the right to take off again. No matter how many times he asked, it was still a clear no.

She took a sip of the tea. Scott was listening carefully: he had never thought of his father as someone who struggled with politics, having such charisma. Grandma, on the other hand, had seen Jeff at his worst. She was his mother and could not disregard him when he needed help. He did not comment so she went on.

- Jeff went to meet one of his friends, a General, who was often in contact with top brass officials. His advice to him was that he needed to play by their rules. Do you know what it implies?

- I have no idea what you are getting at, Grandma.
She paused a moment, trying to find the right way to phrase her thoughts. "What the heck", she told herself, "it has to be said the clearest way possible".

- Your father had to bribe the minister to make sure he could go ahead with his project. Otherwise, all his efforts and money would have gone to waste.

Scott's eyes widened. He could not believe what she was saying. His father was an example of righteousness. His surprised melted to anger and his voice rose.

- Grandma, do you realize what you are saying? I can't believe this!

She matched his tone, frowning.

- What I'm saying is the actual truth, Scott. Believe it or not, your father did it. He could never admit it himself out of shame, but I needed to tell you that. He told me since I was the only person in the world he could trust to know.

- But, why are you telling me this?

- I've overthrown your decision about Alan. He is going to have that prosthetic hand made for him. Another thing your father hated was to see his boys suffer. He would have done anything for you five. Nothing is more precious to him than you boys, never forget that.

Scott sighed. She had that right. He remembered his father had taken leave from work when he and John had gotten sick to help their mother. Jeff took care of all of them; he made sure they never lacked anything and was always there when needed. The memories of his father flooded his mind as his mood shifted to melancholy. Grandma waited. She knew he was thinking about his father, his eyes were lost and she could see a faint tear forming. He came back to his senses. She put her hand over his.

- I went against your decision because you can't always play by the rules. If we have to fight for Alan's rights, we will. That's what International Rescue is all about: saving people and turning wrongs into rights. Whatever people say… or even the world, we have a duty to fulfill and that's what we are going to do.

She finished her tea slowly before picking everything up and leaving. He remained there wondering for a long time. His father was his hero. He could not imagine him going against the law or doing something as drastic as bribing a minister. "Dad's dedication to his project was so fierce he bent the law to make sure it would work in his favor", he thought, reminiscing on several events of his life where this explanation might have fitted. He understood now: a father's love has no bounds when the ones he cherishes face peril. He plunged his face in his hands, hiding his tears.
I would like to thank all of you wonderful readers for keeping up with me so far.

Sorry for the long wait : I had to rewrite this story at least three times to make sure there were nothing awkward.

Thank you for being there and motivating me to go on!

There was not a single soul on Tracy Island that did not lend a hand for Alan's project. Everyone, except Scott, that is. The elder still refused to participate, remaining true to his words. Grandma's decision had only made him mad and he refrained from helping out. The state of the art prosthetic had been measured, fitted and all the parts were printed and ready. There was only one thing missing before the procedure could take place: the nanites.

Abigail had promised the astronaut it would help with his recovery. She had waited a bit too long before telling him about a few of her anxieties. She was afraid it would make him change his mind. But was all the hard work invested so far worth it? The bioengineer had remorse; she met with him to tell him everything.

Alan was sitting down in his room and welcomed her as she asked to come inside. She sat on the bed near him. He was cheery, a bit disappointed he could not play his favorite video games, but he could sleep all he wanted and that was enough for him.

- Looking good, Alan.

- Yeah. And thanks to all of you guys, I'll be able to join the rescue missions again.

She smiled. Hiding anything from him would be so sad. She went on.

- I'm almost done in growing the composite for your nanites. They need an exposition to UV rays for a bit, then I'm going back to finish the serum. I just thought I had a chat with you before.

He was all ears. She bit her lip before going on.

- Nanites are not only good at help with healing. They regenerate every tissue in your body. That means that all cells that die, all matter of torn muscle, nerves or anything else that gets broken… even bones will heal to their original state. Do you understand?

He nodded.

- Yeah, cellular regeneration. That's so cool! Why the long face?

- …it means that you are impervious to poisons, drugs, alcohol, anything that might affect your blood or tissue.

- What's so bad about that?

There was something else, something more. It was a thing she resented and did not really know how to explain. She continued.

- The nanites will work until they wear off, and they won't if you feed them. They require a high
iron intake, much of what you would need to keep yourself healthy. It means that you may never age beyond a certain point. Collagen will regenerate, you will never experience joint pain, neither will you ever have any sickness related to old age.

Alan gasped. He was realizing her point but in the wrong way. He was thrilled.

- WOW! You really mean that I won't become older? And that I'm just going to live on forever?
- Not forever. Simply a long time. I don't know how long they will go. It's only been three years now. They might die in maybe five, ten, a hundred years… I don't know. Are you still up for it?
- You betcha! This is one opportunity I don't want to miss.

She understood now why Scott had taken a decision for him. He was too young and reckless to understand such a burden yet.

- There is one more thing.
- Abigail, listen…

He put down the tablet computer he was holding in his remaining hand and continued.

- I don't know why you are trying to make me change my mind… I will not. I have decided to go along with it and I will not back out from the project. I want to be ready, functional, able to do the things I love again. Whatever your arguments are, I'm still going along with this. There is no turning back. I want the prosthetic, I want the nanites, everything. I'm ready for it.

She sighed as she got up. There were a hundred things she wanted to tell him about it yet she refrained from doing so.

- All right. Get some rest. We'll do the infusion procedure tomorrow.
- FAB!

She exited the room and began asking herself if helping Brains was the right thing. She went back down in the lab, still anxious and wondering if she had not been wrong about ignoring Scott.

There was an alarm. It rang in all the main rooms of the island base. John appeared on the living room's main holo-computer as his brothers rushed in, Alan included. He began:

- I have received a distress call from a group of scientists patrolling the Artic sea. A huge pocket of methane has risen from the depths caught fire. We'll need to evacuate them and find a way to stop the gas from escaping into the atmosphere.

He showed the affected area on his map. The danger zone was very large. Scott took over.

- All right! Virgil, you and Gordon go in Thunderbird two with Thunderbird four. We'll check what we can do. I'll fly there first to assess the situation. Got that?

Both brothers did not even take the time to reply as they were already at their stations. Brains studied the maps in the mean time. Alan remained and watched his brothers in action, hoping he could be joining them soon.

Kayo was coming in to watch when Lady Penelope contacted her on her personal communicator.
- Good evening, Kayo. I have stumbled upon more information. Marle has contacted me this morning and has a few more hints of the whereabouts of her husband.

The young agent was intrigued; she sat down in the kitchen to have more privacy.

- I'm listening, Lady Penelope. What's new?

- Here is a replay of the video message she sent me a few hours ago. She seemed distressed.

Lady Penelope played the message on her holo-communicator. Marle could be seen, crying as she spoke.

- M'lady, I have some news. You see, my man… he came by! I never thought it possible! He was right here! He needed the truck, he took the keys, the papers, and everything. Left me plenty of money to buy a new one. 'Said he would not come back before long; had to sort out some stuff with the boys. He did not want me to speak of this to anyone, but I couldn't keep it from you. Nobody else knows, I swear, not even the kids.

The message stopped. Penelope took over.

- Parker has done some research on this vehicle. It is a 2040 Vitrum pickup truck, one of the few that exists in this particular color. Since they have been distributed in so few numbers, they are deemed collectibles and were identified with a microchip in the dashboard. This one is registered to Marle's husband, Peter Lumlock.

- Did you get the location from the chip?

Parker appeared. He was watching the communication feed with the lady in her parlor.

- Yes ma'am. Been following the lad for a while now. Seems like he stopped for a few hours in a small village about a hundred kilometers away from home, near Nottingham. He's been driving east ever since. Still following him with the help of Thunderbird five's radar grid.

- Patch me the info, I'll monitor him also. If need be, I'll get out there to check it out. My guess is he is not alone. He might be up to no good. I can't say this whole deal is connected to Holling.

Penelope intervened.

- We have to make sure it isn't. If these men are doing something to oppose him, or if they know something, we will make sure we find them. I need proof to bring Holling to justice, that means living witnesses.

- FAB. I'll keep tabs on them.

Kayo proceeded to the living room, keeping the signal active on her communicator. She programmed an algorithm to advise her when the vehicle would have stopped for a prolonged period of time.

The rescue mission was going flawlessly but there was a still lot of work to be done to release the pressure in the earth's crust safely. The boys still had a few hours of foraging on their hands. Kayo remained on standby, making sure they would not require help. She went to grab a bite in the kitchen when she heard a beep and a map popped up, giving her the location of the truck. She opened a comm to John.

- Hey John. Can you scan an area for me? Lady P asked me to check on our missing guys.
He looked particularly busy with the rescue at hand. He answered quickly.

- Patch it through, I'll see what I can do. I must assist Thunderbird two right now. It might take a few minutes.

- Don't bother, I'll fly out without scouting. I'll do some reconnaissance before landing.

- FAB, be careful.

John always worried about the others. He was watching over them from afar but they still felt like he was close behind. She liked to rely on his invisible presence while she was shadowing.

She took off, warning Lady Penelope about her planned course. It took her two hours to fly out to the designated coordinates. Night had already fallen on the English countryside; it was difficult to see clearly without the aid of satellites scanning. After passing over the area twice in digital camouflage, Kayo had a good scan of the place. It was a hill covered in trees and a natural rock formation descending in a steep crater-like valley. There was only one guarded entrance. There was some light down in the crater but a stone outcropping was keeping her from seeing clearly down from the skies.

Her usual pattern was to land Thunderbird Shadow in stealth at a distance and make her way towards the area by foot. This time, there was nowhere she could land without being seen. She decided to try landing closer to the area on top of the hills, silencing her engines during her approach. Finding a safe was in was another challenge: each side was very steep and would require her to grapple down. She fired a grapple gun and tied it to her belt. Scott had given her one of his own to try on the obstacle course and had become very comfortable with it. She asked Brains to make some for her; she wondered why it never crossed her mind to use one of these before.

She rappelled down the rocky sides of the valley, avoiding the densely lighted area. As she rappelled down, she noticed neared what looked like a small camp. The barking of dogs could be heard echoing through the crater and heading her way. That was not good. She hated dogs; not only were their keen senses able to detect her when she was trying to go unnoticed but they were also annoyingly noisy animals. She rummaged through her belt to find a small capsule and pressed it, releasing a cloud of red pepper. In a quick motioned, the capsule was dropped on the floor to act as a pepper screen. The dogs reared but that did not stop the men from coming her way.

Men ran towards her as she was trying to catch her zipline. They cornered her, approaching menacingly with clubs. She tried fighting them off to break free but ended up being outnumbered quickly. She evaded most of the hits swung her way until one caught her strongly from behind in the back of the neck. She fell down, numb and confused, unable to react fast enough. She felt she was carried away and eventually got thrown on the ground. She passed out.

It took her some time to recover. She tried moving her arms and legs but realized they had been tied. This made her go back to her senses quickly as she rose her head to look at her whereabouts. It was the inside of a large canvas tent with nothing else than a makeshift table and crates all around. As she tried reaching for her communicator, she noticed it was missing. Rolling on her stomach, she got up on her knees to have a better look around. At that moment, man came inside the tent, armed with a club. As he saw her moving, he brought the weapon up and waited. She did not try anything as he looked at her.

- Ye don't look much like one o' them troublemakers. Tell us who ye are. We don't like sneaky bastards like you.

She stared at him in the eyes, trying to sense his motives. She replied.
- I come in peace. You attacked me.

The man laughed.

- We don't like thieves of spies. Either you tell me what you came for, or I'll just have it beaten out of ya.

She looked around, trying to figure out where her communicator was. It was nowhere in sight. Collaborating would be the smartest move for now.

- I was looking for six missing men. Marle sent me. She wants us to find her husband.

The man sneered.

- So Marle's payin' ya to find her Pete? How much did she give ya? All that those charities paid her eh? Good money, Pete said. She's gonna live large.

- What about Pete? Where is he?

- Been here in the back with the boys, tryin' to keep him sane enough not to blow his mind off. Y' know, that shit they gave 'em, completely fucked up their brains, it did.

- Are you talking about the drug? Acidosemine?

The man frowned. He lowered his club.

- Yeah. How'd you come up with the name?

- I have a good network. Like I said, I'm here to help.

- Ol' me would like to believe ya, missy. But ain't no friendship in these kinda deals and shady work.

- Then just tell me what you are up to. I'm not with the police or any authority. I just want to come clear to Marle about her husband. Think of me as... a private investigator.

He sat down on a crate near her and scrutinized her face.

- Ye don't look like a police, for one. Dunno if I can fully trust ya. What can you offer me to prove yourself?

He was waiting on her then threw her badge on the floor. She did not even realize it was missing from her suit until now.

- That's yers. Why is International Rescue even concerned with us?

She smiled.

- If you want me to explain, you should give me my communicator back. I'll get through to someone who will confirm my motives.

He seemed reluctant but took the gauntlet computer out from his pocket. He threw it on the ground in front of her. He then produced a pocket knife and freed her hands. She noticed John had called a few times. She hoped he would not have given word to Scott about it. She contacted him quickly.

- Hey, John.
- Kayo! I've tried to reach you at least ten times! Are you okay?

- I'm fine. Don't worry. I found the missing men but their leader needs a proof of my good faith. I'd like for you to confirm.

John turned towards the man and began explaining the known case. There was little detail that man did not actually know or confirmed so he could freely state Kayo's mission objectives. At the same time, maintaining the link helped him get the exact coordinates: he sent a probe down to map the area closely. He knew Kayo did not simply call him to have a chat but also to have him gather intel.

The man seemed satisfied with the space monitor's explanations. He opened up to him.

- These men here, they need help. Been trying hard to find someone who could get them a cure but, ya know, ye don't get a doctor around here who's not paid by the company. Been trying to get through to chemists, universities, even abroad but they don't go cheap. These were good men before they began takin' that drug. Had to take them away from that place, they were destroying their lives.

John had a good view of the camp from the preliminary readings. He went on, keeping up with the scanning in the background.

- Why would you choose to do this? Was there more to it?

The man sighed.

- Bloody hell there was not! One of ´em beat his kid bloody for breaking a goddamn cup! They lost all compassion! Think of their wives and kids! They can't feel a single thing. It's hard to understand but once you figure it out, you know you have no choice but to withdraw them from society. What'cha think they would have done if they remained in the village? I've stopped one from murdering a shop keep for not allowing him to smoke inside his store.

- Is that what it does? They lose all inhibition and emotions, leaving them to act impulsively and suddenly?

- Yes, exactly.

- So how come you haven't fallen prey to their impulses?

- Hell, it was hard to come this far. Ye can only reason with them using logics and it turns out I'm good at that. They just can't apply emotions to their reasoning.

- I see. Do you mind letting our pilot go? Since we found you and know you are willing to collaborate, we will have our people work on a solution.

The man hesitated but ended up freeing Kayo. She stood and thanked him, nodding.

- I can't bloody keep one of International Rescue tied up, can I? When can I expect news?

- We will ask our bioengineer to begin her research. She might need the collaboration of these men. Think they will help?

- If they understand there be a way for them to go back to their lives, surely.

- Good.
At that moment, John received a call. He put Kayo on hold and answered. The boys were almost done in cleaning up the danger zone. He knew Scott would probably have tried to contact Kayo and would inquire about that.

- John, have you tried contacting Kayo?

- I have her on comm, yes. Why?

- She not answering earlier. Is something wrong?

- Not at all. She had a bit of a problem and had to lay low for a while.

- You sure?

- I tell you she is fine, Scott.

At that moment, John detected something in the vicinity of the camp. There seemed to be something approaching. The unidentified object was approaching at very high speed. It was human size but could fly.

- Hold on.

He patched through to Kayo.

- Kayo, I need you to look overhead, do you see anything?

She was getting out of the tent as he spoke and began watching the skies.

- Nothing there, why?

- Don't you see anything?

- No, it's nighttime and the skies are clear. What should I look for?

The dogs began barking uncontrollably. The men approached the pen and tried calming the canines. Kayo looked everywhere but could not shake off a weird feeling of being watched. She heard John shout over the comm:

- LOOK OUT!

She plunged forward as an explosion was triggered. The tent behind her caught fire. Scott heard everything over the radio. He opened a link to the young woman.

- KAYO! Talk to me!

She got to her feet fast, only to witness one of the men hanging in thin air, clutched at the throat by an invisible force. She could not take her eyes off the men's as he was clutching at invisible hands gripping his neck. He was having spasms as life was leaving his body. He was then thrown on the ground violently. The others tried lunging at whatever it was with clubs, not realizing it had moved away. John projected an image to Kayo.

- I can read its heat signature. You should leave, NOW!

- But I can't just….

This time, Scott replied.
- You leave, NOW!

He did not have to tell her twice. She ran away from the scene, leaving the men to fend for themselves. With a quick look at her helmet's UI, she could see more details as the outline of the figure through its heat signature was human. It was using a type of optical or digital camouflage. The probe was still around and caught the video images of the entire slaughter.

She managed to get to her zip line and began winding it back up. Scott contacted her.

- I'm almost there, Kayo. Sit tight.

- Wait, what? No, don't come here! I'm fine! I just need to reach…

Her zip line stopped winding, the wire got caught between branches. She looked at her sensors and noticed that the stealth entity was directly underneath her. She began climbing the metal wire as fast as she could, hurting her fingers in the process. The entity seemed to hover and began flying up, following her. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw it coming closer and closer, a cold shiver ran down her spine. Once she had gotten above the cliff, she tried running back to her ship only to trip and fall down. She could see the entity approaching, rendered visible by the splatters of blood from the men it slaughtered down in the crater, its hands drenched in it to the elbow. She tried to crawl away, her attacker still following her. It finally caught up with her, grabbing her by the throat. She could feel its fingers closing tighter. She reached at them with her hands, clenching at them reflexively. Tears flooded her eyes; she felt the pain and began gasping for air. She tried to push whatever would be in front of her and caught the outline of a helmet. With a clenched fist, she tried to hit it as strong as she could. Her strength was leaving her, her blows were weaker and weaker. As her ears began buzzing, she thought she heard the sound of engines. Smoke filled the air as powerful thrusters blew it around. The hand around her throat released, the entity fled immediately.

The young woman remained on the ground, still in shock, gasping for air. She had come close to passing out, her sight was still blurry. She turned her head to see Scott rushing towards her. He was armed with a power lance: an electrical device used to repel animals with electric shocks. The entity was nowhere to be found. John was scanning the vicinity as Scott kneeled down and helped her sit down.

- Kayo! Are you all right?

He examined her: blood had stained her neck sleeve as it came off her aggressor's hands. She looked at him, still horrified by what she had witnessed.

- I'm... fine. It got away.

She removed her helmet and undid her hair, taking a few deep breaths. Scott did the same. He remained near her, holding her in his arms, waiting to see if she would recover properly. She turned towards him.

- Let's go back home. I really need some rest.

She liked to pretend everything was okay when it was not. He knew when that happened. He insisted.

- Take your time. I don't want you to have a break down on your way.

She stood with his help. They embraced each other. She raised her head, looking at his sky-blue eyes.
- I just want to leave. We can talk more when we get home.

He held her tight, slowly caressing her back. She let go of him and went back to her ship. He watched her leave towards Shadow. She took off, followed close behind by Thunderbird one.

John had recorded the entire incident. He tried to make sense of it all: there was no way the entity would be anything else than a human being in a suit similar to the Olympus keepers. That would mean there were others like Abigail and Holling might be behind this after all. He wanted to break the news of the events to Lady Penelope but refrained, wanting Kayo to participate as well. With what he witnessed, she would want to get some rest beforehand.

The optical camouflage was invisible to the naked eye but could be easily be pinpointed on image stills. Using a recollection of the footage he gathered when Abigail had fled through the base, and that of the incident, he was able to recognize some movement by overlapping filters. The assailant from the camp used exactly the same type of camouflage Abigail did. He made sure to document his observations carefully. Maybe the bioengineer could enlighten him. He truly hoped she did not hide anything from him, too.

The space monitor looked around the base, finding her in the lab. It was well passed midnight, she might have been catching up on some work for the project. He called.

- Hey, Abigail. Working late as usual?

She raised her eyes behind her protective glasses. She was using a pipette a row of test tubes in a rack in front of her.

- What's up? I'm busy.

- I can see that. Listen, I have a very important question to ask you: was there anybody else than you or the other engineers who could have had access to the suits you own? Or the technology behind it?

She resumed working while speaking to him.

- Anyone working for Holling could have it. Well, anyone worth it, I mean. A suit like this is worth a few million dollars. I doubt he'll make a giveaway.

Kayo got attacked by someone using optical camouflage. Do you have any idea who it was?

- Have you checked with the military? They, too, were using Holling's tech. He did sell some of the prototypes to the GDF's R&D.

John was still motioning on the feed. She got up and put the tray in an adjacent fridge. John replied:

- I'm going to search further. This attack was not random, it was triggered by someone. I want to get to the bottom of it.

- Good luck then.

- Aren't you going to go to bed?

She removed the glasses and sat down rubbing her face to remain awake. He could tell she was exhausted. She sighed.
- Not yet. Still a lot to do.

- No, you don't. You really have to do something about your sleeping routine. I'll talk to you in the morning.

He ended the communication.

Virgil and Gordon were done with the mission and headed towards the base. The younger Tracy was sleeping on the back seat, drooling. The engineer smiled, hoping he could catch a still of him and have it sent to Lady Penelope just for fun. News of the incident had gone around and, although he was also very tired, he could not help but think about what had happened. A lot of questions sprung out of his mind; it would be wise to rest before helping John with his information gathering. He contacted the space monitor a few minutes later. As both brothers were recollecting about the recent events, the engineer asked:

- What about Kayo? Did Scott reach her in time?

- Yes. She's safe and coming back to base as we speak.

- Did you contact Abigail about the attacker?

- Yeah. She told me there are a lot more people that could be implied than what I originally thought. We'll have to look into this matter tomorrow. I'm turning in now.

- Okay, good. I'll do the same when I get home.

He began his approach, landing smoothly without even waking his younger brother. He had to shake him before leaving the ship. Gordon wiped the drool from his mouth and looked around, confused. He hurried out and back to his room, dragging his feet around.

After a well-deserved shower, Virgil headed for the kitchen to get a snack going to bed. It was passed 2 a.m., nobody was around. He looked at the terrace, expecting Abigail to be there; she was not. He had a strange feeling that something was wrong. He had spent a lot of time around her and knew she liked it when her routine was not disturbed. He pulled up the island's detection system, trying to locate her: she was still in the lab. He proceeded to meet her there.

The lights had been dimmed very low. He entered to find her resting her head in her arms on the table. She seemed to be sleeping. He approached her and slowly laid a hand on her shoulder. As soon as she felt it, she caught his wrist and sprung to her feet facing him, raising her left arm as a shield. It took her a few seconds to notice it was him before calming down. She let go, her body remaining very close to his.

- I'm… sorry.

He smiled nonetheless.

- You should sleep in your bed. Tables are seldom comfortable.

She looked back at the table quickly, looking at the tablet computer and her instruments.

- There is still a few things I must do.

- You shouldn't overwork yourself. It's late, it would be wiser to call it a day.

- I… I can't. I just…
He looked at her in the eyes. He knew something was wrong. John had spoken to him about this, too.

- You have nightmares due to those experiments, don't you?

She was trying to escape his gaze but ended up going back to it. She could not lie when she was looking someone in the eye and replied by simply nodding. He went on.

- There are a lot of competent doctors out there who can help you cope with that. It's like PTSD, right? There are therapies to help.

She sighed.

- If only it was. It's anchored in my mind and body. The pain… my senses have some kind of memory. Recorded influxes... Whatever I have tried in order to forget has not worked. It always comes back.

He noticed she was struggling to keep her eyes open. She rested her head on his chest an instant. He reflexively put his arms around her; he felt her weaken. She was startled and held on to him. He lowered his voice, stroking her hair gently.

- It's not wise to remain here. Let's get you to bed.

They headed back to her room. She let herself fall on the bed, exhausted. He sat down at her side and slowly drew the sheets over her body. He caressed her shoulder, hoping she would be able to get some rest through what was left of the night. He was about to leave when she said, faintly:

- Please stay…

He turned around to see she opened her eyes and stretched a hand towards him. He went back, hesitating for a moment but ended up lying down over the sheets next to her. She cuddled against him and went back to sleep almost instantly. He held her close; she seemed comforted.

He waited a few minutes; she was sleeping soundly. He closed his eyes: if that could keep her demons away, he would hold her like this every night just for a chance to see her smile the next morning. "She has such a pretty smile…", he thought, slowly falling asleep himself…
Let the show begin

There was no movement until late morning inside the villa. Since everyone had come back late, they caught on sleep as much as they could. Only those who did not remain up late were going around and they had a very important mission that day.

The medical crew consisting of Abigail, Brains and Doctor Chang met up with Alan to prepare for the procedure. They had a lot of preparation on their hands that would require - a whole day to setup. First the nanites injection, then the surgery. Hopefully, before evening they could see the preliminary results. That was if there were no complications. "In the medical domain, you always have to take sufficient risks but ensure all the possible backup plans for these risks not to overwhelm you", the doctor said, as they entered the med bay. They announced that the procedure would require their full attention, therefore it was important not to be disturbed. They shut themselves in the lab, advising John to make sure they would remain in peace.

Kayo had not slept very much. Her mind was full of the images from last night's attack. The sheer horror of that invisible force grasping her throat and clenching it was enough to wake her incessantly during the night. She had tried to wake Scott a few times but he only moved to take her closer to him and go back to sleep. It was not what she needed, comfort was not enough. It was not the first time she would get so close to dying but, this time, it was different: someone had tried to kill her. She could not shake off this feeling of uneasiness that remained in her mind.

She looked at the ocean from her room's balcony, dressed in light attire. Hers was the prettiest sight of the island, with no adjacent room. Even if the sun did not shine in most of the day, she enjoyed the cool breeze that circled around the bay and went inside. Scott liked spending time there too since it was the coolest room of all the island. When the hot season hit the mansion, he took advantage of it and slept with her in her room. They had been together long enough now for it not to be awkward to the others. Even so, their story dated way back to her 19th birthday.

She had not told anyone how it had come to and preferred to keep it low key from Jeff. She snuck in Scott's room plenty of times in the past and being head of security had given her a way to erase her moves around the house from the computer. John had noticed but did not tell. It was once Jeff had done a routine check that he stumbled upon a few registered nighttime entries. He had met with his eldest son but she never knew what was discussed between them. The only hint she had was that Scott was reluctant to have her in his room at night afterward and became more distant as time went by. She had hoped the Tracy patriarch had not tried to discourage any hopes of her and the elder getting together. They were not related by blood, so there was no infringement of morality with them dating or even sleeping together.

Scott woke up. He stretched and got up to meet Kayo at the balcony. He held her from behind, his hands around her waist. She kept on looking at the sea in silence. They remained there for a long time before she opened up to him.

- I was so scared. Had you not come...

He held her closer, tighter. He did not want to imagine what would have happened if he had not decided to boldly go out there to her. Stubbornness pays off, he thought. He kissed her shoulders: her neck was bruised where her attacker had squeezed. It had a powerful grip to be able to do such damage with a single hand. He brushed her neck lightly with his lips; she shivered. He went up to her ear and whispered:
- I love you.

She turned around, both surprised and happy, staring at his eyes. It had been a while ever since she had heard these words.

- I love you too.

He kissed her passionately, holding her close. They remained intertwined, not wanting to let go. When they parted, he noticed she was crying. He looked at her in the eyes, drying her tears with a finger.

- I promise I will always watch over you and protect you, no matter the odds. Whenever you need me, I'll be there.

She sobbed silently, trying to stop the tears from flowing.

- I worry about you also. We have dangerous jobs. One day, something might happen.

She touched her neck: the bruises were painful. He noticed.

- I'll find whoever did this to you, I swear. And when I do, I'll make sure he suffers as well.

He was bound to seek revenge for her wounds, "an eye for an eye" was his motto. Things would not remain as is and he would never carry on until he had the chance to avenge her. It was a bit too much sometimes. Right now, calm was what she required most. She simply asked of him:

- I would like to take the day off and get some rest.

Resting was not something she enjoyed particularly but she had learned to appreciate some quiet time alone. He knew exactly what she meant by that.

- I'll make sure nobody bothers you.

He picked up his clothes and dressed quickly before exiting the room.

The wall of the space station was ridden with holo-screens of different files, folders, images and other valuable information John required to complete his research. So many questions came to mind and there were very little answers to it all. With Kayo unavailable for the day and Abigail busy with Alan's surgery, he would have a lot more freedom to explore a variety of subjects. Plus, he knew Penelope sometimes leaked information from the World Council's database when they were discussing alone but not with the others. She trusted her a lot, and he never wished to betray her.

The Lady appeared on the feed. She looked rather annoyed. The recent events did leave her without her key evidence of Holling’s mischiefs and she had to start all over again. John greeted her politely.

- Good afternoon, Lady Penelope.

- Good afternoon, John. Today is not a very good day… I am disturbed by the recent events. First Kayo has gotten hurt, and now the only lead we had is gone. What a carnage!

- Yeah, it's a mess. Care going over all the info we have gathered so far?

He began sharing the data he had meticulously acquired and filtered. Penelope took her time to
analyze all of the evidence presented to her. There were a lot of files: links from the Olympus database, some news articles dating back a few years time and general information he had gathered through the general web. Holling's name was never mentioned anywhere.

- This is a very interesting data collection you did there. I am impressed.

- Indeed. I have been thinking about all this: last night's attacker was using an optical camouflage similar to Abigail's. Since it was impossible to see it clearly, I can only assume it is using the smart titanium weave she told us about. How it managed to get there is still a mystery though. Could it have just been dropped off and glided down?

- Judging by the geographic position, there is not much more it could have done. Presuming he could have flown down would be far fetched.

John zoomed in on the moment he saw the entity appear on his screen. He noticed there was a sudden great outburst of heat that died out completely. He relayed the image to Lady Penelope.

- Maybe not. This was before the explosion. Either it's a missile being fired or engines starting.

- Would engines not have done some noise?

- Not if they are electrical, or low output ion fusion. Both of these technologies are strong enough to carry a human and be relatively small. Provide they are efficient, that is. I'll try looking at the footage when it left.

He had shifted his attention to Scott and Kayo once the entity left the scene. Going back to the recordings, there was nothing to be found. As expected, it shifted its heat signature when Thunderbird One arrived. He shook his head.

- Nothing. It disappeared completely. And with its heat signature changed, there is no way the sensors could have detected it. I wonder… is it even human at all?

The footage had been scrutinized countless times. Nothing remained unseen. The space monitor sighed.

- I'm beginning to think Abigail is hiding something from us.

The Lady put down her cup. She had ordered some tea in the meanwhile, reading random files from the Olympus database.

- Why do you say that? Are you not trusting her?

- No. I'm certain there is more to it and she intends to keep that for herself.

- How can you say this? She has proven her loyalty…

- … so far, yes. And don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for her saving Alan and Mei. She has demonstrated her skills and she is unmatched in her domain. There is more to it. I can't shake the feeling of her hiding something right under our noses.

- Are you suggesting she has done all that just to win everybody's appreciation?

- There is no way all these events are her fault at all. She has been at the base the whole time and there are witnesses. There are a lot of missing links… like, why does she need to find the other labs?
- To get answers, isn't that obvious?

- But, why are answers going to be satisfying? Tell me, Lady Penelope, if these laboratories contained more than a simple database if there was something else down there…

- Like weapons? I would help her gather them before they fall in Holling's hand. Do not take it badly, John, I think you are overthinking and becoming a little paranoid on the side. This is not a reproach. I just want you to realize what we are trying to do here. We require proof of Holling's implication. We have Abigail who is clearly a product of his Olympus project but no evidence to connect her to it. If she is willing to help out and find such evidence, I will supply all required resources in order for her to produce it.

- You really hate him that much...

He sighed. Penelope was right about the fact that he was sinking a little too low in his conspiracy theory. Even after questioning her, Abigail did not disclose the real motives for finding the labs other than simply getting information out of them. There was more and he was sure of it.

The Lady had taken a break, going back to her reading. She eventually asked:

- Have you found these labs? Where could they be located?

- There is a map I've made; there is still a lot of work to be done on it to be complete. There are incomplete coordinates for the location of Cloud Alpha. Star Alpha does not seem to be on earth and I think I have found it, but I need confirmation from Ridley first. There is a derelict space station orbiting the dark side of the moon. It's a safe spot, away from possible asteroid impacts and it rarely comes to light. Its systems are active but the doors are locked and it is impossible to get inside.

- Have you told Abigail?

- No, not yet. Anyway, we can't get there now with our crippled astronaut. I'll tell her once all things are clear.

- Why don't we try for Cloud Alpha, then?

Both of them resumed working on John's map. Lady Penelope seemed concentrated on something. She pulled up the World Council's database. She produced a similar map, this time containing a lot more data. The space monitor's eyes widened.

- What is that?

- Know exploited site by Holling's facilities prior to his arrest. He had to disclose all the running facilities and laboratories in existence. He got acquitted before all of them could be visited by the GDF. The Council kept the file secretly hidden where he could not even be aware it still existed.

- How did you gain access to it?

- The minister of defense is a good friend of my father and also one of the only men in the world who knows what kind of work I have been doing with International Rescue. I believe he also collaborated with your father in founding the organization.

There were a lot more dots on that map than John's. Cradle Alpha's information was incomplete. He looked at it, studying the new locations and copying them on his. Penelope looked at him work in real time. One of the dots caught her attention.
- John, can you get me satellite imaging of these coordinates? The one near Austria.

He zoomed it on the location. It was in a mountain range, far from known civilization. He even sent a probe down to check it out. The place looked like a very fancy resort. Penelope smiled.

- That place… I know what it is.

- A resort?

- Yes. It is a private resort opened only to the wealthy. This is Samuel Beaujolais' retreat and hot springs; it is called the "Eaux Claires" resort. He is a very rich man and an acquaintance of Marcus Holling. We could begin our investigation there.

- How do you suggest we do this? Do you want me to ask Scott about letting Kayo go with you?

- It might not be wise after what happened. Let's leave her to recover. It is not an establishment where men are most welcomed either. I must think of a plan.

- Why is that?

- Beaujolais is a philanderer. He loves women and respects them wholly. If we can entice him enough, we might be able to get him to talk.

John gasped, uncertain of what the Lady was suggesting.

- Are you saying you want him to confess through pillow talk?

She laughed.

- Out of respect, John, I do not need to resort to that. I intend to be good company. There is nothing wrong with that.

He did not inquire further. If there was anyone who would respect social conventions, it was her. The rules regarding English nobility were numerous and complicated. She could not dishonor herself and her family name. Still, he wanted to insist.

- I don't think Kayo would want to join you on that.

- She was not the one I was planning to take along.

- What? Then who?

- I require someone who can speak French fluently. It so happens that Abigail's ID files state she is a native French speaker. Translators and voice chips will not be appropriate and might even be proscribed.

- Why?

- Beaujolais detests technology. His resort was initially created to escape modernization and live in complete harmony with nature. There are very little communications permitted not to disturb the peace.

- It's the perfect place to hide something.

- Indeed, it is. I will get in touch with Abigail as soon as she is done with Alan's surgery.
- It might take a while.
- There is no rush. Beaujolais is not going anywhere soon. Make sure to keep me informed at all times if anything else springs up.
- I will. Thanks, Lady Penelope.

They ended the comm.

The sound of the piano filled the living room with a joyous ambiance, cabaret style. Virgil was getting ready for his event, hoping that everyone would enjoy having their spirits lifted by some music. Scott had met with him earlier and advised him he was going to practice on his guitar also. They had agreed to meet later that day in order to practice as they intended to perform as a duo. The event was scheduled as soon as Alan would be able to attend.

Gordon arrived and lean down on the piano, listening to his brother's music. He had a smile on his face, that kind of trickster smile he usually bore when he had something in mind. The musician took a break and looked at him.

- Hey, Gordo. Don't tell me, it's a pun.

- No. Better!

- I'd say worse. But go ahead. I know you won't stop looking at me like this until you say whatever you were meant to say.

The aquanaut laughed.

- You know me so well it's scary.

- Get on with it.

- You had some fun last night, right? Didn't know you still had it in you, you ladies man, you!

He winked at his brother. Virgil's smirked melted and he went back to the ivories.

- Oh, come on! Don't take it like this! It's a compliment, Virg!

The musician completely ignored his brother. Gordon remained silent and listened. He waited until the music stopped before adding:

- I didn't know you two were that close. It's just that, well… you know. How it ended up last time between you and …

Virgil pressed the notes firmly. He took a deep breath. His brother had struck a sensitive chord, pressing deep inside his memories. It was an old forgotten love story and he never wanted to hear about it again. All his brothers knew how much he had suffered and he did not want to look back at it. They wanted to protect him, but shielding him too much might not be such a good idea either.

He clenched his fists and took a deep breath before talking.

- I appreciate that you want to look to my well being Gordon, but that's enough. This is all behind me now. And I'm old enough to take care of myself.

The aquanaut looked at him.
Okay, okay... just thought you were over it, seeing you get out of a girl's room like that. It made me happy for you.

- It's not of your concern.

When it was time to talk about emotions, he was like a closed coffin. He kept taking in negative energies until he could burst. It never happened and he did not want to let it happen, either. He had a duty to support his brothers now more than ever.

Virgil resumed playing as Gordon stood and listened. He was looking for something to say to lighten the mood.

- I wonder how Alan is doing?

- You could go and check on him, that would give you something to do.

The musician was still mad, his tone of voice betrayed him. Gordon sighed.

- I just want to see you happy, bro. Whatever you choose.

He left the room as the music played, his footsteps beating the rhythm.

The serum dripped slowly as the life support machines ticked in unison. The mechanical ventilator was keeping Alan alive: they had no choice to revert to standard anesthesia since using a more localized form would have had drastic consequences on his central nervous system. The nanites had not yet begun to take effect since they would negate the effect of regular anesthetics and require the use of another serum in order to keep him sedated.

Abigail had warned the doctor and Brains that he would have to be switched to the other IV once it happened. His vital signs were monitored very closely to make sure they would notice the variation in time and not let him suffer during the transition.

During the procedure, Alan's heart rate suddenly increased. That was the cue Brains was waiting for. He switched the IV as it was required. Everything returned to normal. When he turned his head towards Alan's, he noticed his eyes were wide open. The engineer called on to the doctor, alerted by the young man's state. The doctor noticed it too. She called for a complete halt of the procedure.

- You need to go on! It's okay, everything is controlled. Trust me.

Mei seemed reluctant to continue but there was no time for questioning. Looking back at the young man's face, he had closed his eyes. She noticed the live tissues of his hand began showing a form of webbing. The bioengineer urged her to continue: the nanites had begun to work at their full potential and were starting to heal the damaged tissues. The doctor resumed her work as ordered.

Once they had brought Alan in the recovery room, Mei ripped off her mask, exhausted but also very curious about what happened back there. Grandma had fixed them lunch, a surprisingly good one, too, and went to check on Alan. The medical crew sat down at the table for a well-deserved break. While they were eating, the doctor asked:

- What has happened during the transition? For a moment, I believe Alan was about to awaken.

Abigail drank a full glass of water and munched down a sandwich before answering.
- The nanites took effect. It's normal sometimes to have spasms when they kick in.

The doctor was skeptical, the answer was nowhere near satisfying to her.

- It was more than a mere spasm, it lasted several seconds. The monitor even marked it as an event, which means there was an anomaly.

- It was only longer, that's all.

- I do not believe that.

- What, do you mean I'm lying? Who are you to question me?

Doctor Chang breathed deeply; there is nothing she hated more than people standing arrogantly in their positions and not explaining anything. She gave Abigail a sly look.

- I want you to tell me what you did to that young man! Why has he awoken during the procedure?

- He's safe. There is no need to look further.

Mei growled. Abigail was clearly hiding something. She had to question her thoroughly.

- I noticed that some narcotics were missing in the locked cabinet. There was no signature on the control list either. Knowing that Brains would have documented anything that would have been expired or even taken out and that there was no entry in the lock's computer, I am beginning to think you had something to do with it. I heard you could hack doors with your augmented reality interface, can you not? What happened to these drugs?

The bioengineer's mocking smile faded.

- Some of these drugs were required in order to go along with the procedure. There was nobody around. Plus, the security for that lock if very light, you should increase it.

- So, you did steal the drugs!

- I have not stolen anything. Why should I even need it? Drugs have no effects on me.

- You have taken out some Propofol, the strongest known drug used for anesthetics. What exactly did you intend to do with that?

Abigail resumed eating. She did not reply. Mei waited a few seconds before gripping her hand and stopping her.

- I need an explanation and a quick one. Where is the vial? Did you take it?

Brains came in to interfere between the two women. The bioengineer looked at Mei, remaining silent, as she sat back down in her chair. The engineer calmed her and took over.

- P… Please, Abigail, tell us what use you made of that vial. I am c… curious about what use you could have for such a powerful drug.

She wanted to reply, as it was asked nicely, but answered by getting up and leaving the kitchen. Mei was furious she cursed in her native language, slapping the table at the same time. Brains went after the young woman. He caught her before she entered the lab.

- Listen, I unders…stand the doctor is tired, we all are. Can you t… tell me?
She looked at him in the eyes and sighed.

- I used it to make a drug that would work on Alan. Now that he has nanites, he cannot be sedated by normal means. They break down foreign particles that adhere to blood cells, this is why there is a need for a different drug.

- Did you use the Propofol to make that? It is a great accomplishment.

- Synthetizing molecules, that's simple. Now go and tell that hysterical woman I did not steal it.

- Well, you d..did open the cabinet without my authorization…

- You were not around. It was the middle of the night and I needed to work.

- O... Okay, t… thanks. And sorry about all this mess.

- You had nothing to do with it. She started it. I'll go get some rest, this procedure was long, I'm exhausted.

As she was going to take her leave, he interrupted one last time.

- Wait, what is the name of that drug you made? Is it a registered product?

- It's called Acidosemine. And it's not registered, I came up with it during my researches at the lab. It was made for the Olympus project.

He nodded and let her go.

Alan's recovery over the day was more than impressive. He had awoken about twenty minutes after the procedure to find his Grandmother by his side. At first, he was a bit confused but quickly came back to his senses.

His first reflex was to raise his left hand and look at the work the doctors had completed. The finished product was impressive. The polymer was the same used to patch the Thunderbird ships' bodies so it was lightweight and sturdy. There was even the addition of a subtle red trim which reminded him of his favorite color. It did not look like a toy: the finish was professional and one would mistake it for a real hand under a pair of gloves. Grandma smiled at him while he was clenching his fist repeatedly.

- Do you like it?

- That's so cool! But, it felt weird…

He looked at the bandage covering the junction between the prosthetic and his arm.

- It's itchy... It feels like my skin is becoming tighter around my wrist.

- Want me to get Doctor Chang?

- Nah, I'll wait a bit.

The young astronaut studied his newly attached limb with amazement for a few minutes, touching each finger and gasping as he folded each of them in turn. He seemed to have some trouble at the beginning. He raised his eyes and looked at his Grandma.
- Something happened during the operation.

- What was it?

- I remember being sedated and going to sleep quickly. During the procedure, I had a weird dream. I felt my body becoming hotter and opened my eyes. I felt numb but I could hear everything around me. It was the weirdest thing.

- If it's only a dream, I don't think you have to concern yourself about that. Being sedated plays tricks on your brain.

- Yeah. Right now, I'm so hungry, I'd eat anything!

- Calm down. When Mei comes back to check on you, we'll ask her if you can eat right away. I don't think it is safe right after surgery like that.

Mei came back a whole hour afterward. She was surprised to see Alan awakened and so lively. She examined him thoroughly.

- Alan, I'm glad to say you have made an impressive recovery. I do not detect any side effects of the anesthesia on you. Do you feel dizzy? Light headed? Confused?

- I was when I woke up. But it's gone now. And I'm really hungry.

She did not understand. His condition was nowhere near normal. She was used to patients taking days to recover from the anesthesia and its side effects and about two to four months for all the light-headedness to go away. It was as if his body had expelled all the residual chemicals. She realized she understood even less what was happening.

- Tell me, Alan, do you have any weird feelings? Did the surgery hurt? Is your wound throbbing?

- No, I feel no pain at all. It's amazing! I can even move my hand right now.

She smiled as he demonstrated the flexibility of his newly acquired hardware. The prosthetic was an amazing piece of engineering yet she was more worried about the impacts of the nanites on his body than anything else. Rejection of the material had been the number one concern for giving him the treatment but she did not believe it would be anywhere near as remarkable as this to aid in his recovery.

He was hypnotized by the movements of his fingers. She snapped him out of his reverie.

- You can have a light lunch. I think it will be all right if you do.

- Can I get up?

- Wait a bit for that. I don't want you to have a weakness and fall. It's better if you wait a few hours for that. In the meantime, why don't you get some rest?

- Well, I'm not sleepy so…

- I'd suggest you try some videogames but, according to Abigail, there are still a few adjustments to be done for your hand to respond properly. Try not to break anything until then.

She got up and left, Grandma accompanied her. John appeared to check on his brother.

- Hey, sport! How's it going?
Check it out!

- Trendy? I think it's the COOLEST thing in the world! There is even this little red trim. It's like having a brand-new car but even better.

- Glad to hear you enjoy it. I just wanted to see how you were doing. Happy to know it's better than I expected.

- Say, John, when did Virgil say he wanted to hold his cabaret night? I want to attend this time.

- Won't you get bored halfway through like last time?

- Nah, I promise I won't.

They both laughed. John shifted his eyes on the astronaut's right hand. The space monitor was kind of uneasy at the sight of his brother having a blackish-gray polymer prosthetics instead of his flesh hand. It was better than nothing at all, he thought. He continued:

- I'll get you updated with when it will happen. Get some rest now, and don't get sick on Grandma's cooking.

The youngster smiled as his brother disconnected.

Night had fallen on the island. Doctor Chang waited for supper to report the outcome of the procedure. Brains had not assisted the meeting as he was exhausted from the procedure. Abigail sat far away from the doctor, preferring not to address her in any way. When Mei spoke about the speed at which the young man had recovered, she smiled. She had not disclosed anything to the doctor about the nanites or any other features regarding the healing. Mei was a little irritated but gave up, seeing that their petty quarrel was going nowhere.

Virgil announced at the table that the cabaret night would be scheduled for the next evening if no emergency calls came. Everyone was looking forward to this event to lighten the mood. The dress code was strict; the Tracy boys liked it when there was an opportunity to take their fancy outfits out. Each of them had a signature outfit, mostly couturier, since their father was a wealthy man.

The girls did a little shopping on the world web. With the Virtual shopping session, an algorithm made for online shopping which considered their sizes and the fit, they could try on some outfits virtually and have them delivered quickly to the island by drone the next day.

They met in Kayo's room: she was wearing a scarf to hide her bruises. She had not spoken to anyone about what really happened and nobody really saw her wounds other than Scott. She thought the bioengineer did as they were dressing up, but there was no mention of it. Both of them had chosen long form fitting dresses with different features: Abigail liked the halter top style so she chose one with a high neckline but a triangular cut-out on her chest while Kayo wanted something more classical and choose a draped V neckline. Both dresses were rather sober: they chose a few accessories to enhance their looks.

While everyone was working on their outfits, Mei received a call from the mainland and had to leave: her help was required elsewhere. She arranged for a transport to pick her up as soon as possible and advised that should anything happen with Alan, she would come back to check on him.
Luckily, no emergency call came in that night. John even came back to earth in order to attend the event, going back to his room in order to choose what he was going to wear.

All the boys gathered in the living room. Grandma had prepared a buffet with a few very fancy hors d'oeuvres and wore her old dark purple sequin dress. The younger Tracys smiled as it was a long-forgotten trend but they refrained from laughing not to anger the old woman. Most of them were dressed in vests ranging from dark blues, blacks and gray with fancy dress shirts. Virgil sat down at the piano and began playing a jazz ballad.

Kayo showed up, accompanied by Abigail. Both ladies had done their makeup and hair differently: Kayo favored wearing it lose while her colleague wore hers high a few random strands of hair falling on her shoulders. Their makeup was light yet alluring, contouring their eyes perfectly. Gordon whistled as they arrived, their high heel sandals resounding on the floor. He handed them a glass of sparkling cider.

- Looking good, girls! Especially you, Abigail. Hey, I wanted to ask you, can I call you Abi? Or Abe.

She looked at him, her coral painted lips curling in a smile. She took a sip of her drink and gave him a short and clear "No" for an answer.

Kayo laughed as they went towards the piano to meet the others, Gordon sighing and following them. Scott had already been there for a while, wearing his gray dress shirt and electric blue bow tie. The elder looked five years younger with his hair gelled backward. He approached Kayo and kissed her forehead, catching a whiff of her subtle tropical perfume. They went to sit down on the couch and listened to the music, fingers intertwined.

John was at the piano, dressed in a gray vest with a black dress shirt. Abigail smiled as she looked at him.

- Happy to finally meet you in person. You're a lot taller than I imagined.

- That's what they all say. You know, living in space for a little while does affect your height. The zero G makes you a few inches taller.

She laughed and bit her lip, holding back a salty comment. John understood the underlying meaning when Gordon laughed as well. He blushed and changed the subject.

- I have good news for you.

- Which are?

- Lady Penelope and I have been working on all the information gathered so far. We think we found Cloud Alpha.

Her eyes widened. She smiled.

- Really? This is amazing!

- You owe me an explanation now: what do you want from these labs?

- There are databases inside the computers; we might find some worthy evidence there. If you want to frame Holling, that's a place to start.

- Is that all?
The young woman hesitated. Gordon came in between them.

- Hey! Come on! We're here to have fun, no talk about work! Enjoy yourselves and have that discussion some other time, all right?

John nodded in agreement as he and Abigail turned to listen to the piano. Virgil switched to another song, periodically looking at his close audience. The pianist wore an onyx black dress shirt under his pinstriped vest. John eventually left towards the buffet table set out near the kitchen followed by Gordon. The bioengineer came a bit closer and smiled to the musician. He smiled back.

- Care to join me? I'll let you choose the song.

She smiled as she began browsing through the music scores. Eventually, Alan showed up, dressed as fancy as he could. He was welcomed warmly as the others gathered around him. He was fully rested and in top shape, a most unusual sight for having a surgery the day before. He had understood the nanites' functions and began explaining how that choice was the best one he had made so far. Even Scott was impressed.

They all sat down in the living room as Virgil began playing a very well known popular song on the piano. Abigail joined in, singing along with him. She was a bit rusty but it did not show so much; her voice was a nice and fresh addition. The brothers turned towards her as the "show" begun. The ambiance was set and everyone was enjoying the evening.

The real part was still to come. Virgil took a break after a while and joined the others on the sofa. Alan was proud to join the others: he announced he would be back on track very soon and was eager to joint the rescue missions again. They talked and forgot about their troubles.

After a good hour of break, it was time for the "pièce de résistance". Scott got up and went to pickup his guitar standing next to the piano. It was his electric guitar: a lively silver, black and red six strings instrument. Virgil met with him, taking up the bass and beginning to play a few notes to make sure everything was working fine. They had tuned the instruments prior so they would waste little time to start playing. Like their father, both of them had taken a liking to classical and vintage rock and roll at some point. During their teenage years, they had kept playing until they were overwhelmed with school work and could not find time to enjoy it anymore. This time was the first in a very long while where they would have a chance to put their skills to the test.

The audience was listening and waiting patiently to see what the brothers would play. They began with a well know sweet one: "Nothing really Matters". This really put them to the test. A few of them joined to sing along, but it was Abigail's voice that resounded hard and strong over the others who were really shy. After that one, Scott rubbed his hand and asked for another one. Alan suggested one he remembered from when he was younger: "Dream Onward". That one was a little harder, but they executed it brilliantly. They kept "Twilight sonata" for last, which was a stunning performance considering it was Abigail's favorite.

The event was such a stunning success that time flew fast. The first thing they knew, it was already passed midnight. Scott had to stop playing the guitar, his hand kept cramping as he lacked a lot of practice to play for so long. He turned in, accompanied by Kayo. Grandma had already gone to bed. John was still standing but decided it was more than time to get some rest. He suggested it to his brothers who followed him reluctantly. Only Virgil and Abigail remained.

The stood next to the railing, admiring the sea. The sky was at it's darkest, the stars were the only light shining with their faint glow. She sighed lightly. He noticed.
- Is there something wrong?

She turned towards him.

- No, not at all. It was an amazing night, it had been a very long while ever since I had that much fun.

- It's going to happen again, don't worry.

- I hope so. I'm looking forward to it.

She looked at the horizon to admire the scenery. He was still looking at her.

- You are very beautiful tonight. That dress suits you.

She blushed and bit her lip. He had waited all evening long to tell her that, she knew. The young woman smiled.

- Thanks. That's real nice. You're very handsome yourself.

It was his turn; his cheeks became slightly red but he laughed to cover it up. They caught a glimpse of each others' eyes and smiled. A cool breeze blew from the water: he noticed she was shivering slightly. He put his hand on her arms and caressed her slowly. They had moved closer without noticing. Their hearts were racing. They remained there for a while.

She was expecting him to kiss her: after all, it was not for nothing that they had gone this far. Something was holding him back. She waited, still, for an opportunity…

Nothing happened.

She eventually broke the silence.

- We should get some sleep. It's really late.

He nodded, looking disappointed. He knew he wanted so much to get closer, take her in his arms and kiss her, but he was afraid; an unjustified fright of being rejected. Yet, she had demonstrated interest, but he was not sure, and he refused to open up even to her.

The musician accompanied her back to her room, bidding her good night as she closed the door slowly behind her. He realized what he had done once he went back to his room. Virgil shut the door behind him and leaned against it, cursing at himself. The moment was perfect, he had secretly wished it would happen. They had so much common and shared similar thoughts, he also enjoyed her company. But he just couldn't bring himself to make a move. He dropped himself on his bed, burying his face in a pillow and thinking "I am such an idiot".
Dear readers, thank you for your continual support!

This is my first multi-parter story in which I will only cover the events regarding the mission ahead.

You will come across some dash with an asterisk (-*): this means that the characters are speaking in French! (And maybe some other characters won't understand them!)

Happy reading!

It was late afternoon when everyone was summoned in the living room. Lady Penelope called and had insisted in making this meeting official International Rescue business. Scott sat down behind his father's desk as it was customary and the others waited on the sofa. John was still home; having spent three days on earth, he jumped in his uniform and got ready to leave after the meeting would adjourn.

The Lady began.

- Good afternoon to all of you. As you well know, I am researching evidence in order to expose Marcus C. Holling to the World Council. John and I have discovered an area we suspect to be one of the lost laboratories from the initial Olympus project: Cloud Alpha. We believe there is a substantial amount of information to be gathered there.

Scott took over. He was a bit skeptical, as usual.

- How can you be so sure it's there? And how can you confirm you will even be able to get anything from it?

Penelope answered.

- We have traced the ownership of that land to Samuel Beaujolais. He was one of Holling's collaborators and business partners in the past. It would be fitting if he had sold all of the locations to his close partners to make sure they would remain easy to access.

- So, you are deliberately walking into a trap?

- Not at all. Beaujolais operates a resort there. Hundreds of people have been at that location already. I doubt he himself even knows about the existence of the lab.

- Let's hope you're right. We can't be too cautious after what happened.

- Trust me, Scott. You know I would not do anything to endanger myself or anyone else for that matter.

- It's the only thing making me acknowledge this whole mission. What do you need?

Penelope looked at each of the boys in turn before resuming.

- I require Abigail's help for this mission. This will not be dangerous, I assure you; simply political.
Abigail was disappointed at the "not dangerous". To her, it sounded quite boring. She answered:

- Tell me, why should I be your candidate?

- You are a native French speaker, are you not?

- Rusty, but yes, I first learned French before English.

- Good. You will accompany me to Beaujolais's resort. I'm sure you have no objections if that means finding Cloud Alpha.

- True that. We are basically trying to find out where the entrance is located, right?

- Exactly. And since you have the knowledge about Olympus and the labs, you are the best candidate.

- Is that all you need?

- The young blonde, white woman profile is what I require. The fact that you speak French is an incentive I cannot look over. Your knowledge is valuable too. Only one matter remains: you will need a driver.

The boys looked at each other. Kayo smirked.

- You mean, pilot?

- No, I meant an aide, a butler, an attendant. A driver is a lot more, shall we say, humane word to illustrate it.

Abigail blushed. She really hated having to rely on others. Being driven around in a car was the top of awkwardness for her. She looked at Penelope, puzzled.

- Basically, I'm going to be a spoiled rich girl with a servant?

- Simply say, wealthy young heir to a small fortune. We will also be working on your vocabulary.

- I get it…. But who can be my, eh… butler?

Gordon held his hand up.

- How about I drive Lady Penelope around and leave Parker to you? That sounds like a great plan!

Scott sneered.

- Remember what happened last time you took a car out?

- That wasn't my fault! I told you….

- You totaled it. We all know about your terrible driving skills so that's a no.

Alan volunteered but Abigail objected.

- You still need to work on mastering your new prosthetic. It would be unwise for you to start driving immediately. You still need a few hours in the simulator.

- Awww, man!
Scott looked at the remaining candidates.

- I can't go since Alan is not functional and I doubt Kayo would want to play driver.

The young agent replied:

- Not really. I'm not very good at listening orders.

She smiled at Scott, he sighed. Brains remained low profile; nobody suggested him either so he felt safe. Grandma walked up behind Virgil and grabbed his shoulders.

- What about you? You haven't said anything yet! I think you'd be the perfect candidate.

The musician replied.

- Not really. I need to remain here if there is a distress call.

Gordon reacted.

- Now that's a great idea, Grandma! There's one thing I'm good at and it's piloting Thunderbird two!

- Wait, Gordo, you're not serious about this?

- Very serious. I wasn't able to apply all that training you made me do on a real mission: I don't want all that skill to got to waste. Can't wait for you to break a leg 'cuz you won't.

He breathed deeply, annoyed to be pushed aside like this. Penelope reacted to soften the mood.

- Well, how about it, Virgil? Are you interested?

He was about to reply when Abigail looked at him and smiled.

- Come on! I'm sure this will be a lot more fun with you along. Please?

With what had happened a few days prior, he could not refuse. He felt his anger disappear quickly as she looked at him. His answer came with a sigh.

- Okay, I'll do it.

- Thanks!

Lady Penelope clasped her hands together to gather attention.

- Good! Now that it is settled, I will brief you on all the remaining details once I finish the arrangements. This will be a fun holiday.

She disconnected before anybody could ask anything. She did not even talk to Gordon before leaving; that irritated him. Kayo rose.

- Well now, a holiday? That's one way to call a mission.

The meeting adjourned, leaving only Virgil and Abigail in the living room. He was grumpy, arms crossed. She turned towards him.

- What's wrong?
Can't believe I got cast out like this. What if they need me?

- They will be okay, don't worry. Scott agreed, so he probably feels fine with all this.

- But I don't! What if…

She pressed her finger to his lips. He was startled. She smiled.

- Stop with "ifs". Don't think of it as a chore, she said it was a holiday. I'll make sure you enjoy yourself; I won't be too hard on you.

She got up and left the living room. He remained there alone, a hundred thoughts raced through his mind. He left last to get some rest.

Virgil and Abigail were dropped off in London where Lady Penelope had made arrangements for their rental vehicle. Hybrid cars such as FAB1 were hard to come by, so the aristocrat arranged for them a nice 2060 Midnight blue Blackbolt sedan. It was smaller than the FAB, but still as cozy and a lot more eye catching.

There was still the problem of getting in the remote mountainous area. An air transport shuttled them along with the vehicle the closest city but there was still about two hours of road ahead if them.

Virgil seemed to be enjoying himself and reminisced about the times his father took the family on a road trip. Those were precious memories, yet he was brought back to reality by looking in his rear mirror. Abigail had changed during the flight: she was wearing a tight mini skirt and a linen top with a very revealing neckline. He looked for an instant before quickly going back to the road. He could hardly tell she was wearing fitted skin like latex sleeves on her arm and legs: her movements were so fluent there was no way anyone would guess she had prosthetics unless they had x-ray scanning. Being what it was, that resort would lack such systems as the cost of entry was enough to discourage anyone from doing trouble.

She began making the final touches on her makeup, tapping her lips together to even her lipstick. The driver could not stop looking at her. He felt guilty for not having made his moves when he had the chance and began wondering if he was not going to be too late if he tried his luck later.

They arrived at the resort, a large complex consisting of Swiss chalet architecture. It was a typical resort and, other than the installations being well tended, the outside did not make the place stand out much. There was a lot of snow but the main roads had been cleared large enough to be driven to easily. Abigail put on some fancy high heel boots rising up to mid calf. It was neither comfortable nor practical but it was sexy as hell and it did get her driver's attention more than once. She was a made-up character now: Marilene Friolet, a distant cousin to Lady Penelope seeking some time off away from her regular lifestyle. She was to be presented as a wannabe performer and poet. Having studied classical French literature for a little while, she could talk a lot about the subject. Beaujolais would probably be one of these people who cared about his own culture, not that it was very common to find anyone sharing such interest in English speakers.

Penelope called in. She addressed Abigail in French.

-*Marilene, are you ready?

-* Yes, dear cousin. I am ready to face whatever ordeal is going to be laid on my path.

The aristocrat smiled. She reverted to English.
- Perfect! Just a bit more arrogant and you'll sound like a real Frenchwoman. We shall meet in the lobby of the resort to pickup our keys.

- Keys? You mean, they are still using these there?

- Yes. As I explained, there is very little technology there. It's like a trip in the past about fifty years ago. You will survive; there is nothing very bad about the place.

- I'm not doubting it. We need to find Cloud Alpha and leave. I'm not planning in extending my stay.

- Me neither but we are booked for a whole week. Might as well enjoy it while we are here. We are arriving, see you soon.

Penelope disconnected. Abigail sighed; her driver asked:

- Something wrong?

- I don't feel right. This skirt is too tight, I'm probably going to break a hip falling from these heels and this shirt is showing so much cleavage, it's embarrassing.

- Well, it is very… revealing. Relax and treat yourself while you're here.

He smiled reluctantly. He was as uncomfortable as she was but not for the same reasons: other men were going to look at her in an indecent way and that would bother him. He suddenly felt a bit of jealousy; even if he tried to divert his thoughts to something else, he always came back to it.

He drove the car under the lobby's carport. The doors of the vehicle were automatic, thus not requiring the help of a valet. Abigail put on her woolen coat decorated with faux fur on the collar and got off the vehicle. She pulled her skirt a bit, feeling uneasy as she walked inside. The driver followed Parker's indications and met with FAB1. They opened a conversation while waiting:

- Good to see you, Mister Tracy. I never thought I'd ever be working alongside International Rescue again like this.

- Happy to see you too, Parker. Drop the "mister" bit; I'm supposed to be Abigail's butler right now. Care to share a few tips?

- With pleasure mister… er… Virgil. Well, first, you always need to think ahead. The Lady is always expecting you do that. Second, do not look them in the eye. That is the most disrespectful thing. Third… er… well, do your job. It's not easy to be in the butler business.

- Yeah, I'll keep that in mind.

The young man smiled. Parker was a very nice person but a little simple minded. He was a soldier, after all, and a notorious thief after his glory years in the army but lacked the education of the people around him. Nonetheless, he was welcomed as one of their own for his unique set of skills, even if his knowledge and insight were not always the best.

As Abigail entered the gigantic hall, she was greeted by a hostess wearing a flawless uniform in the colors of the resort. Her golden yellow shirt was complemented with dark green lapels and a skirt of the same colors. Her coiffure was a bob, the typical look to see a waitress with. She greeted the two ladies in French.

-*Bienvenue, Mesdames! We hope that you will enjoy your stay! I am Josephine, I shall be
completing the lodging arrangements with you. Please proceed with me to the counter.

They followed the hostess to a large desk fashioned from a massive slab of crosscut wood. It was varnished and all the knots were visible. The legs were gnarled wooden branches entangling themselves to replace the front panel. Lights had been added through them which gave them a bewitching look. While the hostess gathered the information from Penelope, Abigail looked around. In the center of the reception hall was an enormous fountain fashioned from rocks; it rose as high as the second-floor balcony. Two stairways went around it, made out of acacia wood and forged iron. The ceiling was covered in vines and other types of ivy: flowers grew through it, producing an eerie glow. She knew that was a product of bioengineering. Either Beaujolais ignored it, which was most likely, or he was simply lying to his customers to help them discover the "beauty of nature". The walls were painted in frescos reminding of ancient Rome and Greece. It was an amalgamate of everything rich people would enjoy without any logical consistency.

Two envelopes containing keys were given to Penelope. The hostess smiled.

- Should you require anything, please let me know. You can ring me any time of day or night at the number written on your card. I shall tend to your every need.

Abigail shrugged as the young woman insisted on the word "every", imagining what male customers would ask of the poor girl. They proceeded back to their respective vehicles, both drivers lining up under the carport to pick them up.

Almost all of the buildings were scattered around the valley and the mountainside to make sure everyone could profit of utmost tranquility. They drove up a hill towards two isolated small chalets, several meters away from each other. This setup was most likely done to accommodate families or parties of people not wanting to have to drive over to the other's residences. There was even a small garage for the car.

Penelope accompanied Abigail in her lodging while the men gathered her luggage. The place was HUGE. A hallway led to an opened bedchamber with all the commodities you could think of: whirlpool bath, amazing stone fireplace, a fake bearskin rug, a small wine cellar under a counter containing several good bottles of all types of wine including champagne, comfortable sofas, a 4 seats bar style table and a king-size bed. The adjacent bathroom was equipped with a glass shower, a gigantic wall mirror, and a dressing table. All the lighting could be controlled with a single touch panel and was rather simple to dim.

She was a bit intimidated by the place at first. The Lady smiled.

- This will be your place. I do hope it is sufficient to fit your needs.

- Are you joking me? I've lived in apartments smaller than that! This is fantastic! How much does this cost?

- Now now, there is not need for you to ask such a question. We are on a mission and we require having such luxuries in order to fit in.

The young bioengineer looked around, still amazed and replied a bit sarcastically:

- If you say so…

Virgil and Parker brought in the last of the luggage. Penelope had purchased a lot of clothes for Abigail, way too much for the stay ahead. She could change twice a day and still have some clean
outfits to put on later. The musician looked at the place, whistling. He then asked:

- And where do I sleep?

Penelope showed him through a door near the hallway. There was a small room with a single bed, a table, and a wobbly chair. The place was scarcely heated and the bed seemed really uncomfortable. The Lady sighed.

- You should maybe go for the couch. Beaujolais does not really like people of low social status and treats them poorly.

Parker went over to the bed and pressed on it with both fists.

- It's genuine army bunk, m'lady! Been dreaming for one like that during training. Don't underestimate the comfort.

Virgil showed a thin smile.

- I'll manage. Don't worry.

Penelope went back to the hallway.

- I will get to my quarters now. We shall be expected for supper at 8. It is a bit late, do not hesitate to call in some food if you are hungry.

- Eating at French hours, got it.

As her ladyship was leaving, Parker added:

- We aides and drivers have a special place to hang out. Down the hill, turn left. There is a shack there. That's the place where Lady Dasha's people hang out. They have a whole place to themselves! I'd trust you'd join me there not to be bored.

- I'll consider it, thanks for the advice.

Parker left, hurrying outside to get ahead of the Lady. Virgil shut the door while Abigail was still wowing at her room. She turned towards him and smiled.

- This is fantastic!

- Talk about yourself. I get a bunk.

- I'll let you sleep in my bed. It's king-sized; there's plenty of space.

- Yeah, well, we shouldn't do this… it might arise suspicions about…

- Come on. I'm supposed to be your boss, I'll settle problems when they come. Care to share some champagne? Been a while ever since I've had some.

- Wouldn't you rather be sober for attending the lunch?

- I'll be, don't worry. I can't get drunk.

She seemed a little upset about that fact but quickly went for the wine cellar. He watched her go around, pulling her short skirt down all the time. He smiled.
- You really should change to something better.

- I'm planning to. I feel like it's going to rip every time I bend down. Here.

She grabbed a champagne bottle and lent it to him with a bucket.

- Fill it with snow and pop that bottle. In the meantime, I'm going to go through these clothes and try on something better.

He did what she asked. When he came back from outside, she had already switched outfits. She wore a royal blue mid-sleeved velvet cheongsam dress with embroidered dragons. It was a heavy and high-quality fabric that hugged to her body. The skirt was slit on the side up to her thigh. Virgil glanced at her as she was clipping the frog closures and raised her hair above her head in a messy bun. She added some cascading iridescent earrings made out of something that resembled glass, a matching necklace, and some silver bracelets.

As she came back towards him, she asked:

- How about this one? Do you like it?

He smiled. She was amazingly beautiful. He was looking for simple words to express himself but ended up being very straightforward.

- It's very beautiful and fits you perfectly.

She smiled and sat down near him as he was pouring them glasses of champagne. He gave her one as she seemed to be thinking.

- What's wrong?

- Nothing. I was just looking back. It's not sane to do so, I know, but… I'm happy.

He was puzzled.

- Happy? About being here?

She took a sip of her glass before answering.

- Happy to be free and enjoy life again. This is the closest thing to a vacation I've ever had in a very long while.

She held out her glass.

- I'm sure good things will happen.

They toasted and drank together. Fate was sealed.

Evening came. Penelope and Abigail gathered in the hallway to meet with the other guests. After hostesses took their coats, they were free to wander around. They were walking around, trying to spot Beaujolais; he was nowhere to be seen. Instead, they were approached by a tall mature woman: her physique was exceptional, she was well fit and her posture was straight and perfect. She was wearing a very fancy black dress ornate with pearls and crystals and embroidered with silver thread. Her traits suggested she was of eastern European descent, her wrinkle-free face not showing any emotions other than a very thin smile. They could not guess her age easy but, from her long sleek gray hair, they estimated her to be 60ish.
The woman approached the young ladies, looking judgmentally at their outfits before addressing them with a strong accent.

- Ah, Penelope. Fancy meeting you're here. You put on some weight since last time you were here. Your choice of colors has not improved either.

Penelope gave her a sly look. She did favor pastels over black, a questionable decision in the woman's point of view.

- Lady Dasha, what a pleasant surprise to see you so well. So how have you been? Had a few surgeries still, I see.

Lady Dasha pinched her lips, irritated by Penelope's comment. She ignored her completely, turning her attention to Abigail.

- Who might you be?

- Marilene Friolet, Madame. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.

- Spare me your fancy talk. Your choice of clothing is as horrid as the lipstick you wear with it. Women should not train too much, either; your shoulder are too wide, it is not attractive. What about your lineage?

- My family? Their business is…

- … a bastard no doubt. Your name does not inspire me anything, I suggest you half-breed stay away from people such as us.

The woman left. Abigail clenched her left fist, whispering to Penelope.

- Who does this bitch think she is?

- Lady Dasha Kaczynska is Beaujolais's ex-wife with whom he created this resort. She is the owner of several brothels, bars and other establishments of ill repute in the Russian federated nations and the Bereznik state.

- After seeing her like this, I can see why she's his ex.

- He did not share her initial view for this resort. She wanted an establishment where the wealthy would be able to satisfy all their most exotic fantasies. He reluctantly accepted but decided to stop all these activities when he became the target of a smear campaign. He is an epicurean and philanderer, that might also have something to do with his divorce.

- So, he keeps her around to be abusive towards customers?

- She was not always like this… well, she is usually a little less abusive I must say. Just ignore her.

Several other people started gathering in the lobby. A steward passed through carrying a tray filled with glasses of champagne. The ladies both took one before going along with their game. Abigail followed Penelope around as they were walking through all the guests. They eventually stumbled upon Beaujolais at a distance: a small potbellied man with a well-trimmed mustache, wavy gray hair and big cheeks. He was greeting the guests, smiling genuinely. Penelope motioned in his direction with her chin, taking a sip of her drink. Abigail followed her gaze.

- That's him?
The aristocrat nodded.

- He's… short.

Yes, that does not deprive him of other qualities. One of us will have to try to get an audience with him.

- I'll see what I can do.

Before they were done talking, he passed through the crowd and disappeared. The attendants then called the guests to be seated in the dining hall. Both women looked around as the rich man was nowhere to be found and followed the others to be seated for supper.

During the five-course meal, Lady Penelope was scrutinizing Beaujolais's entourage while Abigail tried to look around herself. She ended up drawing more looks to her than she wanted and answered them by smiling.

Penelope found Beaujolais seated next to the stage, alone. A band was performing some well-known vintage hits. He was enjoying himself, a few female attendants around him. Lady Dasha was at the far end of the room at a table with a few men. The Lady explained the picture to Abigail and then asked:

- Do you have an idea on how to draw his attention?

- Does it have to imply speaking with Lady Dracula?

- Stop holding a grudge against her, you are wasting your time.

The young bioengineer did not reply and looked at the stage. She knew how she could try to get Beaujolais's attention.

- I might, yes. I just have to make it up there.

She hailed an attendant and whispered something. The young servant smiled and went her way. Penelope, looking forward to seeing what it was all about, glanced at her inquisitively. The servant came back and motioned for her to follow. She told the Lady:

- Watch for me. I'll keep in touch if something is up.

Penelope nodded as she watched Abigail make it for the stage. The band finished their piece: the noise of utensils clinking in plates and loud whispering was perceptible. The young performer went up on stage from the side steps, accompanied by a steward. She spoke for a minute to the musicians then faced the audience as the host of the night presented her.

- Ladies and gents, we have here a young novelty artist, Marilene Friolet. She will perform for you tonight. Please welcome her on stage.

Abigail raised her hand and saluted her clapping public, smiling and thanking them in French. The music began: a jazzy sensual pin-up song named "Just One Dance". She was looking at Beaujolais the most enticing way possible and moving at the rhythm, a hand on her hip, arching her back to make her bosom stand out. She made sure her leg would show out of her dresses' side slit. The audience watched with smiles on their faces. Lady Dasha ignored the performance and went on speaking to the men around her. Beaujolais watched eagerly, grinning at the young woman. He did not take his eyes off her during the entire act.
As the song stopped, she finished by sending a kiss flying. The audience clapped loudly and whistled. A steward came towards her to help her down the stairs and showed her to Beaujolais’s table. The rich man rose to welcome her, taking her hand and kissing it immediately. The steward remained to push her chair as she seated. Beaujolais was all smiles and expressed himself in French.

"Mademoiselle! This was a memorable performance! Your name is Friolet?"

"Oui, monsieur. Marilene Friolet.

"I really love your accent, mademoiselle Friolet.

She knew her accent would give her away. She was not native from France, so it would be heard even if she made efforts to conceal it. The old man was keeping her hand in his, looking into her hazel eyes. She was smiling back, trying to be as submissive as she could. It was not easy for her to do so.

"Merci. You are flattering me.

"What do you say we leave this noisy dining hall and go to a more… private and cozy place.

"Why… of course!

She really hoped it did not mean he wanted to get dirty. She glanced at Lady Penelope who nodded to her and got up to follow the man.

He led her to a far wing of the main resort, towards his private quarters. The entire hall was decorated in a French renaissance style. Golden trims complemented the off-white walls. An occasional pedestal holding a bust or vase was seen as they walked through. The doors were part of the decoration and could easily be mistaken for a wall. A steward opened the door that led to a vast boudoir decorated with antique teal and moss green furniture. An enormous canopy bed could be seen through a half-closed door in an adjacent room. The small man motioned for Abigail to sit down while he was talking to the steward. She heard him talk about getting a good bottle to woo her. The steward exited the room and left them both alone. Beaujolais came back and sat down near her.

"Pardon me, madame. I wish not to be rude but it seems my last bottle has disappeared.

He motioned like if it had disappeared from thin air. She understood that meant he drank it.

"Let us talk while the wine is being fetched.

They engaged in a cordial conversation. Abigail insisted in her studies in French classical literature and discussed a bit of poetry with him. She had everything under control.

Meanwhile, Lady Penelope was still in the dining hall. She had noticed that two men sitting around Lady Dasha's table got up and followed the same path Beaujolais took a few minutes prior. She had to look for a quick way to follow them without being seen. Leaving the table, the agent went for the nearest bathroom. Satellite imaging would be deficient in this area, but with the help of John, she might get a detailed map very quickly. She texted him about it, ordering a scan of the place by Thunderbird Five. Five minutes later, the maps were available and downloaded directly to her pocket communicator. A service hallway was accessible from the back of the building. It was too far away for her to reach quickly without going through any crowded area. She sent a message to Parker as she would require his aid.
The residence of Lady Dasha's personnel was nowhere near as prestigious as the ladies' were but it had all the commodities required for the staff members to rest properly. Beds were a lot more comfortable than those in the servants' quarters, the kitchen could provide them with food and drink and a large round table was set in the living room. The keeper of the residence was a bulky old Russian woman who barely spoke three words of English but never stopped rambling in her native language. She was a very nice woman who loved to cook for everyone. Her husband had the same body frame as her but he was a rather silent old man. His Mongolian roots made him look like an old Chinese sage with his long white mustache. He spoke Russian and English fluently, being his wife's only link to the world. The rest of the crew consisted of a young maid who quickly began swarming around Virgil when he entered the home. She was a short red head with freckled cheeks and ample breasts. As soon as he arrived, she followed him everywhere and winked at him more than once. She barely looked twenty years old. Parker shooed her away after a while, realizing she was annoying. There were also a few other drivers and butlers, acquaintances of Parker, who were staying there to pass the time.

Parker and Virgil both sat in the living room, in old but comfortable purplish red velvet sofas. The edges were worn but that was exactly what gave them their charm. The old man, Dagan, was tending to the fire in the stone fireplace while the old lady fetched them each a small glass of Brandy.

Virgil looked around. He noticed the red-haired girl was watching him from the kitchen, seated at the table. She was eyeing him and making indecent gestures. The old lady said something loud and the young woman left immediately. He was relieved. Parker laughed.

- Been a while ever since I've seen this crew. They were the people of Lady Dasha's manor in northern Romania. She promised them she would not leave them and made sure they would have commodities here to live care free.

The young musician took a sip of his glass. He grimaced; it had been a while ever since he drank any alcohol. He looked around before replying:

- It's a nice place. That Lady Dasha must be one good hearted person.

- Actually, she is quite the viper. Never seen her smile, ever. One may think she is not happy at all.

- Could be. You hang out here all the time when you're visiting?

- Yes, sir! Best poker games I've played in my life were here. Best vodka also! Old Bajah has all the best vodkas from the eastern countries in her pantry. She likes collecting all sort of booze for her guests.

The old woman came bearing a platter of what seemed to be sweets. Most of it was meringue dipped in chocolate or candied dried fruits. She put her hands on her hips and said something before laughing loudly and leaving the room. Parker saluted her as she left. Virgil observed the unorthodox crew, smiling. He wondered how his brothers were faring without him, gazing at the crackling fire in the chimney. Dagan eventually brought up a subject of conversation, rocking himself in his massive wooden chair. They talked for a good while; not realizing that time was flying fast.

Parker received a text message from Penelope. He got up and tapped on Virgil's arm.

- The ladies require our aid. We will need to be on our way, now.
The musician nodded and saluted the household, following Parker on his leave. Once outside, the butler's steps became quicker, he exposed the problem.

- Her Ladyship just told me we are needed to investigate. Are you ready for some work?
- Been aching for it, yeah!
- Good then. We need to infiltrate the furthest side of the main complex. We must be on the lookout for two men dressed in fine black suits. They might be up to no good.
- FAB.

They parked their vehicles near all the others in the main parking lot. Making sure they were not followed, they proceeded through the rear of the main complex. It was a long walk in the cold, dark night. Snow crunched under their boots; they had to take already made tracks in order not to arouse suspicion. This entrance was seldom used other than by employees; only a small walkway was plowed, the rest was knee high snow.

A massive metal door stood in front of them. Virgil tried to open it but it was locked. Parker gave it a try; he determined that the lock was magnetized. Taking out an old metal box from his coat, he produced from it a small bead of some kind of putty and inserted inside it a coin shape circuitry. Pressing it against the door, he reverted to his watch and pressed a button; a loud clanking noise was heard and the door released.

They entered a richly decorated hallway, resembling the interior of a French palace. Footsteps were heard at a distance. Only a small desk near the door could hide both of them, they pressed on towards it, crouching behind. The two men in black suits approached, preceded by a steward who held a bottle of wine on a tray. Parker turned around, making sure he did not do any noise, to have a better look. Both men put their backs on a wall, about one meter away from the door on each side. The steward knocked and entered; a voice was heard but it was too faint to clearly understand. The two men remained there standing, immobile. Virgil whispered:

- What are they up to?
- Dunno, but this ain't a good feeling I've got there. Get ready.

Beaujolais welcomed the steward. He presented him the bottle and served him and his guest while they were still chatting. Abigail was having a wonderful time, even if she thought otherwise; the short man's presence was refreshing and never had he said or suggested anything inappropriate to her. She was glad he did not. He held out his glass while speaking.

-* I am glad I could make your acquaintance tonight, mademoiselle Friolet. It has been a very interesting and deep discussion we had there. Are you going to stay here for long?
-* Only four more days, monsieur. This trip is a way for me to escape everyday concerns. The need to resource oneself in order to come back stronger and more creative is necessary.

She was clearly talking rubbish. Deep inside, she was laughing at the simplicity of this discussion and the fact that Beaujolais was a rather simple-minded man with an expanded vocabulary. She took a sip of her glass, he did too. After much more pleasantries, she noticed he was not sitting straight anymore. Considering the elapsed time from the moment they left the dining room and now, it was quite unlikely that a man like him would become drunk on one single glass. He tried to get up, she did too, only to realize that she was a bit dizzy. "There is something in the wine..." she thought and hoped it was not anything acting like GHB. Fortunately for her, she would be able to
shake it off quickly, but not without passing out for a minute or two. Her sight became slightly blurred as she reached for Beaujolais and tried to get him to his bedroom. His body was heavy but she managed in holding him up. She would need to put him to safety before calling Penelope in for reinforcements.

As she was heading towards the bedroom, the boudoir door burst opened and two men in black suits erupted inside, both producing guns from concealed holsters. They pointed at her; she could only distinguish the menacing pose from the armed men ready to fire.

What she heard next were the shots being fired, her ears ringing and her sight fading slowly as she dove down on the carpeted floor.

To be continued…
Her ears were throbbing. She tried to get up and succeeded in crawling further away towards the wall. It was awfully difficult in this dress and even more being confined in the door frame with Beaujolais. He had fallen on her, his right calf bleeding from a gunshot wound. She was trying hard to get back to her senses. Psychoactive drugs were the worst, it took her a lot longer to shake off. The more she came back to reality, the more her left cheek was hurting: she must have hit herself somewhere while falling. A bit of blood was running down her neck. She thought she could hear muffled noise coming from the other room.

Footsteps seemed to come towards her, hasty footsteps. She got up as quickly as she could, wanting to find a place to hide until she could be able to assault the two men by herself. Instead, she heard her name: it was Virgil. She waited for him in the room, wanting to make sure it was not her imagination. He appeared in the door, stepping over Beaujolais to get to her. The young woman stood her back to the wall, still not able to keep her balance. She smiled.

- I had this covered…

Before she could finish her "I had this" sentence, he took her in his arms.

- Are you hurt? You're bleeding!

She noticed he was particularly concerned. His calm and confident voice had shifted to a different tone. He was worried. She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand.

- It's nothing. Just a scratch.

They turned towards Parker who was tending to Beaujolais. The butler had made him a makeshift bandage in order to stop the bleeding. He assessed the situation and contacted Lady Penelope.

- M'Lady, we need to find a doctor to tend to mister Beaujolais. His wound is not bad, but he will require a proper bandage.

- Hold on, Parker. I have found someone who can help inside the complex. Is Abigail all right?

- Yes, ma'am. Mister Virgil is tending to her. Just a flesh wound, nothing very bad.

- Oh dear. And there I thought this would be a quiet little activity for us all to share while we were searching. I'm on my way.

Her Ladyship disconnected. Parker asked for help to put Beaujolais in bed. Virgil lent a hand. The fat rich man was moaning in pain, regaining his senses. Penelope entered the room, followed by three other persons. She motioned for her three allies to get out while the people went to care for Beaujolais.

The crew hurried back to Abigail's residence. Parker prepared some beverages while Penelope invited them to sit down on the sofas. The bioengineer fetched a wet towel and roughly wiped her bloody cheek, avoiding her wound. She undid her hair and removed her jewelry before the drinks arrived and quaffed it down in one gulp. She looked at the Lady.

- I was not expecting that.

- Indeed, neither was I. By chance, I was able to find out that some agents were present here
undercover. They are employed by the Council. It appears that Lady Dasha wishes her ex-husband dead.

- And why should it concern the Council?

- It is a matter of World security. Every person in league with the Bereznik state is being watched. It is the cradle for assassins, spies and all matter of people wishing to disrupt World peace. We have a duty to take these people to justice.

Virgil looked at Abigail's wound. She was still bleeding a bit. As she felt his eyes on her, she applied the towel slowly on her cheek. He turned back towards Lady Penelope and asked:

- Now that they know we stopped the assassination attempt, are they going to come after us?

- I doubt it. But we can never be too careful. Keep in contact at all times with John; I will make sure he has a complete breakdown of the situation. He might require you to keep an open link to monitor your positions. That would mean to use geo-localization around the complex. We have little choice.

They all agreed it was the best way they could be safe if anything happened. The aristocrat and her driver left the chalet late that night. While everyone was seemingly on edge, Abigail was relatively calm. She lied down on the couch, her head on Virgil's lap. The young woman let out a sigh.

- That was some action.

- Somebody shot at you. Doesn't that make you feel uneasy?

She closed her eyes and did not answer. He waited; she was bound to open up eventually as she always did. She took a deep breath.

- It does not bother me, I'm used to it.

He hated those answers coming from her. Being used to get hurt was nowhere near normal. He stroked her hair gently; what he was going to say would probably upset her, but he felt he had to.

- Stop pretending things don't get to you. I am well aware of everything that happened. You will forever be haunted by those memories but… it's over now. I want to see you smile instead of pretending. Don't let your pain destroy you.

She opened her eyes: what he said did have an effect on her. He knew it since she was escaping his gaze. She sighed, touching her wound lightly. After remaining silent for a while, she replied.

- It's not easy. I am surrounded by strangers in this world; there isn't anybody left alive that I know who can help me. You Tracys were the first people to show me some kindness in a very long time. I was able to appreciate life again. Tonight, I was a star, a starlet in front of all those people. But the crude reality caught up with me. There is always something that will anchor me back to earth. I can't have dreams; I can't expect to think about the future. All I can try is anticipate if I'll have to run away again.

She rose, turning towards him.

- Thanks for placing your fate in me. I want you to know I am deeply grateful for it. Please don't be mad if I can't do the same. Having confidence in somebody… it's hard. So many people betrayed me…
He took her in his arms. She was breathing deeply as she caught his gaze, trying not to cry. A small drop of blood ran down her wound; he brushed it lightly with his thumb. He was trying to muster the courage to approach her lips. She whispered.

- I know you have been aching to do this for a long time. Before engaging in anything, I want you to understand… this is me. Don't fool yourself…

She smiled faintly as she let go her tears, staring into his eyes. His decision was made. He approached her lips slowly; they were almost touching…

And then John called.

They were both startled by the ring. With what had happened, it was wiser to answer immediately. The space monitor looked at the two standing in front of him: Abigail had wiped her tears away quickly and Virgil was a visibly upset. He began.

- Hey, I hope you two are okay.

Virgil answered, a callous tone in his voice.

- Well, we were. What's up now?

- Woah, calm down. I was only doing checking on you guys. Did I interrupt something?

Abigail sighed and waved her hand for him to go on, not looking at him directly. She did not want him to know she had cried.

- It's okay, go ahead.

- The World Council is on the lookout for potential criminals escaped from a GDF detention facility in Germany. They think some of them might have gone over to Lady Dasha Kaczynska. After a bit of research, the land you are standing on has been given a special status from the World Council to Samuel Beaujolais: since his project required less satellite traffic, they called this area a yellow zone. This means that, at any time, the Council can send the GDF over to investigate and the resort personnel has no choice but to disclose the names of everyone in a stay.

The young woman turned towards him, understanding the gravity of the situation.

- This is bad news.

- Yes. The GDF does not need to know we are here. You can't stay there much longer either or they'll find out about you.

- I was not planning to remain here very long. I'm going to go skiing around the mountain early tomorrow; I need your help to do some scanning.

- Better get to bed then. It's passed midnight.

- Yeah. Thanks for the reminder.

He disconnected. The momentum had been broken. Virgil sat down, upset, and began going through the file Lady Penelope made available for the mission. Abigail headed for the bathroom to remove her makeup and take a shower. She had a habit of turning the hot water off once she was done washing and remain under the cold jet. It was a way for her to enforce her body and mind. She needed to gather her strength: this mission was far from over.
She donned a pair of boxer shorts and a t-shirt for the night. When she returned, Virgil was sleeping on the sofa, having changed to his pyjamas. She sat down near him and gently touched his cheek.

- Hey, don't sleep here. Come.

He opened his eyes and rubbed his face. He got up slowly and followed her to the gigantic bed. It had happened a few times on the island: she was afraid to go to sleep so he would remain with her until she was okay. He fell asleep with her often, enjoying having someone to cuddle with. They had their code out of respect towards each other: neither of them ever insisted in going further, and it was fine. She would sleep under the sheets and he would only take the top one if it was too cold.

She cuddled against him, resting her head on his shoulder. He went back to sleep, reflexively putting his arm around her. Needless to say, that made her happy.

A knock came on the door of the Lady's chalet. Parker went to get it, welcoming the young attendant who was delivering breakfast in what looked like Chinese wedding baskets. The trays were left on the table as he exited the apartment. The butler made sure he would slip some money in the young man's pockets before he left.

The Lady came out of her dressing room, having finished her morning grooming. She was wearing a pink dressing gown and a pair of matching pink feathery slippers. Her butler had already laid the table and waited for her ladyship to be seated before serving tea. She immediately opened a comm to Thunderbird five. John answered.

- Good morning, Lady Penelope. I have good news.

- It is rather early for you to come up with this. What happened?

- Short night. Abigail left a little after sunrise to begin her mapping. I've been following her for about two hours now.

- What? That early! Oh, my! She really does intend to get this done quickly, does she?

- She if quite fast, already went about thirty-five kilometers around the first mountain. I'm going to scan the whole range and make sure I don't come up with any other kind of surprise.

- Are you expecting something?

- If it is a larger complex, exploring might take longer. Let's hope Abigail knows her way inside.

- I have faith in her, John. Thank you for letting me know about this. I will be going to the resort and find out more about what became of Beaujolais after the attack.

- Good, keep in touch.

He disconnected.

The Lady finished her breakfast and tea before dressing up to reach the main complex. There was a huge billboard explaining all available activities for the day. From relaxations to sports, the choice was ample. Upon reaching the main counter, Josephine came towards her. The Lady smiled as she approached.

-*Good morning, madame. Monsieur Beaujolais asked me to meet with you upon your arrival. He
wishes to see you in his private quarters. Please, follow me.

Penelope left her coat to Josephine and followed her to Beaujolais’ private massage parlor. She was a little uncomfortable as she entered the room. The chubby man was lying face down on the table, showcasing his hairy back, while a young, lightly dressed Asian woman was massaging him. As soon as the aristocrat came inside, the employee left through a back door. The man raised his head to find the lady waiting near the door. He tried to sit down quickly but gave out a shout of pain. An attendant came inside and helped him out. Beaujolais looked like he was exaggerating his pain a lot. He greeted the Lady while still seated on the table.

-*Madame, mes hommages. I am deeply sorry I cannot kiss your sweet silky hands, but you must understand my pain.

-* Do not bother yourself, monsieur Beaujolais. It seems you wanted to see me?

-* Yes! I have been trying to recall the events of last night's incident. I do remember being with the young mademoiselle Friolet. Have you, by any chance, seen her? I am hoping that no harm has come to her!

-*Why inquire to me for her?

-*I have asked my servants about her whereabouts and all pointed towards you, my lady. She does not seem to be at her chalet, this is why I have asked for you to come forth to me.

-* Mademoiselle Friolet is fine, monsieur. She is a bit shaken but will recover. Do not worry about her. She has engaged in an outdoor activity to ease her mind.

-*I remember her jumping towards me. Was she the one to save my life?

Penelope had to make up something. He did not need to know Abigail had saved his life and it was probably for the best. That way, he would not inquire further about her.

-*I do remember her telling me your staff intervened just in time. Nothing more.

He seemed relieved by the news. Penelope continued.

-*Please tell me, do you have any idea who might have wished you harm? These men were intending to shoot and kill.

-*Chère madame, if only I knew, I would not be standing here in ignorance, looking to dive in pleasures in order to forget this terrible ordeal. This is an isolated incident, I am sure of it. How could anyone wish me dead? After all I have done! No, I tell you, there are crazy people everywhere and these men were of them.

She realized he was completely oblivious of the danger that lurked in his resort. He was never known to be a smart man, but she had never met him in person to judge. By her assessment of the situation, Penelope concluded he was greatly exaggerating his condition and was overconfident in his ability to deal with people. At that moment, she realized he was a complete idiot.

He began venting himself with his hand, his mood changing.

-*Dear madame, you have made me anxious once again. Please, leave me. I wish to regain some peace of mind before tonight's supper. What will my guests think of me if I cannot receive them properly?
He motioned with his hand, clearly shooing her off. She did now think twice before leaving. She had expected him to be a more serious man, not a clueless Don Juan. He was simply a rich imbecile. She went back to her chalet, sending a message to Abigail explaining her encounter.

The first light of day was showing through the peaks when Abigail began her journey. She had hailed Josephine early for a pair of skies and some food to take along. She wore her entire Athena attire: it was tight enough to fit under her snowsuit. She even arranged her boots to fit on the skies. When she was far enough from the complex, she switched her hat to her helmet.

She kept mapping the area using a GPS module connected to Thunderbird five and projecting the finished map in augmented reality on her helmet's visor. She stopped at one point and zoomed in some areas towards the peaks. She noted an outcropping stretching out more than the others and decided to climb up. It would be tricky, but she had to at least try. It was about ten meters from the ground. John was watching her progress:

- Are you sure you want to go up there?
- I believe this might be an access shaft or a vent. It is weirdly shaped.
- Let me check instead, save your efforts for returning.

He sent down a probe. It circled the peak in the air while she went on around it on the ground. Abigail stopped at some point.

- Eh… John? Take a look.
She turned on her helmet's camera and broadcasted. She was before a trail of footsteps heading down the valley and towards one of the peaks. While zooming in, they both realized those were snowshoes.

- Somebody came here. Do you think they were trying to find the lab?
- Holling knows about the location of the labs, so I doubt these are his agents. I don't think they would cross the entire valley on foot, either. He knows he can't get in so it's pointless to send anyone.

- Why is that?
- He can't open the door. When the other engineers openly turned against him, they locked up their labs and all the contents, making sure they would never be opened by anybody else…

- Then why are you so sure you will be able to?
- Before the GDF raid, I was about to do the same. I was cut short, but we managed to use our genetic code as the keys to opening the labs. We were three to oppose Holling. Two died. Now there is just me. Turns out I'm important to him so he put me to sleep instead.

- I knew you were still hiding stuff from us.
- This information was useless to you unless we got to the labs. And there is more. I'll tell you later.

She crossed her skis and unlocked her boots. It was noon. She sat down, taking a break and ate some of her lunch. John was still looking at the maps she gave him. He asked something out of the blue:
- Say… What's happening between Virgil and you? It looked at if I was disturbing something last night.

- Nothing much.

- You did heed my warning?

- Yes. But I don't think that concerns you.

- It does. More than you know.

- Tell me why then.

- This information is useless now. I'll tell you later.

She hated someone to take up her own words against her. This made her very mad. Her voice clearly expressed annoyance.

- What is it you want exactly?

- What is your motivation for finding these labs? What do you get from it?

She finished eating and took a good sip of water. She popped the bottle cap shut and packed her stuff while she answered.

- I want to make Holling pay. And there is somebody else I need to take care of.

- Who?

- A coward who ran away. He's dangerous. I need to find him.

- All right then. I just don't want you to draw trouble to our organization.

- I don't want to either. But would you rather pick up the pieces of this world once they run it over or prevent it all from falling?

- That is not for me to decide. International Rescue is made to save lives, not wage war.

- If you need to kill one to save many, that's a decision you cannot hesitate to take.

- We are in no position to make that decision!

She put on her backpack and strapped it on, clipping her boots back in the skies and changed the subject.

- Did you manage to find anything with that probe?

- You were right, there is metallic alloy under that outcropping. Looks like a service hatch. The scanning showed what must have been a horizontal hangar door but the signal is too faint to be sure. This really is a yellow zone. And I don't see any living being around other than animal life signs. Those tracks must date back a few days.

- Okay, put all this info in the file. I'll work on my trajectory for tomorrow at the chalet. I need to go back before nightfall.

FAB. Be careful out there.
He disconnected. A hundred more questions plagued his thoughts. Who was that person she referred to as a coward? What was Holling going to do exactly if he had her back? He kept on working, trying to figure out more through logical reasoning even if everything did not seem to make any sense to him.

It was passed noon when Virgil woke up. Never in so long had he slept that late: he felt bad about it. He did not even notice when Abigail left. It must have been quite early. He got up and showered, putting on a pair of black washed jeans and a charcoal colored shirt. He was going to visit the Residence and ask questions about Lady Dasha. There was nothing more he could do right now than concentrate on the investigation. Penelope had also provided him with some clothing; he took out a dark grey newsboy cap from one of the suitcases. This made him look like a hooligan. He smiled as he put it on, matching it with a leather jacket and a grey scarf. That reminded him of a character from an old musical performance named "West Side Story". He had come across it when he was young and watched it with his mother. He had come a long way since then.

He made his way to the car and drove to the Residence. Parker was already there; Lady Penelope had given him his day off when she had returned to her chalet. He had a liking for old Bajah's cooking and, mostly, her collection of exotic liquors. When the young man came in, he saw the butler already engaged in a poker game with other acquaintances. Virgil sat down in the living room with Dagan who was watching everyone from his rocking chair. The old Russian woman brought him a hot coffee and said something before leaving. Her husband seemed to smile under his wise man moustache.

- She said drink slow. Russian coffee. Strong.

It was very hot, he laid it to rest on the side table and began to discuss with Dagan.

- Tell me, what is Lady Dasha like?

- Lady Dasha is good woman. Took us from Bereznik slum and brought us here to work for her. All people of her from slum with us. She knows we not ask questions. T'is not safe to ask questions in Bereznik.

Bereznik was known to be one of the last remaining dictatorship in the world. Since the fall of North Korea, the World Council was founded and established policies to make sure no other dictator would rise. Unfortunately, due to a very narrow minding from the Russian federation, the northern nation left the Council and decided to act on its own. Poorer countries such as Ukraine, Romania and the surrounding became prey to mercenaries and armies until a man rose to power. General Berenora, a very powerful and charismatic man, decided to unite these countries and established a resistance. The liberator soon turned to tyrant once the land was pacified as his armies continued to swarm the territory and terrorize the people. Economy was reduced to nothing and most of the wealthy fled the territory with their fortune, leaving only the poor and vulnerable behind. Since then, there had been little news from the interior territory and it was considered hostile. The World Council flagged many inhabitants as spies or terrorists; the segregation had begun, welcomed with opened arms by the ruling General.

The red-haired girl was sitting on one of the players' lap, rubbing her bust in his face occasionally. The other men seated seemed not to pay any attention to it. Dagan took a puff on his long pipe: he looked like a magician lacking only the hat.

- Lady Dasha give us house. Bajah and me come to help after her married. She give us beautiful home, we help her.
- What kind of help do you provide for her?

- Oh, not much. T’is sometimes help with errands. Shuttle people around. Make sure packages get to airport. All this.

- Do you know if she ever had visitors from the outside?


- Do you know a man named Marcus Holling?

A man's voice arose from the table. He was looking at his cards while replying.

- Boy, it's bad luck to bring up that name here. That fucking bastard deserved what came his way.

Virgil was all ears. The man looked a little drunk from his posture but still had a lot of spirit in him. The other players were addressing him as Davis: bald with a very classy black goatee. His eyes were narrowed by intoxication. The musician asked:

- What can you tell me about him?

- He's bad luck. Everyone hates him.

- What do you mean?

- I mean just that! Pair of queens!

He remained vague on the subject, dropping his cards on the table. Parker called a pair of Aces. Davis cursed and slapped the wooden surface.

- FUCK YOU, NOSEY! Told you this was bad luck!

He eyed Virgil as he drank, motioning for the dealer to give him another hand. The young man dared not ask anything else. Dagan pointed him with his pipe.

- You tried coffee yet? Make Bajah happy, drink!

He took a sip of his coffee not to insult the lady of the house; the taste of vodka inside was strong but balanced by the sweetness of sugar. The drink was so thick and creamy, he could barely taste the coffee. He turned back to the old man.

- Could there be a connection between Holling and Lady Dasha?

- No, no! Not much liked, that man. Never near the Lady Dasha. She could strangle him.

He mimicked the gesture as he was talking to make himself more convincing. Virgil inquired further.

- How come?

- When Holling arrested… splashed bad reputation on Lady and her husband. Tried very hard to be clean. Took long while because of Lady's trade. Very very hard to make people understand.

- Her trade?
Davis dropped his hand cursing and went to sit in the living room with them. He lit himself a smoke.

- You're quite the curious one, boy. The Kaczynska clan has been dealing in prostitution since decades in the old lands. They had close ties to organized crime and a lot of contacts in Slavonic states. When Holling was accused, he thought he could benefit from the clan's protection but was cast out. He's not welcomed here and anywhere near the east. He made a lot of enemies too but I heard a lot of these people disappeared. Just bringing his name up is very bad luck.

- Did you know him?

- Had a friend working in one of his facilities. He told us the boss was good, giving away a free healthcare and tuitions to the workers' kids so they don't go around asking themselves how big an asshole he is. He buys peace through comfort. That's disgusting.

- I see. That explains a lot.

The man breathed in and let out a large cloud of smoke in the air. He put his cigarette back on the tip of his lip.

- That's enough rambling about that jackass for tonight. Go try your luck at the table, they're missing a player.

Virgil thought for a moment, gazing at the flames crackling in the fireplace. If there were no connection between Holling and neither Dasha or Beaujolais, then they might have stumbled on something else. He sent a message to Lady Penelope and Abigail summarizing the entire discussion he had with Davis. He waited for an answer, finishing his drink. Bajah came in for a refill. He politely declined and left towards the door. Parker grabbed him before he got out of the living room.

- Where are you going, lad?

- Back to the chalet. Why?

- Well, since I'm off, I thought you were off too. Why don't you take a seat?

- I don't think this is a very good idea…

The other men smiled as they looked at him. They fancied having a fresh young man at the table to share a slice of life with; an occasion to repeat anecdotes and stories everyone around the table already had heard over three times. He sat down, telling himself it could not hurt to inquire a little longer. Bajah served cherry liquor and more coffee at the table. After fifteen minutes, there was still no news from Lady Penelope. He joined in, waiting to get an answer. The men drank heartily and played cards for the entire afternoon. Times flew by quickly as he was enjoying himself.

The ride back from the mountain took her three whole hours. Abigail entered her chalet, completely exhausted, ditching her snowsuit, her brow sweaty from the stacked layers of clothing. She noticed a message coming from Penelope on her communicator telling her not to meet with Beaujolais. She sighed in relief; she did not want to have to play her role fatigued as she was. The only thing she wanted now was to wash, eat and spend the evening with Virgil. Having some tranquil time together would surely make him disclose his feelings.

Upon exiting the shower, her communicator rang. She hurried to dress up, taking a pair of tight fitting pants and a light gray form fitting shirt, unbuttoned down to her breast. It was Lady
Penelope calling.

- Good evening, Abigail! That was some ride you went on this morning.

- Yes, quite. I'm really tired now. Do you know where Virgil might be by any chance? I've tried contacting him for a while and he does not pick up. He left with the car.

- I have not heard of him in a good while. I'll try asking Parker.

The Lady put the communication on hold and tried hailing her butler. There was no answer. She came back to Abigail who was looking at her message history.

- This is rather odd. It is like if there is no signal at all.

- Something is wrong. When was last time you spoke to John?

- Late afternoon I believe. Right after he had hung up with you in the wilderness.

- Have you tried contacting me since?

- Yes, a few times. What do you mean?

- Be very careful with what you send. I think our frequencies are being manipulated. Don't call John, I don't want the GDF to interfere if it is them who are doing this. Short waves seem to be working since I received your message when I came home.

- I see. I will be waiting then.

Grabbing a snack from her backpack before leaving, she put on the most comfortable pair of heels she could find in order to go out and start searching. She wanted to go up to the main complex, a twenty-minute walk from her chalet. Under normal circumstances, it would not have bothered her, but she was rather tired from her run. She was going to go slowly.

On her way, she tried to call Virgil again. There was no answer. She also tried to get through to Thunderbird Five: there was a faint signal, then nothing. Something was definitely up; there was no interference whatsoever a few hours prior and now, nothing. It was mostly unlikely that John had moved the station away since he was authorized to be anywhere but that did not explain why they could not broadcast between each other.

During her walk, she had the feeling of being watched. She turned around at several occasions to make sure nobody was following. She noticed a silhouette in the distance that seemed to be running. It disappeared behind a snowy hill. She was not dressed to pursue and her thighs were stiffening from her hard workout. She had to let it go and resumed her walk towards the main complex.

As she was gazing around her, she saw several cars parked behind a residence. The Blackbolt sedan was there along with FAB1. The architecture of the small manor predated all the surrounding buildings. It was clearly a construction of some historical value that had been kept there. The door seemed massive, depicting a coat of arms in the center surrounded by stags, their antlers clashing. A few more sculptures of stags decorated the ledges around, covered in light snow.

She went up the front porch and knocked on the door. Bajah came to answer, laughing, addressing her in Russian. There seemed to be some kind of event going on inside the house, as loud noises came from an adjacent room. Abigail looked at the woman.
Abigail gestured to make her understand what she wanted. The woman answered something and let her pass.

When she was inside, her communicator rang. It was rather odd as she had not been able to come through to anyone in a while. It was Virgil, explaining her his discussion about Holling’s ties with Beaujolais and Lady Dasha's trade. He wrote to her and to Penelope. The message was sent about four hours ago. It confirmed her doubts about the frequencies being monitored: Virgil was around here somewhere and the message came through short wave communication.

The bioengineer made her way towards the living room. There were men playing poker, arguing about various subjects very loudly. Parker was right in front of her and noticed her arrival. He stood, his face completely flushed red.

- Oh... m'Lady! Why did you come here?

All the men turned towards her. Virgil did too: he had taken a drink too many and was rather joyful. He felt ashamed to have let himself go like this. He thought she would be mad. Instead, she sat near him. Everybody watched her; her looks did catch everyone's eye. She spoke, smiling.

- Sit down, Parker. I'm not here to chaperone you. You can resume, gentlemen. I will not interrupt for very long.

Bajah offered her a drink: some apple and honey mead from her motherland. The young lady thanked her; it was exquisite. The men's shouts and arguments continued as if she was not there. She began whispering to Virgil.

- How long have you been here?

- Since... noon.

- Did you contact anybody else than me and Penelope?

- Not since then, why?

- Something is wrong with broadcast communications. I sent you a message when I took a break around the mountain. Did you get it?

He quickly checked his communicator. The message had gotten in when she entered the residence.

- I see what you mean. Only short waves work...

- We should get over to Lady Penelope's place at once. Let's work something out.

- Did you find anything?

- Yes. I know where one of the access shafts is. I'm going there tomorrow morning.

His hand was not good, he dropped. He took another hand of cards and continued.

- I'll go with you.

- No. I need you to take the vehicle away from this place and wait for me.

- How would you be able to contact me if the broadcast is controlled?
I'll figure that one out later but we might be able to contact each other with John's help. I am beginning to think someone is deliberately cutting us off.

You read my message? Dasha and Beaujolais have no ties with Holling.

Yeah, I saw that. But with what happened last night, I just hope nobody thinks we are agents of the World Council.

I should have come along with you. I'm sorry I've spent so much time here…

She drank her mead while watching the game unfold. After a while, she felt a little light-headed: fatigue had kicked in as well as the alcohol. It would all be over in a very short while, but she enjoyed the moment while it lasted. Virgil looked at her and smiled. He realized she had been brushing her leg lightly on his. Once that game was done, she got up.

I will take my leave now, gentlemen.

Virgil saluted the table, leaving as well. The men bid him farewell as they got out of the residence. He got up to her as she was watching the road around.

Is there something wrong?

This uneasy feeling I've got. It's like if we are being watched…

Let's go back to Lady Penelope.

Good. Since you drank a bit too much, I'll drive you there.

She gave him a roguish smile. He laughed, giving her the access cards. He knew she could maneuver a land vehicle pretty well when she lent a hand during a rescue mission. He found that both impressive and weirdly attractive in some way.

Upon arrival, the Lady welcomed them.

Welcome back. Did you see if Parker was there?

Virgil sat down, trying not to show he had drunk. He responded.

Yeah, he was with me at the Residence with Dasha's people. He seemed to profit of his leave a lot.

I will let him go for now. I believe he might be up to something. Even during his leave, he rarely remains away that much.

She looked at Abigail.

You look worried, dear. Is there something wrong?

On my way to the residence, I felt like I was being followed. I saw a silhouette in the distance but it disappeared. I hope it's only my imagination. I'm exhausted, maybe I am just overreacting.

Good, get some rest then.

Lady Penelope continued on her work while her guests were leaving. A weird brushing sound, like snow falling from the roof, was heard. Everyone looked at each other, all aware of the sound.
Virgil got outside as quickly as he could to check. There were footsteps in the snow coming from the chalet towards the road but nobody in sight. He was about to turn around when he was attacked from behind. He tried to wrestle his assailant, only to succeed in bringing him in front of him. That is when he noticed the man was armed with a knife and seemed pretty good at using it. He reared as his opponent was slicing in his direction, trying to corner him. His reflexes were not at their best, he tripped and fell down on his back. The man saw an opportunity to strike and thrust the blade towards his chest. Virgil quickly turned to his side but was struck. He took a quick look at his arm: the knife had cut through his clothing but fortunately missed his skin. The man tried to go for it again; this time he met with Abigail, jumping in front of her companion and catching the knife's blade with her left hand. He tried to push the blade further in her hand; he noticed a bit too late that he was cutting through the latex sleeve, revealing her carbon polymer prosthetic. She delivered a powerful blow in the assailant's private parts with her knee. He fell down, shaking in pain. She stood on top of him, kicking the knife away and kneeling on his plexus.

- Who sent you?

The man was still recovering from his nut shot. She pulled his neoprene mask from his face: he was a blond man with a square jaw. His few words seemed to be curses pronounced in German. She put more weight on her knee and urged him to talk. He kept speaking in a foreign language.

Lady Penelope came outside that instant. She approached the man and began speaking to him in German. He seemed rather surprised but spat in her direction. Abigail pressed a little more. She heard his bones beginning to crack. He had heard it too; his face changed and he begged her to stop in English. Penelope took over the investigation.

- Who sent you?

- L… Lady D…Dasha.

- Why?

- She wants to get rid of the agents…

- Well, I have a message for Dasha. Tell her we are not with those agents. We are acting freely and on our own volition. Do tell her to stop pursuing us for we do not care if Beaujolais either lives or dies. She can do whatever she pleases.

She nodded to Abigail. The bioengineer released the man. He got up quickly, trying to catch his breath and left along the road, running sideways. He eventually disappeared from sight behind a hill. The aristocrat sighed.

- As I thought. I will need to remain here tomorrow and clear out this mess. We will have to act quickly.

She went back inside. Abigail looked at Virgil. He was leaning against the façade, trying to collect himself from all the action. His head was spinning. She got up and went to help him. He felt pathetic, swearing not to abuse alcohol that much again.

She helped him walk all the way to their chalet, a few meters away. He sat on the sofa, his head still spinning. She sat facing him, smiling.

- Did you get your lesson about vodka?

- Yeah. I haven't drunk like this since… university.
- That was an awfully long time. You should get out more.

- I'll pass. I can't.

- Always on duty, huh?

He smiled, turning his head towards her.

- You saved my life, you know.

- Isn't it just an everyday thing like you guys say? Saving lives, sacrificing your own...

- We live for that. Saving the world and its people.

- It is quite heroic. But is the world grateful for your aid that much? I always wondered what it really felt to be selfless and give my own to save others. I haven't done anything like you guys did but, I think sometimes, it's good to have a bit of recognition.

- Yeah, I understand what you mean. But seeing that the people we save are going to go back to their everyday lives changed from their experience and share awareness about how much life is important, how it is precious and how much it counts, this is the satisfaction we get from our job. This is the driving force of International Rescue.

She began thinking about his reply. "A second chance, don't screw it", she thought. He noticed her face changing.

- What's wrong?

She woke from her thought.


He turned towards her, putting his arms around her waist and bringing her over to him. He would not have normally done such a thing, alcohol had something to do with it. She was kneeling over him on the sofa, her face inches from his. He kissed her. She held him tightly, not wanting it to stop. He did the same. He slowly went down towards her neck; she stretched it out to him, sliding her fingers in his hair. His hands began coursing her body amorously. It was going a lot further than expected, but neither of them backed out, abandoning each other to their instincts. The night was going to be a short one…
He sat at the table, his back towards a wall and a plain view of the kitchen and entrance. He knew that Bajah and Dagan were not all that they seemed: housing fugitives was their thing. Even if they mentioned their mistress had no ties with Bereznik, they lied. He knew it the moment he set foot inside the house: the atmosphere was tense and all guests were not welcomed as usual.

As Virgil left the residence, Parker kept on playing poker with all the other intoxicated aides and drivers remaining. He himself drank very little but was a master con artist. He enjoyed tricking others into believing he had one drink too many. He knew exactly when the communications came down but did not want to tell Lady Penelope not to blow his cover. He had noticed Bajah welcoming a young blond man in the house and indicating him towards a stairway in the back. A few others had come in; Davis had sparked an argument about politics at the table and began debating loudly so nobody actually saw the late guests.

The game went on. His hand was bad, so he dropped and got up, feigning having to go to the bathroom. He crossed the kitchen, escaping Bajah's awareness for a moment. He got upstairs and locked the bathroom door, closing it as he remained outside. He went back downstairs quickly, making sure he would not be seen. There was so much noise in the living room he could relax his steps a bit, even with the massive wooden staircase resonating under his feet. A huge door stood in front of him; he opened it slowly, looking to see if anyone stood on the other side. There was not a soul in sight. He slipped in a corridor with two other doors on each side. One of them was barred with three locks. He was tempted to see what was behind but turned his attention to the other one.

He crouched and put his ear on the door to listen. There were voices on the other side, speaking in German. It was probably not a good idea to take the men head on as they were at least two.

He proceeded to the locked door. "No lock can ever resist old Nosey Parker" he told himself, unfolding a small set of tools from his pocket. The locks were mainly mechanical, homemade from scavenged parts. That was bad news: although unconventional locks were easier to open, having them made from old or recycled part would mean relying on a very flimsy installation. He had to be careful not to damage anything if he wanted the lock to work properly.

After a few minutes, he managed to open all three. He entered what looked like a storage depot containing wooden crates. He turned on his flashlight, revealing the logos on the boxes: they were of Slavonic provenance. Getting closer, he noticed one of them was open; there were explosives. He took a few steps back, making sure he would not disturb anything, resuming his search. There were some supplies lying around on shelves: ammo, wiring, some old communicators and electronic junk which could be used to build makeshift detonators.

The butler looked around a little more. Plastic boxes containing some household objects were piled up in a corner. He found a rusty metal box on top, containing letters written on paper. They were all addressed to Bajah, from Dagan. He took a quick look at some of them: love letters with a set of numbers at the bottom… His doubts were beginning to be found. He did suspect Bajah and Dagan of being Bereznik spies: he had met the old man during the war but only briefly. He worked as a communications officer for the eastern front back then. It was a fortuitous reunion when they both met at the resort a decade later when the Lady came for her first visit to the place. He had doubted his honesty ever since.

There were footsteps coming down the corridor. Parker replaced the letters in the box back where he found it. He heard the loud noise of feet on the stairs fading slowly. In the same stealthy fashion, he exited the room, remaining in the shadows. He went back towards the other door. There
did not seem to be any more noise from inside. He opened it very carefully.

The room was well lighted, the clay walls fashioned in a round shape. Around him stood some communication equipment: airwaves disruptors, communicators, antennas, frequency jammers. A computer was on standby on an old table. He touched the holo-screen, checking the files quickly. There were numerous recordings on the solid-state drive; he began browsing through all of them. A pair of headphones lay on the side. He picked them up and began listening to some recordings.

Many were from the main complex, the vast majority of Beaujolais' private apartments. Others were from the different chalets. By selecting a random entry, he caught the discussion from right after the shooting. The recordings were as clear as if taken from very close. That gave him the hint that somebody was listening to their comm lines. The other pieces of equipment would be acting as signal jammers to make sure all foreign communicators would be affected. He took out a portable key drive and plugged it in, transferring all the data. He slipped it back inside the seam of his coat to hide it. He did not sabotage any of the material but knew he had to do something about it. He searched through the configuration and added a few addresses as exceptions. He was done and heading for the exit when he heard footsteps coming closer. There were not many places to hide inside this room: he stood in wait behind the door. The steps stopped. He opened the door slightly to get a glimpse; it was pushed rather fiercely and banged on the wall. Parker backed a few steps and was ready to brawl. A blond man entered, followed by Dagan. The old sage looked at Parker.

- Ah! There you are! You are sneaking around, me not like spies. Take him to Lady Dasha.

Two other blond men came down the stairs. They restrained Parker's hands, tying them behind his back with plastic ties and passed a bag over his head. The Butler was led through the door as the old man watched them smiling, fiddling with his long mustache.

It was the middle of the night. The anxious aristocrat came looking at the window a thousand times, expecting her servant to be back incessantly. He did not come. She was still dressed and had hesitated to go to the residence herself to fetch him. She deemed it too dangerous; with all that was happening on the resort right now, the safest place she could be is at her cabin. She could rely solely on a few gadgets, but it proved ineffective when outnumbered.

Her communicator beeped. She rushed to see who was calling. It was John.

- Finally! What is happening? I lost all contact with you.

- John! I am so happy to see you! How are you able to contact me?

- I don't know. I have been cut off for some time. There is something going on in there. Where are the others? I can't get through to them.

- Abigail suggested that there was something jamming our communications. I do not know why you are able to get through to me now… Oh! Parker! That must be his doing!

- You mean he's out there by himself?

- That could only be that he succeeded at some point. Let me brief you about the recent details.

She gave him a breakdown of the whole evening. He was particularly concerned.

- Is my brother okay?

- Yes, he is fine. He is with Abigail now. They are resting for their journey tomorrow. The
investigation of Cloud Alpha will begin at dawn.

He sighed.

- I would have liked to speak to him but... well, doesn't matter now. I'll inform the island about what is happening. Scott is not really going to be happy about this. He will want to get you out of there.

- Do not tell him everything. I have to get to the bottom of this whole story with Dasha. We seem to have landed in the middle of something.

- I'll monitor your moves from now, Lady Penelope. Don't put yourself in unnecessary danger even if it is for the Council. If the lines are all tapped, that means they are listening to everything.

- Thank you, John.

He disconnected. She was beginning to tire; it would not be wise to remain up late like this with everything going on. She lied on her sofa, her handgun under a cushion and dozed off.

The next morning, she was awakened by a loud noise. Quickly getting on her feet, she began touring the chalet to find where it came from. No sight of Parker still and nobody was around. She sighed in relief a few seconds too early: she got caught from behind and dragged towards the door. She tried to fight off her attacker, hitting his shins with her heels and clawing at his face from behind. He applied a drugged handkerchief on her face. The Lady slowly fell into unconsciousness.

She was awakened brutally by a splash of cold water. Her hair stuck to her face, she could barely make out her surroundings. The air around was very cold, even more now with the water dripping on her clothes. Her hands were tied behind her back tightly; even shaking her hands did not loosen the bonds. Somebody got closer to her and dragged her hair back: it was Lady Dasha. The old woman looked at her face and smiled.

- Dear Penelope, see how miserable you are right now.

The young woman witnessed her surroundings: there were two people lying down a few feet away, lifeless. She recognized the London agents who came to her aid during the shooting. Parker was kneeling down at her right. He was looking straight in the eye of the man who stood in front of him, a gun pointed at his head. Dasha began walking around, waving a gun towards the Lady.

- Now dearest, you will tell me what you know. Unless you want to end like these poor souls, I suggest you talk.

Penelope looked at Parker then back at Dasha.

- What exactly do you want to know?

The old Russian woman began.

- Why are you here?

- I have already told your underling I was not part of whatever these people came to do here.

She motioned with her head, looking in the direction of the agents. Dasha seemed unsatisfied.

- They helped you still when the shooting took place. And I learned that young woman who accompanied you was not what she seemed either. You both are agents, are you not?
There would be no end to it unless Penelope told her what she wanted to hear. She began.

- Yes. We are agents, but neither working for the Council or London. We are freelancers and were hired by our client. I cannot disclose his identity.

Penelope waited to see if Dasha would buy that. She seemed to wait for more. The aristocrat continued.

- We were supposed to investigate the area…

Dasha cut her short.

- .. did Marcus Holling send you?

- No. He is not the one who hired us.

- Pity, that would have given me a good reason to shoot you. No matter. Fate will decide if you live.

She ended her sentence there. Penelope looked around as the men began exiting the room. They seemed to be in an exterior shed of some sort. She began shivering, her clothes were beginning to freeze. Dasha searched through her pocket and produced a small velvet box. She opened it to reveal a detonator. Smiling, the Russian woman said:

- Let us hope we never meet again.

She exited the room, closing the door behind her. Parker got up and got closer. Penelope noticed his jaw was a bit swollen and he was dragging his leg around.

- My poor Parker! What happened to you?

- Nothing much, m'lady. They thought they could squeeze information from me. Didn't know I could take so much hurt and keep my tongue.

- Oh, dear me. In what mess have I put us through?

- It's not your fault, m'lady.

He had already begun to break his bonds, the plastic ties keeping his hands in place were almost broken. Now that they were alone, he could concentrate on finishing the job. It only took him a few seconds and he was out. He took his vest off and put it on the Lady's shoulders before freeing her as well.

A loud explosion echoed in the distance; the ground began rumbling below them. The door was locked from the outside. They could catch a glimpse of the outside through a small round window, too small to squeeze through. Penelope watched as an enormous cloud of snow was building up in the distance, surging towards the resort. The shed they were in was further away but was in the way of the avalanche. She rummaged through her pockets, trying to find a gadget that would help her, to no avail. All her gear was still at the chalet. The only thing she had was a beacon hidden in one of her chemise's buttons. She activated it immediately, that would at least give John a hint about her whereabouts.

Parker was trying to kick the door open. He managed to damage it sufficiently to access the closure on the other side but to no avail. Instead, he fiddled with one of his gloves; hidden inside was a small flexible membrane he could use to control some functions on FAB1. This would put the
vehicle out of the danger zone and permit them to escape safely.

The avalanche had engulfed the main complex. It raged in the vicinity, taking everything in its path. The shed cracked and the door was blown by the force of the impact. Parker covered the Lady as the snow poured inside the small building.

The first light of day shone through the windows. Waking up was hard. Holding on each other, neither of them wanted to move. They could spend the day like this, remaining in bed and fooling around. They would have been happy to remain just like that.

But duty comes first.

They kissed and embraced for a long time before getting up, their bodies still willing to cling onto each other. It was going to be a rough day. As they were getting ready to leave, they held on again, hoping they could share such moments once they came back home.

Virgil was fully dressed in his blue suit, sash and all. He got out of the chalet and donned his helmet. Abigail followed him close behind, doing the same and activating her map addon. Since they were at close range, they could communicate without interference. The sun was not very high still; it gave them the advantage of not being noticeable but they needed to be quickly on their way not to be spotted.

During the trip, they kept looking right and left, hoping there would not be any lookouts around. They changed course a couple of times, preferring a densely-wooded area to plain sight. This would make the trip a little longer but much safer. As they neared the area, they had to shed their cover and start climbing. Without the help of Thunderbird five's scanners, things were getting a little harder. Fresh snow fallen from the night was giving them a hard time. Abigail insisted in giving a try but was exhausted halfway through. She was disappointed.

- I wasn't planning that…

- It's not the best idea. Have you checked around if there is some other way?

- John said he saw some kind of helipad or hangar door. We could check that out instead.

- How far is it from here?

She seemed to be interfacing with augmented reality, gesturing with her left hand in the air. Before answering:

- Twenty minutes…

The young woman did not even end her sentence that the roaring of an engine was heard. Virgil zoomed in on the white steppes through the branches and noticed a snowmobile on its way towards them. He turned back to her quickly.

- We need to leave, now. Find a way to cut them off.

They began advancing faster. The sound of the engine was approaching, a gunshot was fired. Both of them ducked as they were sliding away. Abigail looked at the map periodically, trying to find an escape route where they could go downhill. The only place she found seemed to be leading down a steep descent. It was very dangerous. She kept on looking as Virgil pressed her to go faster. She turned around, favoring another route a lot less hazardous. The branches of the fir trees were too dense for the vehicle to come closer and provided decent cover. It went away for a minute, circling
the grove and shooting in random directions.

The safe route lead them down a slope circling the mountain. They began descending, gaining as much speed as they could, the snowmobile slowed by the powdered snow, the combined weight of the passengers plus the engine was giving them a hard time. Right down the path, another weirdly shaped outcropping could be seen. Abigail gestured to Virgil and began making her way towards it. Their pursuers were relentless: nothing was going to stop them. Virgil opened a comm.

- We can't shake them off.
- How good are you at brawling?
- You're not serious about taking them on, are you?
- That seems to be the only solution.

There was a gigantic explosion originating from the mountain peak. On every side, snow came rumbling down as an avalanche was triggered. The people of the snowmobile made a sharp U-turn while the skiers were trying to reach the outcropping. They were less than a meter away when snow engulfed them, carrying them towards a chasm. It was but too late that they realized their fate.

Up until now, Scott had been asking for some updates on the investigation. John had given him a good breakdown of the situation, which did no good in helping the elder ease his anxiety. As he heard about the attempted murder, he was a lot less incline to keep the mission going. John reasoned with him and succeeded in making him understand it was not as bad as it seemed. It was left to that.

John kept silent about the communication jamming and Lady Dasha. He had been aware that something was happening for a little while: vehicle traffic entering and exiting the resort had increased that night. He found very weird most of the cars converged to the same location whereas, the Residence.

The avalanche was sudden. The space monitor could not have seen it coming: the explosion triggered the violent snowfall from the mountainside that engulfed the entire complex. He called his brothers in the living room.

- Guys, this is bad. The "Eaux Claires" resort has been hit by a strong avalanche. It was triggered by well placed explosives. The whole place has been buried in snow.

Avalanche. That word made everyone nervous. The same disaster that took the life of their mother. It was no easy thing rescuing people caught under several meters of packed snow. Even with all the specialized machinery in the world, they could never rush such a rescue. That meant some of the victims would die waiting, gasping for air.

The beacon popped on the main computer. It was supposed to be used when Lady Penelope required immediate aid. John checked on the location. He resumed.

- I can confirm Lady Penelope is in trouble. She used her distress beacon. She got caught by the avalanche.

Gordon stepped up quickly, worried and angry.

- Let's go help her now!
Scott held out his hand and turned to John.

- Where are Virgil and Abigail? Can you confirm they are around her?

- No. I don't have access to their signal. Penelope told me they were supposed to investigate Cloud Alpha early in the morning.

- Let's hope these two are safe. Gordon, launch Thunderbird 2. Alan, you will help John and try to free the communication network from whatever is keeping it from broadcasting.

Alan sighed. He was still not ready to go on a mission. He was disappointed.

- Right... FAB...

Scott resumed.

- Kayo, you will come with us. We need all the help we can get. Launch Thunderbird Shadow. I'll get there first and assess the situation. Keep a cool head until I get there.

They launched.

Silence. Abigail's ears were buzzing from the shock. She shook herself back to her senses and tried to break free of her icy prison. Only her lower body was stuck, she could easily dig herself out. She looked around for Virgil: he was trying to break free but was in a worse position. She hurried to help him out. He was grimacing in pain, holding his left shoulder. She examined him; his suit was intact. He took a deep breath, trying to push his dislocated shoulder back into place.

- Wait, I'll help.

Abigail pulled on his arm as he was pushing it back. He tried to hold his scream as his shoulder joint cracked. He breathed deeply, gathering his senses and turned back to her, concerned.

- Are you okay?

- Better than you, I'd say.

Their surroundings were too dark to see. Virgil lighted his LED torch and began to look around. There seemed to be some kind of structure at the far end of the cavern. They dug it out to reveal an access shaft. Abigail made her way towards the control and activated it. The UI reacted.

- Authorization required. Please input voice pattern.

- Abigail Shaw.

- Confirmed.

The door had a hard time moving. With a little help, it opened to reveal a long corridor. At the end was a bigger one protected in the same fashion.

- Authorization required. Please input DNA pattern.

She took off her right glove and put her hand inside an interstice. A few rays began circling it before they heard the confirmation message. She put her glove back on before proceeding. The walls surrounding them made of steel plates, designed to withstand pressure, heat and even flooding. The air was not breathable inside, they had to keep their helmets on at all time. Abigail
- Welcome to Cloud Alpha.

He quickly surveyed the map.

- This place is huge. How are we going to know where to go?

- Trust me, I've been here before.

He remained silent as they resumed marching. At one point, they came to a vast room with computers. Everything was shut down. Abigail went towards the center of the room to restore the power while Virgil was looking around. He stumbled upon a wall where blueprints and posters were pinned. There were a lot of drawings and images of Thunderbird one. He asked, intrigued:

- What's this all about?

Abigail was rigging the console to the main power unit through a grating in the ground. She plunged halfway inside the trap; Virgil quickly looked at her backside but was awakened from his reverie by her voice.

- Charles Ericsson was the engineer in charge of this lab. He was a very big fan of Brain's work… probably his biggest fan in all. He marveled at Thunderbird One. He was an aeronautics engineer, he had previously designed special aircraft and worked on the Fireflash project. His greatest achievement was also his worst nightmare: The Falcon.

- That aircraft crashed with civilians on board. It was a disaster.

- Yep. Everyone blamed him saying there was a flaw in the design. He claimed it was sabotage.

- Do you believe him?

- Yes. The man had put his wife and daughter on that flight. They were excited to go, probably more than he was… And they died horribly. I don't think he would have let them fly it if he was not confident about what he built.

She pulled herself back up and went towards the console. It started on the first try. She began browsing the records. Virgil went up near her, massaging his wounded shoulder.

- Why did Holling ask him to join the project?

He needed a guy with a lot of talents in building aircraft. I said before flight modules were tested during the Olympus project start-up, remember? Well, he designed them. And they were pretty powerful.

- That's what you came to find here?

- Yes. And information for Lady Penelope, of course.

There was a folder labeled "Abigail". She opened it; there were various files inside and a video. She put it up on the main holo-screen. A tall man, with short, curly hair was sitting down on a stool. His right forearm and hand were prosthetics like hers. He had round glasses and a nervous smile as he began talking to the camera in a friendly tone.

- Abigail! I'm so happy you came here. How do I know it's you? Well, nobody else could ever open the door to this facility. After we declared our war against Holling, Dennis and I knew we would
not live for very long… so we made sure the place would be waiting for you. I'm glad to know you're alive.

He paused, emotions seemed to get to him as his voice was trembling.

- Listen, I do not have much time. The black boxes are hidden in the hangar with your flight module. It's only a matter of time before Holling comes for me. When he does, I'll seal this place… air tight. No one will ever be able to access it, not even him. That is my wish. He has played us one time too many. Please now, Abigail, take the content of the boxes to the Council and expose Holling. They deserve to know what he did. We are counting on you, sweetie.

The video stopped. She took a deep breath, looking at the empty screen. Virgil went closer.

- Are you ok?

- Yeah. He used to call me sweetie all the time. I am the exact same age his daughter would have been if she hadn't died… He looked out for me a lot during the project. I called him "Dad" a few times, just for fun. That made him proud.

She selected all the files and transferred them to a portable drive. She then selected the video and hesitated before adding:

- Goodbye, Ericsson. I'll make him pay, I promise.

She pressed the delete button before ejecting the drive and holding onto it. She turned around and pressed on deeper inside the complex. Virgil remained silent; he began to understand a lot more her feeling of loneliness.

The aftershock was not as bad as they thought. Penelope opened her eyes: Parker had shielded her from debris that came inside through the broken door and window. There were about a few feet of snow inside but the general structure seemed to have stood. The Butler moved as soon as the rumbling sound was over, investigating his surroundings immediately to find a way out.

The snow rose high over the window: it was very dark inside. How deep they had been entombed was impossible to know. They would have to find a way out. Parker began digging with his hands to clear the door frame; the Lady joined to give him a hand, hoping the beacon's signal had been caught by Thunderbird Five.

It took them a while but they managed to dig to the light. Penelope felt cold and dizzy, her thoughts confused. She had stopped digging halfway through as she could not concentrate on her task. Parker carried on; his soldier training paid off even with his wounds. He helped the lady towards the dug hole for her to breathe some fresh air. At that moment, she heard a familiar noise: Thunderbird one had arrived on the scene and was circling the area above them. The Butler began ascending the tunnel he had dug, followed by the Lady. She had a hard time climbing but managed to get up. She had to get somewhere hot and change her clothes or she would suffer from hypothermia.

As they arrived at the surface, they witnessed the damage done to the area. The main complex had disappeared under the snow along with most of the buildings near it. She could not see if the residence had been engulfed but judging the extent of the damage, it had been buried also. The Lady was shivering even more as the cold wind blew down the mountain. Parker raised his hands in the air and tried to signal his presence to the aircraft. Scott opened the lower hatch: the ladder came down near the Butler. He helped the lady up on the ramp inside the Thunderbird.
Penelope dropped on her knees inside the craft. The elder Tracy went towards her, handing her an emergency blanket.

- Are you okay?

She took a deep breath.

- Barely. Thanks to Parker, we managed to escape this dreaded prison.

- Do you know how much people were staying here?

- Not a single idea. The registry was surely inside the main complex. I have seen roughly forty people in all. That did include Dasha's men.

- John told me a lot of people were leaving right before the avalanche was triggered. Do you have an idea about who they were?

Parker took over.

- Mister Tracy, Lady Dasha mobilized her people very early this morning in order to free the complex. They had been about fifteen or twenty, all from Bereznik.

Scott was displeased by that bit of information.

- It's not very wise to dip in these affairs. Let's rescue the remaining people and get the hell out of here. Where is my brother?

Penelope sighed.

- He was supposed to leave early along with Abigail to investigate Cloud Alpha.

- I really hope he is okay.

Scott opened a communication link towards Kayo.

- Thunderbird Shadow, circle the west side of the mountain. See if you cannot find Virgil and Abigail. Check with John if Thunderbird Five's probe he sent had caught anything interesting.

- FAB.

He looked back at Penelope.

- Thunderbird Two shall be here soon. Where is FAB1?

The aristocrat looked at her driver. He fiddled on his glove before answering.

- Safe, mister Tracy. I programmed a course to get it to further away. It will be coming back in auto-pilot.

- How come were you able to use that if our comms were dead?

- I stumbled on the jammer in the basement of the Residence and was able to input a few exemption codes for broadcasting. It was unfortunate that I got caught by Dagan's men, Sir.

- I see. It was meant to block regular communicators. Good job, Parker. Thunderbird two is going to arrive soon; I will begin scanning the area. You'd better sit down and strap in.
Penelope declined.

- I'm sorry but we will have to go. Drop us further down where the road is accessible. I need to find Dasha and know what she is up to.

- Okay, but be careful. We can't back you up until we're done here.

- Do not worry about it. I will not be caught off guard twice.

Scott turned his craft around and dropped the Lady and her driver further down the road. FAB1 was waiting down the road. They hurried towards the car. Penelope commanded:

- Let's go, Parker.

Parker turned on FAB1's digital computer screen: a detailed map appeared on which a dot was flashing. He smiled, satisfied. Penelope smiled too.

- Did you by any chance put a bug on her car?

- Yes, m'lady.

- Good then. Let us get ready to leave.

The long and unending succession of corridors was starting to get old. Virgil was following Abigail, believing that she knew her way around. He began doubting after he put up his compass: they were always headed in the same direction. He stopped.

- Do you know where you are going?

She turned around and looked at him.

- Yes, we're going towards the hangar.

- Why are we going around in circles?

- We are not. These are the service ramps… wait a second…

The young woman interacted with her augmented reality. She looked up.

- Chronos…

- What?

- This place is protected by the Chronos module. Damn you, Edwards. I don't have time for this.

She connected to the base's node. Virgil witnessed the lights blinking around him. He waited. She spoke aloud.

- Computer, disable Chronos redundant module.

It took some time before a voice was heard.

- Access denied.

- Computer, connect to Chronos redundant module.
She proceeded with the verification through augmented reality, sighing.

- I hate this whole thing. Why did they make it so damn complicated? Couldn't they have asked for the DNA sequence authorisation to be global?

Virgil did not answer. He did not understand what was going on but his compass began shuffling for a moment then settling in a whole other direction. He turned around to see if it was working still, and it was. This time, the directions seemed true. He asked:

- What caused this?

- The Chronos module is a very powerful frequency modulator… Not only does it give control over the air waves, but it has a lot of other functions: it can disrupt electronic traffic and even changes the pattern of electrons. Basically, a hardware hack.

- Let's hope it doesn't give us more trouble. We have to contact John as soon as we can and let him and Lady Penelope know of our whereabouts.

- Yeah, good idea. We're almost down there anyway.

They resumed their march towards the hangar. The size of it was imposing, even more than Thunderbird two's bay. The place could house at least two aircraft the size of the green giant. It was clear in Virgil's mind that the place was made to stash an entire float. There was none in sight, only debris, crates, and empty barrels were lying around.

On the far eastern side was a station. Abigail went towards it. In front of that station stood four smaller platforms, each labeled in the name of their keeper. Hermes and Chronos's stations were empty, while Artemis' was in disrepair. Athena's bay contained the flight module she spoke of earlier. It was a black exoskeleton with an armored shell and reactors in the back. It was made to strap tightly to a human body to prevent injury during flight. Contrarily to a jet pack, this could fly horizontally and vertically to a much greater speed. The young woman went towards the platform and boarded her module. It took her some time to put it on; the automated outfitting machine was not working. She clipped the armored gauntlets over hers, strapping and adjusting all the necessary flexible joints to be comfortable. The suit made her a little taller as the impact-proof soles about two inches thick. The armored neck protection made it difficult for her to turn her head around, she had to turn her shoulders to look at what her companion was doing. He was in front of Artemis' platform and was looking inside. She approached him. He asked.

- You did say Artemis disappeared, right?

- ...Yes.

Virgil turned towards her. She was clearly hesitating.

- Do you know where he could have gone?

- No, and I don't care. He was dangerous. Once he got his augments, he had fun hurting people. He's a sick bastard.

- He appeared in most of the files, though, as a member of your crew.

She remained silent, accessing the console. He came closer to her.
- I don't want to bring painful memories back, it's just that I wanted to be sure…

She answered while keeping her eyes on the console.

- About what?

He put a hand on her shoulder. She turned to look at him.

- Did you really kill him?

She turned back to the console, remaining silent. A trap opened under the desk. Two black boxes were lying there in wait. She took them out before carrying on her programming.

Virgil crossed his arms and waited, thinking. One of the passages from the files troubled him: he read depositions given by Cradle Alpha's personnel about an incident they had witnessed.

Siegmund aka Artemis had been killed by at least a dozen blows to the head; his skull cracked opened with his brains spilling out. Abigail was seen leaving the scene, her clothing tattered, with bruises on her arms, face and her hands bloody. He wanted to know the truth, the document only stated the facts. From the description of the events, he could only interpret this as self-defense.

Abigail finally succeeded in opening a communication link. She began pinging John.

- Come in, Thunderbird five. Do you read me?

John answered.

- Loud and clear. Where are you guys?

- Inside Cloud Alpha. We are going to be exiting the base soon.

- Good. The others are here. An avalanche swallowed the resort. We are about to pull survivors out from the main complex. We identified at least ten people still inside. Can you come and lend a hand?

- We'll try. It's not exactly easy to leave here without flying.

- FAB. I'll have somebody pick you up from your location. Speaking of which… why is this communication being forwarded like this?

- What do you mean?

- It's like if it came from a nearby node in space.

- That's the Chronos module. It's sending a false signal.

- I see. Send me the encryption algorithm, I'm curious about how they can pull that up.

- I have it on a drive. You'll get it when we're home. I'll contact you when we're at the pickup point.

- FAB.

She cut the communication and turned around, not wanting to catch Virgil's gaze. He held her arm.

- I was serious. Did you kill him?
She looked at his hand and in his eyes.

- He beat me out of my mind before trying to force himself on me. I could not let that happen. Now, NEVER mention that EVER again.

She was dead serious, pressing her words. He let her go. She resumed her march, determined. He sighed; there was a lot more pain hidden inside her than she let show.

Abigail put down the black boxes and began setting something up in augmented reality. She began giving vocal commands to the computer before she started running in the hangar and jumping. The ion reactors of her suit took over and compensated for the fall, sending her flying into the air. With a little difficulty, she began steering and eventually flying. Her control was not perfect but she could at least confirm it was functional. She landed in a drop near the platform. Virgil looked at her, impressed, and smiled. She was still angry, his smile faded.

- There is a high access shaft up there that used to be the control tower. We'll have to exit through there. I don't think I can fly a long while with you and the boxes. We'll need air support from your craft.

- If we can get to high enough ground, I can get Scott to get me quickly.

- Take the boxes with you. I'll go straight for Thunderbird two in digital camouflage.

- Good, let's go.

They were ready to get out. Another few minutes in the winding corridors and they would soon see the light of day.

Kayo had been circling the area between the mountains while the boys worked on rescuing the people inside the Main complex. She had scanned the area and combined her data with Thunderbird five's. The ski trails were identical to those of Abigail a day prior, and another set of tracks were right alongside them. She believed it to be Virgil's.

As she neared the mountain, she witnessed the presence of more footprints than was previously recorded. Fresh holes made with snowshoes were not easy to overlook at low altitude. They led towards the avalanche. She pressed on north, hoping to find someone on the far end of the tracks, at least.

John got in touch with her.

- Kayo, don't wander too far off. Concentrate on the task at hand.

- There are more footprints than previously recorded. I can't just ignore that.

- You should. I received a message from Abigail and Virgil. They are safe inside Cloud Alpha. Just make sure the area is safe: the explosion might have weakened more snow slabs. We don't want to be surprised by another avalanche.

- FAB.

She began looking at the surrounding peaks to ensure there would not be signs of detaching snow. She was equipped with the sound cannon and could trigger the avalanches voluntarily if she deemed it too dangerous.
She was watching the peaks when an alarm rang. Looking at the computer, she realized projectiles had been fired from an unidentified location. She managed to dodge them by flying upwards. There were no aircraft in the vicinity, and nothing indicated they came from the ground. She began defensive maneuvers, ready to evade another round if it came. She opened a communication to Thunderbird Five.

- John, I'm being shot at. I don't know where it came from. Can you check and see if there is anything I missed?

The space monitor shifted his attention towards her.

- I don't see anything. There are no heat sources in miles around. Were they missiles?

She frowned.

- You think I'm joking? I dodged projectiles heading my way…

The alarms rang again. Another round was fired. John reacted.

- Kayo! Watch out.

She managed to evade them just in time. She heard John reply.

- Something is following you. The projectiles came from the air.

John began searching for a heat signature, overlapping various filters in order to detect the presence of cloaked aircraft. He managed to get a visual: a figure was flying in the air, waiting. It did not look like it was pursuing.

- Kayo, I'll send you coordinates. Try firing your sound cannon in that direction.

- FAB.

He inputted the coordinates where the figure was standing. She made a sharp turn and a feint in order to get closer, then fired the cannon. The figure bounced towards a peak, crashing down in the snow. She camouflaged her ship and remained in the vicinity. John smiled.

- Good work. This looks like the exact same entity that attacked you in England.

- What does that guy want with me? It's becoming personal…

Kayo saw a heap of snow moving. John warned her.

- It took off and it's back in the air. It's heading towards you again. Be careful.

- I'm tired of that idiot. Get me a visual, I'll make short work of it.

The space monitor sent the filter combination to her. She was only able to see through the computer. After going around the mountain, she gained speed and headed straight for him. He intervened.

- Wait, you're not really thinking of ramming it?

- I'm all out of ideas. Besides, a good knock on the head will do him some good.

She headed at full speed straight towards the entity. It tried to avoid Shadow, to no avail. It was
struck head on. Kayo felt a bump on the back of her ship, followed by a screeching noise. An alarm sounded, her ship had been damaged: the left wing was broken. She thought to herself "Talk about having such bad ideas..." as she tried to steer her ship back towards the others at the complex. It was impossible for her to turn around, she was also losing altitude fast. John caught the alarms just in time. He sighed

- Kayo... That was a very bad idea. Try going into that valley over there, I'm getting through to Scott.

She turned her head to the left: the entity was visible and hanging on to the ship. It was exactly as John said. The figure was wearing a red suit, identical in features to Abigail's. His flight module seemed to be made of a carbon alloy as it showed no signs of damage. His helmet's visor was dark, she could not see his face.

John witnessed in horror what was happening, powerless. He messaged Scott immediately, hoping he could get there in time. Kayo could not shake the entity off with the damage on the ship. He punched through the cockpit window, grabbing her safety belts firmly with his reinforced gauntlet. She tried to break free but his grip was too tight. He managed to rip off the belts; removing his hand from the glass. Before she could catch her breath, he punched again, this time breaking the glass cockpit; it exploded in a million pieces. He grabbed hold of her arm, extracting her painfully from her seat. He kept her in the air, holding her by the arms tightly. They were at least two hundred meters above the ground. Thunderbird Shadow nosed down without a pilot to steer it, crashing below in the snowy vale.

She was shaking, afraid to move even the slightest. He was holding her straight in front of him, arms locked, waiting. She could hear the engines of Thunderbird one approaching. Scott was more than furious. He addressed the entity through the speakers.

- This is International Rescue. We are not a threat. Please, put our pilot down safely.

It did not respond. Scott gave it another try.

- I will ask you again, please put our pilot down. We are not here to interfere with your activities. Do not harm her.

Kayo contacted Scott.

- It's not... letting me go. Don't tease him.

- Kayo, don't worry, I got this.

The entity looked up at the Thunderbird craft and back down to Kayo. He did not respond. She insisted.

- Please, Scott. Leave me. If you provoke him...

- I won't let him harm you again!

Scott approached the scene, ready to open the hatch. The entity seemed to release its grip on Kayo. She screamed over the comms.

- STAND BACK!

Thunderbird one pulled back. The entity remained stationary in the air still watching the Thunderbird craft. It released one arm, Kayo hung in the air, petrified. Scott screamed.
He was completely out of it. He approached one last time, opening the hatch and getting his zip line ready to fetch her. The entity backed a few feet away before releasing her. Kayo screamed as she was diving in the air, too low to deploy her parachute or her winged suit. She would crash before it could be effective, and with the mountains around, it would be impossible to glide properly. Scott fired a zip line but missed. He jumped back to his seat, hoping to be able to have another try. He was too close to the ground to dive down. He cursed, shaking, helpless with only seconds to make a decision...
He tried to dive down. His only hope was to catch Kayo in midair before she was too low to be reached. The mountains around were very close, Thunderbird one would be damaged from trying to slow down appropriately. At least, he had to try.

As he was about to fire the engines, Kayo was caught in midair. The held his breath, trying to make sense of what happened. The young woman seemed to be held by something flying around. He knew exactly who it was when the optical camouflage dropped: Abigail. Upon seeing her, the red Keeper left the scene quickly, disappearing behind the mountains.

Scott sighed in relief as the two women boarded the ship. He took Kayo in, relieved and helped her to a seat to rest. The elder could not believe what had happened. He had trouble processing the entire event but knew he did not have much time to think about it. Kayo raised her head and looked at him giving him her "I'm fine" look. Abigail jumped back down immediately, cloaking herself. She did not want to say anything.

John got in touch.

- Scott, Virgil is waiting for you. I updated your map with his location. Get him so he can help Gordon out.

- FAB.

He approached the tower. Virgil was waiting, signaling him with his hands in the air. Scott brought the ladder down on the platform for his brother to board the ship, carrying the black boxes with him. The elder welcomed him warmly.

- Am I glad to see you back in one piece!

Virgil laughed.

- Just get me to my ship. I'm getting nervous just thinking that Gordon is at the controls.

- FAB!

The musician looked down at the wreckage.

- This is one hell of a mess. Kayo, what were you thinking? You could have killed yourself.

She did not respond. It was better that way. She was in no mood to take any kind of abuse. Virgil placed a hand on her shoulder.

- I'm glad you're safe. We'll pick up your ship with Thunderbird two as soon as we're done.

The crew headed for the main complex. Gordon was digging out the survivors using a POD module and special capsules designed to melt a significant amount of snow. He had cleared an area and was boarding the survivors inside Thunderbird Two. He was heading back towards the ship when Thunderbird One landed. He was annoyed when he saw his brother approach.

- Awww man! And I thought I would reap all the honors from doing this mission alone!

Virgil smiled.
- You can take all the credit. But I'm taking the ship back.

He went inside the pod bay after his brother, who was carrying the black boxes with him. Gordon went up to the cockpit and sat in the passenger's seat, waiting for his brother. He turned on the maps of the complex, scanning to see if there was not anything he had missed. All was clear. He stretched his arms.

- All in a day's work! Did you see all this handling? Like a pro!

Virgil took place in the pilot seat, readjusting the settings. He detested having to share his ship, even more knowing Gordon would change some configs on the computer to fit his needs better. He also added some loathsome pop music, the likes of which Virgil did not approve. He activated the engines for take-off, answering his boasting brother.

- It was good work, Gordon. You have reason to be proud. Let's get the survivors to the nearest town and make sure we can come back to pick up Thunderbird Shadow.

- What's the rush? We can come back for it later. There won't be anyone going for it in the state it is now.

John appeared.

- Unfortunately, Gordon, we can't do that. The area is not deserted. Other than for Cloud Alpha, there are some more people around these parts. There were footprints, most probably snowshoes, which means there has been movement around the mountain.

- So? It's a resort. You'd expect people to do that, no?

- No. The tracks were neither coming from the resort or going towards it. The tracks circled the mountain and go down the valley where the snow stops. That's where we can't follow them.

- Wow, you do know your stuff. That's what you do with your free time?

- I've studied the area carefully during the communication downtime. I had to make sure out agents would be safe doing their jobs. Don't nag at me.

Gordon was eager to see if Lady Penelope was all right. She had left the scene so quickly he could not even try to rescue her. That would have boosted his ego quite a lot. He began looking at the other maps John had made available before asking:

- Where is Lady Penelope now?

- I think she was going to pursue Lady Dasha. I don't know what she's up to, but I hope it will not be dangerous. After all, we should not get implied with Bereznik. Remember, we save lives, not fight crime.

Scott appeared on Thunderbird Two's dashboard computer.

- Guys, I'll head back to base. Kayo needs to rest. I trust you'll be okay to shuttle the people and pick up Shadow?

Virgil answered.

- Already on the way to deliver the passengers to safety. We'll manage for the rest.

Scott disconnected. Abigail's voice was heard over the comms.
I'll wait for you near Thunderbird Shadow.

John was about to speak but Virgil cut him off, insisting:

- Abigail, if anything comes up, tell us immediately. Don't engage anyone before informing us.
- I'll do that, yeah.

She disconnected. There was an awkward silence. Gordon giggled in the back seat; his brother turned his head.

- What?

- It's funny because John is always the one issuing the warnings and telling us to be overly careful. Hearing it from you is... well...

- Well?

- New. I dunno, I've never seen you worry that much before.

Virgil's voice sounded angry.

- Don't get started on this.

The aquanaut did not reply. He preferred not to annoy his brother and kept silent instead. He did not understand why he got so riled up as soon as he implying he was having an affair with Abigail.

The winding mountain roads would only slow them down. As soon as a stretch permitted it, Parker drove FAB1 airborne and followed the signal from the air. The comfort of the vehicle permitted the lady to heat up, yet her clothes were still annoyingly wet. She would surely catch a bad cold. Parker looked in his rear mirror.

- Are you all right, m'lady?

- Yes, I will be once we find out what Dasha is up to.

- Is it wise to follow her like this, m'lady?

She sighed. It was not a good idea. At least with the bug, they would know where the woman was headed with her crew. The aristocrat looked at the map.

- We will follow at a good distance and try to find out where she is heading before we lose her.

They tailed her for a good hour before the signal died. It was to be expected: they were flying near the borders of Bereznik. The nation had shut down all satellite traffic from unauthorized sources and remained to day the only place in the world where the World Council and the GDF could not access. Parker turned around immediately. She was clearly not approving.

- Parker? What are you doing?

- We've got company, m'lady.

Two aircrafts were visible on the radar. They were moving very fast, it could not have been anything else than scouts. Parker managed to get back on the road, trying hard to keep the two aircrafts at bay. They turned around when they noticed he was not going towards the border.
Penelope was upset.

- This is really annoying. Dasha has gotten away and there is not much I can do. I want to know what this harpy is up to.

- Please, calm down, m'lady. It is a dangerous thing to cross the borders. We should rethink our strategy.

She took a deep breath and before peaking outside.

- You are right, Parker. Let us establish a better plan before trying to go after her.

- Home, m'lady?

- Home, Parker.

The driver changed course for England.

During the whole trip back home, Kayo had not spoken a single word. She was really upset about the outcome of the situation. Once they landed, she went straight to her room without even removing her uniform. Scott followed her, closing the door behind him. He seemed more worried than angry. He began:

- What were you thinking? Kayo, please, tell me: I can't understand why you would endanger yourself like this.

She crossed her arms and turned around, evading his gaze.

- I panicked, okay! I had to get rid of that guy. It was the only way…

Scott interrupted her.

- The only way? Don't tell me ramming him with your ship was the only way? You could have waited for us to help. Why not use the sound cannon? He could have killed you!

- Stop talking to me like if I was a child! This is not a normal circumstance! I did what I could!

She was so angry she was shaking, her fists clenched tightly. She was feeling faint from the aftershock but did not withdraw from the confrontation. Scott sighed. He turned around and left. She followed him.

- Are you going to walk out on me like this?

Her voice was trembling. She needed him more than anything now and could not swallow her pride one minute to accept her fault. He turned around and went towards her, taking her in his arms and holding her tight.

- I was so afraid to lose you… I don't want you to toy around with your life.

She could not cry even if she tried. All she wanted was to lie down and rest. He swept her off her feet and carried her back inside the room. She hated that but would not refuse this one time. He laid her down on the bed.

- Try to get some rest. These events took their toll on you. I understand the feeling.
They kissed. She held on to him and did not want to let go. He brushed aside a lock of her hair hiding her eyes. Their gaze met. She whispered to him.

- I'm sorry. I will take better care of myself.

He smiled.

- Good.

She lied down to rest. Scott left the room.

In the hallway, he turned to see Grandma Tracy waiting, her arms crossed. He was startled.

- Grandma! Were you eavesdropping?

- Don't need to. You two were so loud I could have heard you from the kitchen. Good thing poor Alan's away in the lab with Brains, that would have scared him off.

- I'm sorry, Grandma. We had to settle something.

- Yeah. Well, I know what you should settle to: a nice dinner with her. Have you thought about taking her out? She would love that. Take a break from work and take her to shore. You two need a break together if you want to salvage that relationship of yours before it sinks.

Scott was baffled.

- That had nothing to do with us! What are you talking about?

- I know what happened, Scott. Don't take me for an old fool. Kayo almost got herself killed back there trying to pin down that maniac. I was watching John's feed.

- Then why…

- I'm saying that she needs you to be supportive more than ever. She's playing tough, but she is fragile. You of all people should know that. She does not have nerves as strong as yours. Do me a favor and don't scream at her like this ever again.

He sighed, completely oblivious. His grandmother went on.

- Now take off that uniform and get yourself something to eat. I'll pick up your mess.

- Right…

The elder went towards the kitchen while Grandma entered Kayo's room. The young lady was lying on her side, weeping. The elderly woman sat down near her; Kayo rose and hugged her.

- Now, now, tell me what those boys did to you.

Kayo remained clutched in the old woman's arms as she wept.

- I was so scared, Grandma. I don't think I'm cut out for this.

- Why is that? You're as good as these boys. At anything. Don't sell yourself short.

- It happened to me twice. This feeling… I just froze and could not do anything. How can I hope to help them if I can't even follow their lead?
- This was not the same. You went through something else. You were attacked. This is no simple matter and Scott should have addressed it better.

The young woman wept as they parted.

- He does not seem to understand how I feel right now.

- All men are like that. My husband was the worst. A smart man, but a dud when it came to feelings. Jeff was also like this. This might explain why you struggle with your man.

The young woman lied down, relaxing her body. She took a deep breath before speaking.

- I have tried talking to him about opening up. It's... hard. He won't acknowledge our relationship. He insists on keeping work above all else.

The old woman took her hand. Kayo went on.

- I've tried asking him about what he sees for himself in the future... he won't tell me anything. It's as if nothing else matters. There is solely International Rescue.

- You'll have to shake some sense into him. Hell, if I did not take my hubby by the shoulders and smacked some truth into his rock-hard head of his, he wouldn't have seen past his career. Sometimes, you have to take matters into your own hands.

- I'll try. Thank you, Grandma.

- Don't mention it. If you need anything, just call me.

Grandma exited the room, leaving the young woman to rest.

The wind whistling in the peaks was the song of the valley, the snow shining under the bright sun. Gordon, Virgil and Abigail loaded Thunderbird Shadow in the POD bay and were ready to leave. The young woman had removed her flight module and strapped it down in the POD alongside the broken ship, joining the crew in the cockpit. They headed back home.

She looked at the skies: the man she saw today was wearing the same type of outfit Artemis had. She began wondering if she had done her job properly in finishing him. Nothing was clearer in her mind than his melting expression, his skull cracked open and the bits of his brain lying around everywhere. She could still smell his breath as he bent over her shoulder and whispered in her ear "Don't scream, or I'll break your back" before she managed to free herself. She began hitting him with all her strength, the adrenaline kicking in. Her right hand was throbbing in pain as she hit his skull continuously, her knuckles bloody, the skin damaged by the bits of broken skull. Her left fist dug even deeper at each blow as the carbon allow pulverized the bones. She shook off the memory; that could not be him. Nobody can come back from the dead.

Gordon whistled, it woke her up. The two brothers were having a chat while she was daydreaming.

- …now that's a mess!

Virgil replied.

- It's not as bad as Thunderbird four being ripped in two by the mechanic. Only one wing is damaged. A bit of bodywork, a system checks and she'll be back in the sky in no time.

The aquanaut sneered. He did not appreciate the memory.
- I'm still wondering why Kayo did not wait for backup.

Abigail turned towards Gordon.

- It is clear she did not know how to react. I don't blame her. You don't really expect to find a lonely guy flying in the air and shooting missiles at you.

John appeared at that moment.

- Scott and Kayo are back home and Lady Penelope is heading back to London as we speak. What's your status, guys?

The pilot looked at his brother's holographic image.

- We picked up Shadow and are heading back home.

- Good. There is something I want to ask Abigail.

The young woman turned back to face the hologram.

- What is it?

- It's about that man we saw earlier. What do you know about him?

- Very little I'm afraid. This guy is supposed to be dead. You saw the files.

- Yes, I did. I know what happened and this is why I wanted to ask you about it. There is something weird though: when he was in the air, he tried to contact you. Twice. Were you aware of that?

She remained silent. He did send a signal her way but she completely ignored it. She did not want to have anything to do with him, let alone draw any more attention. Her answer was quick.

- I know he did but I shut him off. Whatever he wanted, I don't have any part in it.

John did not find the answer satisfying.

- Tell me then, what is he? You have given us very little information so far about your real goals. I want to know the truth.

- Are you saying I'm lying?

He was dead serious when he answered.

- Yes. You are hiding stuff from us. We helped you so far, but the deeper we go into this mess, the worst off we're getting. Why is that guy there and still alive? Why do you need this weaponized suit? You are planning something and I want to know what.

The two passengers were listening. Abigail sighed.

- I told you it's now wise to know too much. Why don't you listen to me?

- We can cope with danger. We've seen worse.

Virgil interrupted.

- Can we at least wait until we get home? I think we should all get some rest before engaging in this discussion.
John did not agree but went along with his brother's suggestion. After all, they did have a busy day with the investigation and the rescue mission.

- Very well. I'm looking forward to this. Don't back out on me.

He disconnected. Abigail was relieved.

- Thanks. I really am in no mood to discuss this right now.

- I noticed. ETA twenty minutes before we get home. We all deserve a rest.

Abigail closed her eyes for a moment, trying to relax. She had to find a way to phrase her thoughts well and not hide anything while concealing the bits that might be dangerous. Gordon broke the tension by telling bad puns on the way; it was how he dealt with such situations. The mood lightened slightly; his sense of humor not appreciated by everyone. It made the journey back home seem a little shorter.

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Thunderbird two landed at the base. Everyone on board deserved a rest. Brains welcomed them home, eager to plunge into the new black boxes and uncover their secrets. Abigail joined him, after having showered and eaten a bit, and began browsing through the files. Much of the information covered Ericsson's research. The engineer was more than thrilled, engaging in the study of several blueprints and technical brochures. The young woman was searching for something else.

And she found it.

Recordings, interviews, notes. All that concerned the birth of Project Olympus and the direct link to the Veterans' project. Evidence implying Holling did command his scientists to do human experiments; signed documents for the beginning of the projects, all of which were meticulously filed in the database. She highlighted the most important and sent them to John. There was a lot more than she expected: the security recordings of the explosion that cost her limbs was also there. She watched it a few times, continuously rewinding the same passage. Brains became curious and looked at what she was doing. She froze the screen and zoomed in on the still image. The engineer watched closely. The young woman grabbed her head and let out a roar of anger. Brains was startled, examining what could have triggered such a reaction from her. He understood.

In the image, a central power reactor could be seen slowly overloading. Engineers flooded inside the room to try to contain it. Most of them were around at consoles while other wore protective suits and entered the hazardous area to shut down the inner core. Behind one of the consoles, a man drew a gun and began shooting the other engineers. The gun was equipped with a silencer; the ambient noise was so loud nobody could have noticed. He shot all the people manning the consoles. Once he was done, he tried leaving the room but was caught in the explosion. It was sabotage, an intended one. The still clearly showed the gunman's face before the explosion.

She knocked her fist down on the table, teeth clenched. Brains felt nervous. He wanted to know more about it.

- The r…reactor overloaded s… since there was n..nobody to monitor and turn down the power levels. Why would s…someone do that?

Abigail rubbed her forehead.

- He wanted it to happen. He intended for us to be wounded so badly we would not have any choice. And he chose him to do his dirty job.
She pointed the screen.

- Siegmund. That's him. Artemis. That guy caused us so many problems. So, this is where it began… He could not exit the reactor chamber in time and got caught with us… Originally, he was not supposed to work on the project, he was stuck doing it. This explains a lot about his behavior...

John appeared.

- Sorry to interrupt, but I guess now is the right time to talk about all this? You have given me good material, yet that does not answer my questions.

She sighed. He would never leave her alone until she had said something to satisfy his curiosity. So far, she had managed to, she could surely do it again.

- I don't want Holling to have these files. I don't want him to steal our research and, most of all, I don't want him to make an army of Keepers. That's what he intended to do with the original Veterans project. He wanted to outfit them and get them back in service.

- How could he manage that with older men? He could not possibly turn back time.

- With the regenerative capacities of the nanites, yes. Their cells would rejuvenate and they would have regained a fit and capable body in very little time. It's sad to say but I'm glad it did not work.

- Wait, isn't Holling supposed to be kept in check by the World Council?

- He is. But the fact that nobody could provide such incriminating evidence was enough to prove his innocence. The labs being locked away played in his favor. Basically, we helped him get away with everything without realizing it.

The young woman seemed disgusted at her own words. John went on.

- But what about that famous "awakening"? What did he want to do with that?

She browsed through the files but did not seem to find what she was looking for. John was waiting for an answer.

- It's obvious, John. What do you think he wanted to do? Find that evidence, destroy it and get the research files. Plain and simple.

- He could not have done anything unless he would have gotten a position in order to do so. Lady Penelope told me he is not entirely trusted.

- He supplies the GDF with weapons, his pharmaceutical facilities are all operational. I'd say he rebuilt his reputation quite nicely over time. He will find a way.

- Not really. He is being observed by the Council and the GDF. Both of them will move on him if he raises any suspicions.

Abigail reared in her chair, exhausted and impatient. She looked at John.

- Whatever. We can't just go around and draw any type of hypothesis like this with nothing to back us up. We'd better rely on Lady Penelope for that matter. She knows a lot more than we do. Does that make you happy now?

- I think that's fair. Those answers are satisfying. We'll see what else I can find. Thanks.
He disconnected. She would have at least liked to hear some excuses. Brains was concentrated on studying the blueprints of the flight module. He was taking side notes and wowing at the patterns. The young lady left him to his admiration.

The sun had set and left behind a filet of pinkish clouds hanging over the last lights of the day. The city was still bustling with activity. Marcus Holling was staring through his office's window, gazing upon a busy street down below. James Sheinor entered and sat down in one of the auburn leather couches, putting his feet up on the coffee table. He stretched to get himself a glass and the jug of scotch. He poured himself one and quaffed it in one gulp before serving himself another round.

Holling remained undisturbed by his uncouth behavior. He addressed him simply.

- I trust you have what I asked you for?

- Yes, sir. We got the pictures, the addresses, everything.

He took out a data chip from his pocket. Holling turned around and looked as Sheinor sat properly and inputted the device in a tablet computer. He popped up pictures along with various other data.

- That's her, sir. She's the one.

- Good. Do you have a stout plan?

- Yup. We're going to execute the whole deal after we agree on a payment.

- Might I remind you that you still owe me for bailing you out of jail on your botched retrieval mission?

Sheinor snorted. That had upset him.

- If you hadn't set us up with that bitch, none of this would have happened. Next time, try getting us pros, not underpaid students.

Holling laughed.

- I will set you up with the resources I see fit. If you had hurried up instead of sightseeing, everything would have worked out well.

The businessman joined his crony and began looking through the photos. He asked:

- Have you found a way to execute the plan? By that, I mean a flawless execution.

- Yes sir. We've got one very easy way to get that kid.

- Tell me.

The henchman began.

- This girl, the Minister of defense's daughter, she be hanging around at a local pub after class with some buddies. Her driver's always picking her up at the same time. We'll get her. I know where that guy takes his breaks.

- I will believe you once I see the results. Remember not to show your face before you drop her off. I expect nothing else than perfection.
That's what ye'll get. Better have my money.

Sheinor got up and left, slamming the door behind him. Holling remained seated and browsed through the pictures brought to him.

At that moment, his communicator flashed. He looked at the caller and ignored it until it stopped. Another call came in, immediately after the first. He pressed a button on his tablet computer, not even bothering to lift his head.

- This better be important.
- It is.

A female voice with a very strong Russian accent answered. The image of the speaker was masked. He raised his head rapidly as he recognized the voice.

- You were not expected to call so soon. What do you want?
- Have you finally secured your position?

The businessman laid back in the sofa. He shrugged.

- Delays are inevitable. You know how things are.
- Delays are unacceptable. Do you really intend for your plan to succeed?
- Do not raise your voice at me. I do not react to threats.

The woman laughed.

- You sound like a man with very little resources. Are you finally at the end of the line?
- Dear, dear associate, I am far from it. We have Olympus still…
- … but no guardians. No one to protect. No credibility and no money. A very fine defense against all odds, really. Laughable.
- We shall have Athena back. She is all we need. After all, none of the others were really as useful.

Holling rose from his seat and began walking towards a window, hands behind his back. The woman went on.

- I have heard there was quite a mess happening at Eaux Claires. Your friend Beaujolais is dead.

That did not seem to please Holling. The businessman tilted his head, inquiring:

- Dead? Who is responsible for this?
- Dasha Kazyncza. She has also killed a few agents of your Council and took in the fugitives from Germany.

- Very interesting. In what way does this affect me?
- It will eventually become your problem, provide you succeed with your plan.

Holling turned towards the projectors' blurred image of the woman.
- Do you intend to remain hidden?

- As long as it is needed. You need me inside these borders to ensure your success. If we are victorious, the profit will be enormous.

- Still, I am wondering why you would turn against your home country like this. Are you people from Bereznik not supposed to be loyal and good people?

- Some of us prefer to improve our situation rather than dwell in shit and thank the General for it. I will contact you in two weeks from now. Do not try to trace this call.

The woman disconnected. Holling looked outside for a few minutes before coming back to his desk, a smile hanging from his lips.

Everything was going according to plan.
A few days had passed. The tension had died down. Everything was coming back as it was, except for Brains' mood. He would not sleep easy knowing one of his ships had been damaged. He had to work on the repairs until he was sure it was back up and running. Thankfully, only the wing's body had been damaged. The important parts, the reactors and all the sensors were still operational. He would have to test these too. Virgil went to lend a hand, accompanied by Alan. The youngest was happy to be useful, at last. His hand had healed nicely and he had regained much of his dexterity. He still had some trouble with coordinating movements with joint hands since he could not completely feel his prosthetic limb. He still had more rehab to do before traveling into space.

Brains prepared the laser cutter for the parts that he required while Virgil loaded a sheet of metal on the table. It was rather heavy, he let out a breath once it came down. The engineer programmed the machine and turned towards his helper.

- G.. good. Once the pieces are c.. cut, we will finish the edges and prepare the fiber compound to c.. cover it. T.. the guidance system in the w.. wing needs to be straightened, care to s… start with that?
- Will do.

Grabbing a few tools, Virgil went towards Thunderbird Shadow while Alan was waiting, smiling, for his orders. Brains gave him a schematic.

- M… make sure you fix the lighting system. You will s.. search for bad contacts. Take the computerized multimeter and m… make sure there is continuity on the circuits.
- FAB!

Scaffolding had been set around the ship to make it easy to fix. A raised platform held Shadow in place; Alan slid underneath it and opened a service trap. He began his work. His older brother was working on a steel rod, reshaping it and preparing the frame for the metal parts.

The astronaut looked at the damage.

- Wow… who would have thought Kayo would damage her ship like this. It's unreal.

His brother answered.

- This stuff happens. Don't pin the fault entirely on her. It was simply an error of judgment, but who know what that guy could have done to her if she had not tried something. He could have succeeded in shooting her down. We are not equipped with missile jammers.

Brains raised his finger.

- Not yet equipped with missile jammers. I w.. will equip Thunderbird Shadow with some and I know j.. just which ones.

Both Tracys looked at him, puzzled. Alan asked:

- Missile jammers are military technology. It's expensive. How can we manage to afford that?
- I have spent some time reading the c.. contents of the black boxes you b… brought me. I must say,
these findings are am...amazing! It is a gold mine of information!

- You mean, you'll make some military stuff right here?

The engineer pointed at Alan's hand.

- It's the same as when we built your prosthetic. The engineers from the Olympus project seemed to have worked in simplifying technology and shrinking it to the smallest possible size. I would not be surprised if Abigail is equipped with a missile jammer on her flight module too.

His eyes were lit when he spoke about the flight module, his hands waving in the air. He would have taken it apart and find out all the secrets, but having the blueprints saved the poor thing from visiting his lab. Both boys laughed. Brains came back to reality.

- Right, so, I will make such a jammer and program it to work with the ship's commands. Let us hope it does not interfere with communications.

The brother nodded as they resumed their maintenance.

In the kitchen, Kayo was helping Grandma with lunch. She remained silent for a while and seemed thoughtful. The elderly woman looked at her.

- Still thinking about Scott?

The young woman was startled. She looked down.

- Yes and no. I have a lot of things on my mind right now.

- Which are?

She sat down at the counter while Grandma was stirring the pots on the stove.

- When did you decide it was time to start a family?

The old woman turned towards her and winked.

- When I decided it was the right moment. I could not count on ol'Grandpa to make up his mind so I urged things a bit. We were happily married, had a very nice country house and enough money to buy ten more. I was lucky.

The young lady tapped her fingers on the counter, thinking. Grandma went on.

- I can imagine what you have been through made you realize a lot of stuff about life, huh? Those boys are different: they throw away their lives and don't even think about anything except each other. I wish sometimes they had something else to hold on to.

Kayo sighed. She and Grandma thought alike. She remained thoughtful for a while before declaring:

- I'm going to shore after dinner. I need to get my mind off this whole mess.

- Ask Scott to accompany you. You two need some time together.

- No.
The answer shocked Grandma. She inquired.

- Why? You two need to be away to…

- I would be better not to right now. I'll ask Gordon. I'm bound to have fun with him along.

- If it's fun in clubs or at police stations you want, he's good at both.

The young woman smirked.

- I'll keep an eye on him if he gets too drunk. I won't let him punch anyone, promised.

Grandma laughed.

- Good then. You have my blessing. Rent yourself a nice hotel room and get a massage too. Don't worry about what's happening here.

- I won't. Thanks, Grandma.

She went towards the old woman and delivered her a warm hug. Kayo smiled, at last, relieved.

The evening in Cambridge was rather tranquil at this time of year. The term was over and many students had gone back home. For those who stayed, there was always some activities going on to enjoy a glimpse of summer and its lot of pleasures. The small group of four was comprised of two English young men, one very tall Norwegian young woman and another one, beautiful as could be, Indian, with olive skin and silky long black hair. She wore brand name shirts, expensive jeans and designer heels, and handbag. She was always the one who paid for the bill, preferring her close friends to strangers. The three of them followed her around every time. They sat down at a pub near the River Cam, treating themselves to food and drinks of all kind.

The chauffeur had dropped her off near the pub and took his leave. He parked the car in an alley not far away and took out a tablet computer. Reaching under the front seat, he produced a bottle of dark rum. He switched to sit in the rear of the car and began watching sports while quaffing down his drink. There was a knock on the door. He looked quickly but saw nobody. He activated the electric window and looked carefully around. Nothing. Judging it would only be young hooligans playing him a trick, he resumed watching the match. There was another knock. This time louder. He let out a breath, irritated, and proceeded to exit the vehicle. Joseph Herring, the tall red-bearded Irish man was waiting for him outside. The chauffeur looked up at the bully's face only to realize he was done for. Herring grabbed his head and smacked it against the car. Sheinor came from the other side, grabbing the fallen control card and opened the trunk. They shoved the body inside, closing it firmly and locking it. Sheinor grabbed the bottle and the tablet and resumed the match on the back seat as if nothing had happened. Herring sat down in the front of the car. He opened the window separating the rear seat and the chauffeur.

- How do we do this?

- Get the girl and go to the rendezvous point. That's not hard, is it?

Herring turned back towards the front. This car was perfect for their operation: black with dark tinted windows so nobody could see inside. A politician's favorite ride. After a good while, a signal popped from the tablet computer, indicating the young woman was ready to be picked up. The new driver closed the window between the seats and brought the car near the pub. The young woman was waiting in front, making out with one of the young men. That was clearly not planned. Sheinor produced a gun from his coat and sat at the far end of the rear seat, making sure the young couple
would not see him until the door had been closed. Fortunately for him, they were a bit too busy to notice him immediately. It was only when she tried to lie down on the seat that she bumped her head on Sheinor's thigh. He pointed the gun at the young man. The young lady was about to scream but he slapped her before she could do any noise with his free hand. The young man raised his hands in the air. Sheinor smiled, showing his crooked teeth.

- Good lad. One noise, I'll shoot.

Herring had already started the car and was engaging on the road towards the highway. Sheinor took out the young woman's phone from her handbag and threw it out the window, asking the young man to do the same. Instead, he turned around and tried opening the door. The henchman pulled the trigger, shooting right through his chest. The young man dropped on the seat, his blood spilling everywhere. The woman broke out in tears, shaking from fright. Sheinor put his hand over her mouth.

- One more sound, yer dead, slut.

She kept crying uncontrollably. As they were nearing their destination, he took out some plastic ties for her hands and legs and gagged her. The young man seemed to be hanging on, breathing still. Sheinor realized a little too late that he had his phone still in his hand and had set up a tracking beacon. As he tried to grab the young man's hand, the woman struck him in the face with her knee. He reared, touching his bleeding broken nose, gun still in hand.

- Fucking bitch!

He knocked her behind the head with the butt of his gun so hard he heard a cracking noise. He bent over to finish the young man off, smothering him with his own coat. He then turned to Herring.

- Change o' plan old boy. We need to ditch this car.

The young man's cellphone had broadcasted everything. Sheinor urged Herring to pull over.

They had reached a countryside road with very little traffic.

- Where do we go now?

- We lay low. Then ye find us a new ride and we go. Burn that shit now.

Sheinor grabbed the young woman on his shoulder and went towards the nearest cover of trees. Herring took out from his pocket a box containing small metallic. He placed them on the backseat of the car. Once he was far away enough, he used a small remote control to detonate the small explosives. The fire spread through the vehicle, sending a large cloud of smoke in the sky. He quickly went back towards his boss, disappearing into the wilderness, remorseless of his actions.

Kayo and Gordon set out for Brisbane, Australia. She had wanted to see the rooftop terraces for a long time now and Gordon was a specialist in finding interesting venues where to party. He was hunting for nice places to hang out while she was piloting the civilian aircraft towards the airport. She was deep in thoughts when he hailed her.

- So, which one you want? Cozy garden party? Poolside? Funky and colorful? Oh, that one is very modern. How about that?

- Whatever. Make sure you pick one not so far away from the hotel. I don't want to wait hours for a cab.
- There is one right on the top floor. Let's try that one. Poolside with a nice view on the city it is!

He piped down once they were ready to land.

They made their way towards the hotel and checked in their respective rooms. Kayo went to do some shopping while Gordon was hanging around the pool, swimming, and tanning. He surprised a threesome of beautiful young ladies and entertained them for a while with stories about his Olympic glory and fame.

Kayo was happy to be alone. She could take some time to think with nobody around asking her what was wrong. There were only strangers all around and an occasional young man staring at her, looking forward to talking her into getting a drink. When she made eye contact, she quickly walked her way, ignoring them. She went to the stores and picked herself a nice sober outfit for the night.

Her thoughts were swirling. Did she really love Scott so much that she would remain at his side even if he was dedicated to his work? Grandma Tracy's advice seemed fit for her situation but not so much for hers. When the Tracys took her in, she felt out of place. Her mother had died, her father joining her several years after as he lost his battle against cancer and her uncle was up to no good, trying to rob her of the only family she had. The boys were nice enough to her, but they were not her real family. It was a community, a frigid environment where you cannot expect to be cuddled and loved. The boys had lost their mother so young and grew up without a delicate feminine touch. Other than Grandma, who's tomboy attitude is no example, she was the iconic feminine presence, the one all the boys looked at when they were teens, and who flirted with her even if it was a bit wrong. She quickly brought them back to earth, except one: Scott. He had some ways of making her feel good. His words, his gestures, all the little things he did for her… but that was before his father disappeared. Now, he is cold, committed and uses the word "duty" to justify everything. She did not want that…

But what now? Nearing her 25th birthday, she was wondering what to do. The events shook her so much she had to look back at her life. There was something else; what made her so clumsy? Fear? She could not react in time; her reflexes were slow and that displeased her very much.

She went back to the hotel, having finished her purchases. She messaged Gordon about meeting him in about one hour at the bar. He answered by sending him a picture of himself and the three pretty ladies hanging near the pool. She sighed; how could Lady Penelope fall for such a guy? His freelance spirit, maybe? His beach boy body? "Whatever," she thought, rummaging through her bags. There was something more important she had to do now.

The hour passed; Gordon took his leave from the beautiful young ladies and headed down to his room, hoping none of them would follow him. He changed into casual clothes before meeting Kayo inside her room. She wore a very formal white dress, the kind you would see on a businesswoman, with matching shoes and pearls. Her hair was styled in a bun, she looked ten years older. It struck him hard when he entered. He whistled.

- So, you're dressed as a cougar tonight? Man! You look a lot older...

- Stop it. Let me dress as I please.

- All right, all right! You are stunning. I think Scott would have liked it… or at least, complain that you look taller than him with those heels.

She went towards the bathroom as he sat on the bed. A bunch of clothing fell down on the floor. He began picking them up when he felt a cardboard packaging wrapped inside a shirt. Kayo was still tending to her makeup when he took the box out and read the label. His face changed when he
discovered the content.

He walked up to the bathroom, not saying a single word. She was putting the finishing touches on her lipstick when she saw him in the mirror, brandishing a plastic stick he had found inside the box. He was damn serious, something you don't see every day.

- You were not really planning on going out to drink tonight, right?

She closed her eyes, tears ran down her cheeks. Gordon went towards her, concerned.

- I don't want to force you to explain but… will it relieve you to do so?

He took her by the shoulders and brought her towards her bed. She sat down, breathing deeply to hold back her tears. He sat near her. She began.

- I did not know, until today. I… I had doubts but… My mind was swimming in thoughts of all kind…

- Does Scott know?

- He doesn't. I don't want to push it on him.

He held her close, she began crying.

- I'm sorry, Kayo. It's just that… I mean… I'm as shocked as you are. Okay, less than you are.

He was probably the worst person to speak with in this situation. She smiled.

- Listen, Gordon. I just wanted to get away from the island a bit and think things over. This… really puts some aspects of my life back in perspective. I just want to be sure before I face Scott.

- You won't be able to hide if from him for long. He loves you, Kayo, very much. He's stubborn and stern and anxious about all of us, but he needs to concentrate and stop going over the limit. Now, he'll have a reason to pipe down.

- Please don't tell anyone about this.

- Don't worry. You can count on me.

Gordon was a natural snitch, famous in gossiping and a very, very bad liar. She knew it would be a matter of time before the truth came out. He got up.

- Get some rest. I'll go party upstairs with the girls. Take some time for yourself. I believe the sooner you speak to Scott about this, the better. I don't really know how he'll react when you tell him he is to become a father. We can only guess. Well, if anything is wrong, call me.

He smiled as he left. She lied down on her bed, closing her eyes. She had to be courageous and face Scott as soon as she returned.

The full moon casts its shadow in the swimming pool, reflecting a beautiful light on the surface. As usual, Abigail was still up. This time, it was not from fear of sleep, but from hunger. Grandma Tracy had made an enormous strawberry shortcake with whipped cream frosting and had announced the "first come first serve" rule. Alan had eaten until he was about to burst, the other boys had a piece but not more. Abigail did not want to ask for another serving during dinner and was surprised to see so much remaining in the end.
She took her plate and sat at the counter. As she was eating, John appeared.

- Hey, Abigail. I wanted to apologize. I did not mean to call you a liar.

She smiled, licking her lips.

- Apologies accepted. Just know that I don't do that out of bad faith.

- Yeah…

She grabbed another bite, motioning that she wanted to speak afterward.

- You still haven't told me about why you are protecting Virgil that much. I'd love to know.

- Why should I tell you?

- We got "involved" ...

- I knew it….

- We are grown adults, we can make our own choices.

He sighed.

- Very well. Don't ever bring it up in front of him.

- Promised.

John cleared his throat and began. She went to sit on the terrace.

- It was during his first year in university. Despite our father's council, he entered the Boston school of Fine Arts. He is an accomplished painter and artist, just so you know. He made various paintings that are hanging around the house.

He had strayed and went back to the subject.

- There was this beautiful redhead, the kind of girl who never has a bad hair day. She was a bit simple-minded and superficial but my brother took a liking to her. They were in the same class. After a few months, they began dating and seeing each other after school. He had his own apartment; my father had insisted. That girl used to hang out there a lot. One day, our father came to visit. He was going to meet Virgil after his classes and treat him to lunch. Dad wanted to speak to him about how much he would welcome his help in the organization. Since he was paying the bill, he could access the apartment at all time. That day, when he came in, he did not like what he saw. He surprised the girl in bed with another guy, inside Virgil's apartment. You have to know that our Dad was never the type to get angry often, but when he did, it was a nightmare. I don't know what happened exactly, but I know my brother got himself a long lecture. It was a rather stormy discussion, or so I heard.

- That was that slut's fault, not his.

- Yeah, but Virgil was the one who gave her access to the place. Plus, Dad was very upset about my brother's choice of studies. He would have liked him to go for a more useful field. He agreed for him to finish his year but he wanted me to move in with him. I was about to start my first year at Harvard. The apartment was not very far away from both our campuses.

- Your Dad talked him out of his program?
- Mostly, yes. There was also the subject of International Rescue, since my brother really wanted to take part of it. He was urged to change fields if he wanted to participate.

- I see.

- I moved in with him about a week later. The girl came back a few times; they had numerous arguments but, each time, she was bursting into tears and manipulating him. He ended up feeling sorry for her and forgiving her. He made me promise I would not tell Dad. We had a discussion about her and her habits since she was mainly coming in to have sex with him. He did not see it like that. I think he was hooked onto her so badly, he could have given her anything.

He paused. He was looking at the grid of Tracy Island to make sure nobody would interrupt them. Telling this story made him nervous. He went on.

- Everything seemed to go well for a while, other than the fact that she sometimes left town for extended periods of time. Virgil inquired about it; she was giving very little detail about her trips. He took her out, bought her fancy gifts, but she was never satisfied. She used to whine a lot about everything. During the end term, I was in preparatory classes. A bunch of guys had invited all the preps to the initiation rites that were held in a Frat dorm near the campus. It was a debauchery of all sorts, I made sure to remain sober enough to enjoy myself. That's where I saw the girl, Virgil's "girlfriend". She was walking around topless, completely drunk. Guys were putting cash in her string and asking her for blowjobs. She did some guys in front of everyone.

Abigail grimaced in disdain.

- Ewww...

- You can say that again. Most of the party was filmed by one of the students I was hanging with. I asked him to send me a copy and showed it to my brother the next day. He was... utterly destroyed. It took him a very long while to recover. By that, I mean years. And I still wonder if he has gone over it today.

- What happened to her?

- He never returned her phone calls, blocked her and changed his phone number. She came knocking a few times, but I turned her around. She was getting hysterical one day, I had to call the cops on her. She harassed him in class so much she even got suspended. He left for Denver not so long after. He had been accepted in the engineering program.

- I understand now…

- He made me promise to watch his back. So that's what I'm doing. Thus, the warning.

- Are you suggesting I'll betray him like that bitch did?

- No, I'm sure you won't. What I am afraid of is if you have to leave the island. That's going to hurt him. It's fine if you are flirting with each other, but beyond that, you must be realistic. If you hope to leave one day, I suggest you put a stop to this now. Remember that we are keeping you here for your safety and the world's but as much as we go deeper in this whole ordeal, I'm beginning to think we have embarked on something a lot bigger than we can handle. Yet, the decision remains Scott's.

She took a deep breath. It was not even in her thoughts to leave the place. She was doing all she could not to be a burden and help out in any situations. She answered, lowering her head.
- I see. Is that all?
- Apart from his other bad experiences, I believe this was the most proving one.
- I'm sorry then.
- Don't be. Just, consider it, please.
- I will. Thanks.
- Good night.

He closed the comm. She took a deep breath and looked at the stars. Someone seemed to approach her from the kitchen: it was Virgil, as usual. She smiled at him when he arrived. He sat down near her.

- Still not sleeping? Nightmares keeping you up again?
- No, cake craving. I wanted to eat it before your brother did.

He laughed.

- That usually means war.
- If that's his fun, then let him. Two can play that game.

They looked at each other. He was smiling. She kept thinking about what John said, her smile fading slowly. He noticed.

- Is everything okay?
- Yeah… Well, I wanted to know… about what happened at the resort.
- That night?

She bit her lip, recalling the moment.

- Yeah, that night. I wanted to know if… well… if you pushed it further because of your condition or…

He smirked. He had enjoyed it as much as she did, it was clearly showing in his smile.

- It did actually help me a bit. I was shy… it had been a moment ever since I wanted to tell you how I felt.

She crept closer, sitting with her back towards him. He took her in his arms, holding both her hands in his. They entwined their fingers together and remained silent for a while. Something was bothering Abigail; she had to ask him.

- Tell me…. If I ever have to leave, what would you do?

She felt his heart beat faster. He seemed to be looking for an answer. He held her tight.

- I'll make sure you don't have to.
- What if your brother….
The disappearance of the World defense minister's daughter was declared a kidnapping by the police two days after the events. The GDF became immediately implied. Colonel Casey was flooded with phone calls from members of the Council and even the minister himself paid a visit. She had little information to deliver: Devika Sawhney was reported missing after leaving a pub in Cambridge. Locals had seen her embark in a black car which matched the description of her usual ride. Witnesses had heard gunfire on the highway and gave a description of the same vehicle leaving towards the east. There was also a video that made its way on social networking, suggesting that at least one person was wounded by the gunshot. It was quickly removed and labeled as evidence. After rigorous searches, the car was found, burned with two bodies inside. Autopsies were being conducted on both carcasses but the coroner was formal: both were male. It was a relief for everyone.

Searches were ordered in the surrounding areas. The GDF was actively working on that particular site, leaving no stone unturned. There was a lot of pressure coming from the higher ups, expecting the girl to be found and brought to safety as soon as possible. The colonel would have to see to the success of the operation; this whole thing made her think about her own daughter Tabatha.

Nothing had turned up so far. Footprints had been seen heading from a forested area towards a private property. They had found the owner, his wife and his two dogs shot dead. The bullets matched the exact same type than the one used inside the car. There was no surveillance cameras or other bits of technology that could be used to trace the kidnappers appropriately. Even the RFID microchip the young lady had under her skin was not responding.

Whoever decided to do such a terrible thing knew about the minister's private details. He was not a very healthy man, hence his frequent leaves and withdrawal from meetings. A few years back, he was diagnosed with heart failure. Ever since then, he had taken the precautions necessary to remain in good health but never wanted to leave his position. After many councils with the other ministers, they agreed he would be staying for a few years until all his cases were closed, then he could go care free. He was a dedicated man, working very long hours revising all the cases files from the defense division of the GDF. Colonel Casey knew him very well and was aware he could not stop working; she needed him too. No other minister had shown the same dedication he did. She began wondering if he was not set up.

The minister was interrogated on his frequentation. All the primary suspects were either close to him or within the Council, which made it a lot more difficult for an open investigation to take place. This whole situation was playing in favor of somebody and she wanted to find out who.

The Colonel called Lady Penelope. The aristocrat was very busy when the call came in; she gave the caller a stern look but remained courteous.

- Colonel Casey, this is a pleasant surprise. How can I help?

- Lady Penelope, I require your aid in the present case involving the kidnapping of the Minister of World Defense's daughter. I trust you already know about this?

- Another case is holding my attention. Still, I shall try to help you as much as I can.
- I appreciate. If you can take a look at the gathered data, maybe you can help shed light on this case. I do believe this situation is profitable for someone, but I cannot find out who. We are getting authorizations to interrogate different ministers, dignitaries, presidents and their suite from various nations who had recent contacts with the victim's father. We have not received any news from the kidnapper, they have not even asked for a ransom yet.

Penelope raised her head. This incident could be related to her research; Dasha was into human trafficking. Holding the daughter of a high ranked member of the Council would give them leverage for negotiations. But that was a bit too harsh for an action on behalf of the Slavic state; they never acted so openly. It could well be an isolated cell of criminals acting on their own. She replied:

- Have you been aware of any Bereznik agents acting openly?

- Nothing was reported to me. You should ask the Council's secret services directly. We are aware that there was a jailbreak in Germany but we were asked to leave it to them.

"Just as I thought..." Penelope said to herself. The German agents were meant to be spied on while they went back to Dasha. The Council was on their tail. She hoped her presence in the resort did not affect their mission; she might have screwed up their investigation.

- I will look onto the Council later. What of Marcus Holling? What has he been up to lately?

- Nothing. He is showing up regularly for scheduled meetings and agreed for five of his facilities to be inspected by our personnel. We have not detected any discrepancies in the last visits. He will be cleared of all doubts very soon if things are going like this.

- What about you, Colonel? What do you think about him?

The Colonel was surprised. She did not want to speak ill of Holling considering all the help he was providing her for her daughter.

- Mister Holling has suffered the consequences of his actions. I believe he has learned his lesson. We have no reason to suspect him.

Penelope frowned. She refrained from commenting.

- Ask yourself this, Colonel: who will benefit of the Minister's leave? The present events will surely shake his entire being and force him to rest. I suggest you look into people who were prohibited from acting directly on matters such as Global Defense, military actions or even... prohibited military technology.

- This is a very good clue, thank you, Lady Penelope. I will think about this.

- You are welcomed, Colonel. I will take my leave.

She disconnected. The aristocrat had insisted on words in her statement. Something inside made her want to believe Penelope's accusations. But without proof, she was getting nowhere.

A notification came from the computer. There was an update in the case file. A field team had found some more clues about the missing girl. She looked at the images provided.

Clothes... All torn and dropped in the mud.

Looking at the scene gave her shivers. It seemed like if somebody was dragged around on the
ground; all indicated that a struggle took place. There was no clue about where the kidnappers might have gone. They were nearing the eastern coast of England and would require a way to cross the sea if they wanted to leave the country. She ordered searches of the coastal regions and the surrounding airfields to make sure the kidnappers would not be able to escape.

For the sake of that poor young lady, she hoped she would not be too late.
Dear readers,

Thank you for keeping up with the story!

Just as a reminder, I wanted to draw your attention to the age of the characters. To fit the setting more logically, all the characters are older than in TAG. Thus, the youngest, Alan, is 19 as mentioned in an earlier fic. I will try to make a breakdown of my timeline as a future project.

Enjoy!

The faint light of the stars and the big blue planet were the only thing lighting the darkness of space. The space monitor never missed an opportunity to observe the world under his feet. John had always been captivated by Earth's beauty since his first space flight. There was not a day that went by when he did stop and look at it. From where he was, he could do everything imaginable: spy on communications, send probes to survey areas, see the seasons unfold without even moving from his station.

He enjoyed solitude. He felt space was the right place for him. Since the death of his mother, he withdrew himself from his brothers' presence, preferring to approach the situation with logic instead of emotions. Contrarily to all the boys who had a very fierce immediate reaction, he was completely detached. He loved his mother as much as his brothers did but he understood that it was not sadness that would honor her memory. Nonetheless, he ended up suffering in the end, even if he tried hard to hide it. His only consolation was that she had left him with a very deep knowledge of astronomy and a curiosity in the matter which pushed him to study it more and more, drowning his sadness into books.

Once in a while, Brains and Alan came over to help or deliver supplies. He was glad to see them but was anxious for them to leave. The only person he could tolerate hanging with was Ridley. She was the only person whose presence did not annoy him. The first time she visited Thunderbird Five, he was not as anxious to see her leave and, once she did, he would have wanted her to stay longer. She came back a few times; he entertained her with games, documentaries, discussions about astronomy, politics, the news…. He loved to speak with her. Her duty was requiring her to leave for a few days and patrol Earth's orbit; she always paid him a visit when she was in the area.

There was only one problem: EOS. The sentient AI understood what was going on between her creator and the Captain. It had tried to keep him for itself as a jealous child would be reluctant to share. John explained numerous times the difference in the relationships. The AI had built itself a logical database comprising of all the elements from that discussion, getting to the conclusion of her being a sibling to John rather than a lover. It had a lot of difficulties making the difference, but the algorithm seemed to adapt quite well to the changes. That was one less problem on his hands.

His attention was drawn to Star Alpha. After the communication defaulting done by Cloud Alpha's computer, he was more than curious about how it was done and why. Defaulting a signal was easy, provide you could use a land line to do it. But with long range communications, it was harder as the signal could be intercepted by any other receptor. What's more is he could not identify the protocol and the encryption used to protect the message. Even with his extensive hacking knowledge and skills, he could not find the key. He had to gain access to Star Alpha and try to get what Abigail called "Chronos". That would surely answer his question and also broaden his
understanding in the matter of communications, something he was very proficient in.

The only person who could give him safe access to the station was Ridley. He had to make sure it would not be off limits if he was going to explore it. He called her. She smiled when answering.

- Captain Ridley O'Bannon speaking. What can I help you with, John?

He smiled in reply, happy to hear her voice.

- Hello, Ridley. How's it going?

- Nothing to report. Same old stuff as usual. No aliens, ghosts or pirates anywhere. Space is quiet and safe for the time being.

He sighed. There were no such things as ghosts, but one's mind can wander from being alone in the darkness for so long. He understood a bit too late that she was joking regarding his own fears.

- Good to hear all is well. I have something to ask you. Do you know about a space station at these coordinates?

He filled her in with the location of Star Alpha. She seemed puzzled.

- Are you sure about this, John? I don't see anything there. It is quite a stroll from my location. Do you have a visual?

- I have located something at these coordinates and I would like to know if you have any details about it.

Images which had been taken from his probe were sent to the Captain. She took a good look at them before answering.

- This station belongs to a research group, I believe. It is still active; it is giving me a reading and replying to my ping requests every time I go by. Nothing new about a bunch of scientists wanting to be left alone.

- Are you certain about this?

- More than certain. If there was no life inside that ship, I would not get those replies. You can try contacting them.

- FAB. I'll look into it.

Ridley's statement seemed to bother him. According to the black boxes, the station had been abandoned for nearly a year now, ever since the engineers decided to revolt against Marcus Holling. There was no record of what had happened to Star Alpha, but he began having doubts about it: all the staff could have fled back to earth or died on board. Either way, he had to see this through.

Traveling would not take long but it meant changing the location of the space station. He planned a course towards the lab and hopped in his flight gear. It took him less than ten minutes to make it there.

Star Alpha stood right in front of him, lighted as if it was completely operational. He began wondering if there really were people inside. As he neared the gateway, a computer prompted him with an authorization code. He had found a few random codes in the papers none of them was
actually working. The access was denied, requiring a retinal scan and voice pattern to proceed. There was no way around it: he would need the help of the only person left alive to open it.

Upon returning to Thunderbird Five, he opened a comm to his brother Alan. The latter was enjoying a drink near the pool, sunbathing. He did not seem to notice the space monitor.

- Alan!

The young astronaut was startled and almost spilled his drink on himself.

- Wha.. What? John, don't scare me like this, phew!
- How's your flight training going?
- Never been better. I'll have to try the real deal soon. Can't wait!
- You'll have a chance to. I'll need you to fly Abigail up here. Star Alpha won't open otherwise.

Alan smiled.

- Finally! A real space mission! My kind of thing!
- Well, it's more like tagging along for some exploration in an abandoned space station.
- Cool! Want me to tell Scott about it?
- I'll fill him in. Just get Abigail and go to the living room. Meet you there in about ten minutes.
- FAB!

The space monitor disconnected as his brother got up with excitement, fetching his elder brother and Abigail. The astronaut returned in the living room with the bioengineer, his brother already speaking with Scott. Abigail listened to a part of their discussion and objected.

- W…wait. Space? You want me to go in space?

John answered.

- That's the deal, yes. Star Alpha is that space station right there and we need you to open the door.
- I… hum… really? There is no other way around this?

The space monitor looked at the young woman, intrigued.

- Are you backing out?
- No… it's not that. Everything is fine, really.

She smiled nervously. Alan looked at her and smiled.

- Don't tell me you are afraid of going in space.

Her face changed. He seemed to have struck a sensitive chord. She frowned.

- I'm not afraid. It's just that… I've never been up there. And… well… ah… When are we leaving?
- Don't change the subject. That can mean a lot. Are you afraid of going out in space?
She held back her response. Scott looked at her.

- It's not as dangerous as it used to be but the fact that you are afraid can be dangerous. It means that, in the case of a life-threatening situation, you might not be able to react appropriately. So, can you do it or not?

She took a deep breath.

- I can and will do it.

- Good. Alan, you will leave tomorrow morning. I'll have John fill you in with your takeoff schedule. Abigail, ask Brains to show you to the zero G and co-pilot simulator for Thunderbird Three. It's not that hard, but you'll need a bit of practice if you want to master a few basics.

She nodded, thinking: "I didn't have a star astronaut for a dad, you know". Space was the only place she had never insisted on going. It was dark, cold and unforgiving…

The small Philippinese clinic was bustling that morning as woman and children flooded the waiting room, lining up for checkups and vaccines. Doctor Chang's help was requested in backup as the regular doctors could not keep up with the demand. She lent a hand for a week, ending up taking the office of an American doctor who had resigned a few days earlier. Her days usually ended at nightfall. Food was brought to her by an attendant and she had to eat between two patients with little to no time to relax. The presence of a full-time doctor was required, but very little people wanted to come to such recluse villages: the pay was not good and the work conditions less than appropriate.

She astonished herself that evening in having wrapped up her clinic before sundown. It was a very unusual day as she did not expect it to finish so soon. She closed all the files and picked up her belongings before heading for the door. She came face to face with six men in the waiting room, dressed in formal black suits. With them stood a tall and handsome man in a grayish suit: it was Marcus Holling. She tried to back up inside her office but he caught up, stopping her from closing the door. He smiled.

- Doctor Chang, I assume? It was quite difficult to find you. Why run away? Don't you want to receive your prize?

She dropped her bag on the floor as two men entered after him. He began looking around.

- This place would be needing a makeover, don't you think? Your equipment is obsolete, your furniture came directly from the garbage...

He went back towards her, looking her in the eyes.

- I still owe you for the information you provided me. This is what I came to do here. The Holling Pharmaceutical division wishes to award you with a donation of two million dollars. How is that?

She approached him.

- We have talked about this, you were supposed to deposit the money…

He drew a finger to her lips.

- It is no legal practice. Threats are not, either.
- I could complain to the police about my abduction, too.

- That would not be wise. Peru is a country plagued with drug dealers, prostitution, and corrupted policemen. I doubt that would play in your favor. Try to appreciate the good side of this negotiation: you told the truth and I reward you with money. It is a very good deal.

- I never wanted to see your face again. What do you want now?

- A picture, for the news. Try to look happy, too. It would spoil the whole image if you did not express genuine joy from such a generous donation.

- And what else do you want? You did not come here only to take a picture with me. There is something else motivating your visit.

Holling laughed.

- Straight to the point already? I thought we could discuss it over a nice drink.

- Your presence is enough to spoil my thirst. Talk now.

He sat casually on the side of the desk.

- Negotiations were open with the government about accepting a partnership. Unfortunately, none of the dignitaries want to have anything to do with a foreigner. This is why I need you to obtain an audience with the Prime Minister and speak about all the perks in accepting our pharmaceutical division's help here.

Mei's eyes widened.

- To think you would come to me and talk such nonsense after what happened! Do you really believe I intend to help you?

Holling rose and started walking around slowly. He was upset.

- You have come to me to get your father's investment back. It was a relatively large investment and you expected me to surrender it nicely? You are bold, I must give you that; this is why you are the perfect candidate for that job.

- What if I refuse?

He turned around, signaling one of his goons with his chin. The man took out a gun. Mei gulped, rearing. Holling went towards her.

- You cannot. You are bound to me now. Any attempt to walk away would result in your own death. How about it?

She looked down, taking a deep breath before gazing into the businessman's eyes.

- Do not expect anything extravagant, I'm no politician.

- I expect you to do a good job. If the government refuses the deal, it will count as treason. The only available option is for the project to be accepted. Did I make myself clear?

She nodded reluctantly, shaking. He smiled.

- Good, very good. I entrust you with all the details and expect some news very soon. You have
three days to give me a follow up on the case. If I learn that you have betrayed me, you shall pay
dearly and your friends of International Rescue will, too.

The man sheathed his gun and gave Mei a data chip as Holling was heading towards the exit. He
turned around for one last word.

- And don't think about breaking the news to them or even asking for help. They will have their
hands full soon enough.

He exited the clinic with his suite, leaving the woman to wonder what mess she had gotten herself
into. She dropped to her knees and cried.

It was the dead of night in England. The henchmen had made it as far as the coast and found
themselves a cruiser boat to make their escape. Its owner did not seem to be anywhere around.
Joseph Herring hopped on and made it for the pilot's wheel, groping around in darkness. The roar
of engines overhead startled him as he was trying to jump start the motor. He laid low and waited,
looking quickly to notice a large GDF aircraft patrolling the area. He went back towards Sheinor
who was waiting in the car with the unconscious hostage. She had been striped of her clothing and
dressed up with a dirty work uniform found in the trunk of the car. This would at least mask her
scent a bit in case they would have to go on foot. As Herring came back, Sheinor cursed.

- Fuck, mate! Whatcha doin' there? You had to start the boat so we can get the bloody hell outta
here!

- There is a patrol in the sky. We'll have to change plans.

- Those idiots are still on out tracks. Damn, we're not getting paid enough to do this.

Sheinor took out a tablet computer and began fiddling with it. He made sure to put the network
offline not to be traced.

- The boss has sum warehouses north. We'll lay low there and find sum wings.

Herring took the wheel and began driving north, lights out. They went on for a couple of miles
when the road became tortuous in between hills. The darkness was almost complete, they could
barely make out the rocks from the rest of the pasture. It was too late when they noticed another
car going around a corner. Both vehicles ended up crashing.

Sheinor cursed and screamed, getting out of the car and towards the other one, weapon in hand.
There was only the driver inside, passed out from the crash, his forehead bloody as he hit the
steering wheel before the airbags inflated. Herring was exiting the vehicle, stunned but able to
move. He went towards Sheinor.

- What are you doing! We need to bail, now!

There was no vehicle coming from the road but the short dark-haired man was starting to become
nervous. He kicked the car door in anger.

- Take the chick, we're bailing through the fields.

Herring grabbed the young woman on his shoulder and headed for the wilderness, followed by his
boss. As they were making their way towards an old field barn, their hostage began waking up.
Herring rummaged through his pockets, trying to find the sedative he had previously used; the
remaining vials had broken during the accident. The young woman was moaning groggily, not
fully awake. She was still tied up. Sheinor looked at her.

- Gag her. I'll try to get us a new ride.

Herring grabbed a handkerchief and tied it firmly around the young woman's head. They split up as the tall Irish man went inside the barn and Sheinor towards what a far away farmhouse.

He dropped the young woman in a heap of hay, sitting down not so far away from her. He had thought about knocking her unconscious but wounding her would was not part of the contract. He kept her in check instead.

Bright lights could be seen through the window, brushing against the old barn. Sheinor came back inside quickly.

- Herring! Two cops are coming. Let's get 'em.

The henchman got up and followed him, hiding in the darkness. They installed silencers on their gun; it made the weapon unconcealable but they had no choice at that point.

Two policemen entered the barn and began looking around with a flashlight. They noticed some movement in the hay. As they approached, they were startled by the young woman's presence. One of the officers was about to announce their finding on the radio when a gunshot was fired, traversing his skull and exiting his forehead. His colleague was startled but was felled quickly in a similar fashion. Blood spilled on the ground as the kidnappers came out of hiding. Remaining silent, they took the girl and exited the barn, making it for the vehicle.

Herring opened the trunk and dropped the hostage inside. He sat back in the passenger seat and watched as Sheinor began fiddling with the computer, programming fake sightings further in the west. This would give them time to reach the warehouse. The dark-haired man grinned.

- We go now before anybody else becomes curious.

They went back on the road again on board of the police vehicle. This would not let them go unnoticed, but until they would make it in the vicinity of the warehouse, they had to take any ride they could. The cover of the night would provide the rest.

Kayo and Gordon left the hotel in midday. The young woman had a restless night, exhibiting a very bad mood. Gordon had his troubles too; he had drunk a bit too much and ended up stripping while dancing on the bar. The three beautiful young women were all excited and wished to get a piece of him but is was one of the bouncers who did, taking him down from his perch and politely asking him to leave. He did not try to put up resistance, having no intention of ending up in jail. He walked back, having trouble remembering which door was his. He told Kayo in the morning over breakfast; it cheered her up and made her smile.

As they took place in the jet, Gordon was strangely silent. She inquired about it.

- It's not like you not to have anything to say.

He was gazing at the sky.

- I've been thinking about what you told me yesterday. It shook me a bit.

She sighed. He was a bit of a drama queen, it was to be expected that such news would affect him even if he was not concerned.
- Stop thinking about it and let my handle my problems. Everything will be fine but you must help me and keep your mouth shut about it. Promise me.

- Promised. I told you not to worry about it, Kayo. I’m not going to betray you or anything.

Everything he said had to be taken lightly. He did sell her out for a lot of things during their youth and she had learned not to rely on him for anything. This time, she had not a choice and would need to see if he really did grow up.

She landed the craft and drove it to the lower hangar near Thunderbird Two’s launch bay. Gordon took care of the luggage while she went upstairs. Scott was sitting behind his father’s desk, working. As he noticed Kayo approaching, he got up and took her in his arms. He held her close for a minute before asking:

- So, how did it go?

- It wasn't bad. I would have liked it if you would have come.

- You know I couldn’t. I have to stay on watch and make sure everything is okay here.

The usual answer. This time, she wanted to cry. Instead, she asked:

- Would you want to go for a walk on the beach?

- Yes, of course. I'll finish this paperwork and meet you down there in about twenty minutes. Does it sound good?

- It does.

She went back to her room and put on a nice summer dress. The sun was still hot at the end of the day but the breeze from the ocean was balancing the heat in the air. It took her a few minutes to get ready before heading down and waiting in the shade, under a small thatched roofed hut. He came, wearing a light linen shirt and a pair of shorts. It was unusual for him to dress lightly but she enjoyed seeing him finally take some time off.

She took his arm as they began walking along the beach. He looked at the horizon before asking her:

- It was an awfully quick trip. I thought you would stay for a few days.

- I did not want to stay there by myself. Gordon isn't the type of company you would enjoy for a few days straight. He is a bit too much…

He laughed. Gordon was a party animal and never missed an opportunity to make a show of himself.

- Yeah, I know what you mean. You can't really rest with him around. On the other hand, you always did enjoy a bit of action.

She stopped. He turned towards her. She gazed at his sky-blue eyes.

- There is something I was meant to tell you, Scott.

He was looking at her, pushing strands of hair back over her ears as they were blown by the breeze. He smiled sweetly.
- I'm all ears.

She took a deep breath.

- I… I'm… expecting a child.

Her words were like a splash of cold water on him. His face changed suddenly from surprise to anxiety. He tried making sense of all this, the words seemed to mix in his mouth.

- You… I mean, are you sure?

She nodded. He rubbed his face in his hands. He was not talking it very well. She touched his arm.

- Scott, please. Calm down.

He slowly pushed her hand away.

- This… this can't be happening… I mean, it's not…

- Stop just a minute. Look at me.

He evaded her gaze. He could not look at her. This seemed too much for him to bear. She insisted.

- Look at me!

He turned, she was crying. He hesitated before approaching her and taking her in his arms. He kissed her head trying hard to remain calm.

- Tynusha… I… we can't to this. We just can't.

She held on tight to him. It was as she expected. She took a step back and looked at him.

- Then… what do you expect me to do now?

He sighed.

- Let me think, please. I just need some time.

He turned around and left. She remained on the shore, looking at the horizon before sitting down on the beach. It was no surprise to her: Scott had always been anxious and coping with such news would be difficult. She would need to leave him some time, but could not wait too long, either.

It was nightfall when she came back inside. The boys were enjoying an evening swim and Grandma had joined them. Brains was doing some work on the kitchen table. He was drawing something on a tablet computer and zooming blueprints on a holo-screen. It looked like an addition to Thunderbird Shadow. She sat down at the table and looked.

- What are you working on, Brains?

He was startled, so focused on his work he did not even see her arrive. He replaced his glasses.

- Oh, Kayo! Hap…py to see you are back! This is the n…new addition to Thunderbird Shadow: a missile jammer. Q…quite amazing, isn't it?

- This looks… complicated. You'll have to explain it to me once it's installed.

- Of c…course!
Abigail came through the kitchen carrying a towel. She looked at what Brains was doing.

- Missile Jammer… neat. Good addition to your ship, only, it won't work with tracking missiles. You need to hook a communication module as an add-on.

Brains looked at the bioengineer, looking very serious.

- I knew that. I'll make sure we can d…do something with Thunderbird Five. It's already p…planned.

The bioengineer turned towards Kayo.

- Care to join us for a swim?

The operative got up.

- No thanks. I'll get some rest instead.

- You okay?

- Yeah… everything is fine. Just tired, that is all.

She walked passed the people in the kitchen and went towards her room. Abigail followed her in the corridor. Once they were alone, she caught up with her.

- You don't look okay; your eyes are red. What happened?

She took a deep breath, not knowing if it was wise to speak to her about it, but she had to take it off her chest. Kayo opened the door to her room and went inside, followed by the bioengineer who was waiting for her to speak. She did, repressing her sobbing.

- I went to shore to get my mind off all that happened. Turns out, that was not all.

The box containing the test was lying around. Abigail noticed it but did not inquire about it. She waited for Kayo to speak up.

- I just learned some crushing news. It shouldn't have happened. The whole thing just messes me up.

Abigail took the box in her hand and opened it. She noticed the test results before looking back at her host. She thought for a moment.

- Well, I believe you should check out the data sheet of Rifampin, the antibiotics used to cure your sepsis. My guess is that it messed you up in some way.

- This… would explain it all.

- What's Scott thinking about that?

She sighed.

- He's lost it. He asked me to give him some time, but I don't think that would be smart. I don't really know what to think about right now.

- It is better to go one day at a time. Don't worry. If he cares about you, he'll be glad this happened.
- I don't know. I guess I don't want to press it on him. International Rescue is a complex organization and I know it takes him all his energy to run it. But he must understand he's not alone and even after being terribly sick, he didn't take it as a lesson. He still blames himself for Alan's misfortune... We can't expect to spend our entire lives doing this.

Abigail smiled.

- You are right. You can't expect to put aside your normal life. Emergencies and disaster happen, but not every single day. You are all young and healthy now, but once you reach a certain point in your life, you'll all realize it will take its toll on your mind and bodies. Let's hope he does not find out too late.

- I'd like him to.

The bioengineer bit her lip before speaking.

- I'd recommend going through lab testing too, just to be sure. Even if pharmacy tests are becoming more accurate, you never know if it's not something else...

- What do you mean?

- Just... Meet me at the lab tomorrow.

Kayo nodded. Abigail went on.

- It's all settled then. Do you want to join us in the pool? It's part two of volleyball revenge against surfer boy and his partner the "Space Terror".

- No thanks, my mind is not really at play right now. I'll stay here.

- Suit yourself. Just, take it easy.

Kayo hugged Abigail. It seemed to make her feel better. They parted, the young agent seemed to feel better. The bioengineer smiled as she exited the room, heading back towards the terrace.

The kidnapping of Devika, the Minister's daughter, was all over the news. Penelope closed the video report of the recent findings about the case before delving in her own research. There had been no recent sightings of Bereznik agents by the Council or any involvement of their part in current incidents. She was beginning to become anxious to act and find out more for herself. That would require her to gain access to the Bereznik border, something she could not do. Her face was branded as an agent of the Council and if she ever crossed over to the foreign state, she might be murdered by anyone who recognized her.

As she was complementing her research with files from the Council's database, she received a call. It was the Director of the Secret services and Investigation division. She had not much choice but to pick up; he must have noticed her access.

Georges Henry Phelps, a renowned policemen and detective, decorated with many medals of honor for his lawful services to his country was nominated to be the Director of Secret services employed by the Council. After the war ended, many agents were unemployed and began taking freelance jobs, sometimes interfering with the Council's goals. The agency was created in order to recruit them and gain a precious force of undercover operatives and spies. Penelope had been drafted after going through the regular process but had a huge advantage: her aristocratic title made her a very good asset to infiltrate high end events without raising suspicions; going as far as approaching the
Queen herself, something a commoner could not even think of doing without giving himself off.

He greeted her with the utmost courtesy and his usual severe look.

- Greetings, Lady Creighton-Ward.

- Greetings Director. What a pleasant surprise! What can I help you with?

He sat straight in his chair, clearing his throat.

- I have noticed your various accesses in the database in the last few weeks. I would appreciate an explanation.

She did not expect him to make such a statement. He was clearly looking to question her about something.

- Well, Sir, I have a lead on something and wished to verify the recent progress on the cases.

- A lead? Go on.

It was useless to try avoiding him, he would simply notice. He was incredibly skilled at reading people's intentions.

- I have a lead on Dasha Kaczynska. It seems that she has enlisted the help of German agents…

He interrupted her.

- What was your purpose in *Eaux Claires*?

She was caught off guard. Of course, the agents present on the site would have given their reports before they met their demise. She had to expect that much but was so engaged in finding what Dasha was up to that she did not consider they might divulge her presence. Making up a reason would only make matters worse. He went on.

- Lady Creighton-Ward, I cannot have agents do rogue work with the help of the Council's resources. You have to give me the right explanation for why you were there. Also, please identify the people accompanying you, especially that young woman who stopped the assassination attempt on Beaujolais.

- The people with me were some aides and personnel. That young woman did not know better; Beaujolais was enticed by her looks and her voice. Do not worry about them. We were on a mission to gather information about Marcus Holling. We thought we could get Beaujolais to speak about his partnership with him. The shooters cut us short. Luckily, we were able to get away before the avalanche hit. I believe he might have ties with the Bereznik state.

Speaking about International Rescue would not do her any good. He knew that she had close ties with them, that was certain, yet she did not want to create more confusion about the organization.

The director smiled.

- I see. You have very good assumptions. We know he does but not with her. It seems his contact inside the state is a rogue agent named Zeta. She has been leading a group of people who's only desire is to overthrow the government. Dasha Kaczynska's actions are futile as they stand; she mainly concentrates in growing the numbers of her bank account with her trade. That is not an immediate threat.
She was expecting a scolding but instead, his tone softened and he seemed pleased.

- Regarding Marcus Holling, I believe you are doing the right thing. This man could not be tried from lack of proof from the Council, even though we were aware of his direct implication in the Veterans and Olympus projects. He had spies working for him and immediately destroyed the evidence once he learned his time had come. I am hoping he will get what he deserves, but justice is blind. It requires proof, strong ones.

- In all do respect, Sir, I have gathered bits of information that are reliable and could be used against him in a future trial. But access to the Council's database has given me the possibility to validate such information. This is why I have need of this access.

He fiddled on a tablet computer and sent folder directly through a secured encrypted link connection. It was labeled with a lot of numbers and letters. She could not make out what it meant. Once it was all transferred, he deleted any traces of the transfer and connection.

- Please keep this secured. It was part of my own findings during the initial investigation. As you know, I was the one working on Holling's case. This is the file containing all the files that were deleted from either the Council's database or the worldwide web.

She began browsing through the file names, still labeled with numbers and letters. She was perplexed.

- Why... are you giving me this?

- As you know, the Minister of Defense's daughter has been kidnapped. His health is declining and soon he will have to abandon his seat on the Council. There will be someone appointed in his stead, yet we do not know who.

- Do you have a guess?

- I cannot say, but it is best if this information is not available when his successor will take the seat. I do not even know if I will remain head of the Services. Since cannot be sure if he will be an ally of Holling or not, it's best to do a cleanup…

He paused and resumed on a more formal tone.

- Good luck, agent Creighton-Ward. I hope your search will be fructuous.

He disconnected.

Penelope began browsing through the folder, thinking of herself as an archivist more than an agent. She had been doing paperwork for weeks now, and the existence of this file would keep her inside for a while still.

She ordered tea and began opening a few files randomly and laying them on a holo-screen. One retained her attention. It was financial information and a listing of the backer of the Veterans project. She suddenly gasped as she read.

One of the entries listed was "Tracy industries. Backer: Jeff Tracy".
Star Alpha

It was a bit past sunrise when Abigail got up. She slept surprisingly well, something that had happened only a few times since she came to the island. She went towards the kitchen to fix herself some coffee before heading down to the lab. She sent a message to Kayo, telling her she was up and ready to proceed.

The trip was on her mind; it frightened her. It was an environment she could not control and about which she knew very little. Everyone was comfortable with it, all thanks to Jeff Tracy, who had taught his sons enough for them to be accustomed to space travel and operation. That made her feel a little less worried, but a bit left out. She would place her life be in the hands of Alan, ironically the youngest but the only one with the real title of "astronaut". After a coffee and a lot of persuasions, she would not die upon exiting the atmosphere, all would be well. Luckily, her pilot was a sleepy head, so she had some time in front of her to do that.

Kayo arrived about ten minutes later. Dark rings under her eyes indicated she had very little sleep. The operative sat down and looked at Abigail.

- I'm here. What did you want to do exactly?

The bioengineer was preparing the necessary material to take a few blood samples; she laid down the necessary tubes.

- You want to get to the bottom of this, right? A blood test is the only thing that can be a hundred percent sure.

- What else could it be?

She tied the tourniquet to her rested arm and plucked a needle in. She began filling one of the test tubes before answering.

- Mutated cells…

- Don't use your scientific vocabulary with me.

Two vials full, two more to take. Kayo reared in her chair, waiting for the reply. Abigail answered:

- An underlying sickness of some kind. Cancerigenous cells or remains from your infection. What you were exposed to might have had some effects on your body. These scientists were working on biological weapons.

Kayo's voice took a sarcastic tone:

- You are really scary once you start exposing facts. I'd rather listen to Brains' lecture than have you talk about that stuff.

The bioengineer expressed a half smile. The truth was a scary thing; the military worked hard to hide the horrors of biological warfare to the general public. She pressed on Kayo's arm, removing the syringe and sticking a ball of cotton wool over her puncture. She took the tubes and began preparing them for analysis while the Kayo was watching. The operative said:

- Will you be able to do the analysis before you leave?
- Yes. Basic testing takes less than ten minutes on the computer. For the rest, it will have to wait until I come back.

The tests were set on a rack and ready to go through the analyzer. The impressive miniature assembly line took the tubes and plunged small plastic straws inside. Blood was taken sucked out, a few drops at a time, and tested in the special computer unit. Kayo observed the machine, hypnotized by the tiny tubing changing color as it drew from various reactive solutions. It took a bit more than ten minutes before all the results were in.

Abigail opened the report, scrolling up and down.

- Negative. That settles it. But something else is wrong.

- What is?

- There are some changes in your body; your cells did mutate from the virus. I can see very subtle changes in your white blood cells count.

- I would rather have dealt with the previous situation…

- I'll prepare the slides and be ready to investigate once I come down from space. It's no immediate danger, but if you leave it untreated, it might become.

- Care to explain what it could do?

- Cancer. Debilitating diseases. Or even something else… like genetic mutation. I'll have to make an in-depth check on the microscope. Meanwhile, don't worry. Take some time to rest and speak to Scott. He'll be happy to know it was a fake positive.

- I'll have to give him a good explanation for this…

- I'm sure you can work this out.

The bioengineer began making the microscope slides. She turned towards Kayo suddenly, as something flashed in her mind.

- Make sure the Chinese doctor does not stick her nose in this.

Her tone was bitter. The fact that she hated Mei was obvious now and it showed in her body language as she spoke. Kayo answered in a calm voice to ease the tone.

- I won't. Right now, I'll try focusing on Scott. Concentrate on your trip ahead, I heard that you are not comfortable with space.

Abigail answered, coloring the slides and laying them to dry.

- It's very unsettling. Never had any training or preparation for this.

- You don't have to worry. I was scared too the first time I went; it was the boys' father who was piloting. He taught us all we needed to know. Alan takes from him, he is a good astronaut. You'll feel better once you've left the atmosphere.

It was almost seven-thirty when Abigail looked at the clock. She sighed.

- I feel like I'm walking the green line.
Kayo smiled watching her leave.

Scott was already behind his desk with a coffee in hand, handling business on the holo-computer when Abigail showed up in the living room. Alan was nowhere in sight. She sat down and waited for the elder to speak. He turned towards her, taking a breath. His face was different: he looked a bit shaken. She bit her lip thinking that Kayo would want to talk to him quickly instead of having him sink in a whirlpool of emotions and believing his life had completely flipped around. His attitude was surprisingly calm.

- Good morning, Abigail. Alan will be here shortly. John will be in charge of your mission after launch. You simply need to remember the simulator training you had yesterday and Alan will guide you through the rest.

She nodded. Her fear had dissipated once she had set foot inside the simulator and began the short training for space basics, zero-G and co-piloting. It was not as hard as she thought and with Alan and John, she was confident she could fare pretty well. If they asked her to go EVA, though, that would make her quite unsteady. But she was with International Rescue; what could go wrong?

Alan came to the living room, yawning. He looked at Scott and Abigail as he stretched.

- Ready for launch!

The elder did not even bother criticizing him; he was used to his brother sleeping in until the last minute, even when he was required for an urgent mission. The youngest looked groggy but was so quick witted that he could do his tasks half asleep. On the other hand, Abigail began feeling nervous again.

They took place in the double chair leading to Thunderbird Three's hangar. On the way, right before they split inside the tunnels, Alan said:

- This is going to be a piece of cake.

The bioengineer sighed. "I'm just being paranoid" she thought, as everyone seemed to take this trip very lightly. Since her outfit had never been tested amongst the rigorous environment of space, she had to borrow a spare outfit from the island's stock. It was a stretching blue suit resembling the one John was using, with boots, helmet, and gloves all branded with the IR logo but no accent color. The sizing was not perfect; it was made for a man. The arms and legs were a bit too long and the chest was tight. This made a really awkward situation when her chair collided back with Alan's: he stared at her bosom and blushed. She laughed to ease the moment.

Once the seats were loaded and locked in position inside the craft, Alan broke the silence:

- Ready for the introductory speech? It will guide you through the launch.

She turned her head towards him.

- Go ahead, I'm all ears.

He gave her a complete breakdown of her tasks during launch and out of the atmosphere, tips and tricks in moving around in zero-G and other useful things. She was relieved to know that Alan was a lot more caring than she had previously thought; he was the captain now and his task was to protect his crew.

The metal silo closed and the countdown began. The engines rumbled as the ship took off towards
the sky, passing through the atmosphere, as the sky gradually darkened to a pitch black scenery with an only the eerie light of the blue planet underneath illuminating the cockpit. Alan's instructions were so detailed and clear that Abigail had surprisingly gone through takeoff without even noticing, executing every order he gave her. Once in space, she gazed at the portal, amazed. The astronaut smiled.

- Really beautiful, right?

She responded positively, nodding slowly, her eyes still clinging to the only window there was to look outside. He pressed a few buttons before commenting.

- I don't understand you. How can you jump into a group of guerrilla fighters armed with machine guns and be afraid of going to space in the safest ship there is?

She answered without moving her eyes.

- Because I know these guys can't hurt me. My suit is bullet-proof, I have sufficient military training to fight them and my body can regenerate. But space… I feel can't fight against the laws of nature.

He did not understand why she would be so straightforward: he had always seen her seldom answering questions of simply evading them. "She must have enough confidence in me to tell me all that", he thought. After all, her life was in his hands.

A beep from the computer indicated their approach of Thunderbird Five. Alan initiated the docking sequence. Abigail came out of her reverie and executed her tasks, which consisted mainly of countdowns, checking dials, secondary calculations and data surveillance. The astronaut's console was already so complete; he needed an extra pair of eyes to execute tasks more easily, not that he could not do them alone.

Alan released his security braces from his shoulders and grabbed his helmet.

- We are docked with Thunderbird Five. Let's go see John on board and make a plan of action.

Abigail nodded, ready to get out of her chair. Her body felt lighter, beginning to slowly float around. Her heart raced. It was not the same feeling as inside the simulator. She tried going towards him, only achieving crashing on the ceiling. The astronaut caught her hand and dragged her towards him.

- Take it easy! A very light push is all you need. There is not friction in space, you need to remember that.

She nodded, putting on her helmet.

- Yeah… right. I remember. Just a thought… if we are going to go EVA, please tie me to you. I'd feel safer knowing I won't get lost in space.

Alan sighed. He was hesitating between laughing and being completely annoyed by her tone of voice was a bit anxious. He smiled.

- You are with us. International Rescue. The guys that save other guys who get lost in space. I won't let you drift away nor will I abandon you up here.

He turned back towards the bay door, muttering a comment.
- *If anything happened to you, my brother would never forgive me.*

She overheard him; her eyes widened.

- What did you say?

Alan activated the locking system and the door opened. He answered.

- Nothing…. Don't be mad, you'll just get carried away and fly off again.

Surprisingly, she steered herself in front of Alan, cutting him off.

- How did you know about this?

- Simply what Gordon told me.

He went around her and towards the access shaft to the space station. He turned around, floating backward.

- All I know is he does care a lot about you. That's good enough for me.

She bit her lip: was it so obvious to everyone? It did not matter now; she was away from earth and on a mission. She followed the astronaut into the space station.

John greeted them in the gravity ring, working on the mission ahead. He set the station on remote, defaulting all traffic to the communications monitoring on Tracy Island. Abigail smiled, looking around.

- You have a nice place. Not much sunlight, though.

The space monitor smiled.

- I'm glad to have you on board. Are you ready for the briefing?

- Yes. The quicker we get this done, the faster we can get back to earth.

F- AB. Let me draw out all that I found.

He set up a holo-screen with a collage of images, old and new. He began his presentation.

- Star Alpha is only a few miles away. It is labeled as a research facility, from an undisclosed company. The GDF does not regard it as a threat. I've talked to Ridley and she says there might people inside. We need to be careful.

Abigail looked at the images.

- It's unlikely that there are any survivors. Unless they did feign their deaths. That would have been a very smart move. But six months without re-supplying would not be possible for a complete crew.

- Maybe there are only a few people remaining. The station is active, which means someone, or something, is controlling it. Usually, it's a person to prevent automated replies.

- Unless they programmed Chronos to reply in their stead. It could be possible. It is a communication module that has a very powerful algorithm, almost as powerful as an AI.
- You know what we are looking for inside?

- Yes. We need to find Chronos, the black boxes, and Dennis Edwards, if he is still alive. I doubt it, but we'll see.

- Good. I've uploaded all we need to know. We'll fly towards the station on Thunderbird Three. I'll co-pilot so you can take it easy, Abigail.

She was relieved with two astronauts on her side. The three took place inside the rocket and headed towards the station. Alan's comment stirred something inside of her as if she felt a bit annoyed that everyone would know about her and Virgil through gossip. She would have preferred for him to announce it himself once he was comfortable with the situation and not have anyone interfere. After her discussion with John, she understood that his past experiences might get in the way, which is why she required him to make up his mind first. She also did not want to get hurt: accepting the fact that somebody was attracted to her was difficult as she had problems accepting herself in the first place.

The station was eerily, with only a few lights flashing to indicate system was online and a very light humming coming from it. Alan used the docking port and locked Thunderbird Three onto it. They entered the first airlock, the system prompting for authorization again. Abigail approached slowly, getting in front of the computer.

She enabled her helmet's exterior microphone and stated her name. The computer confirmed and opened a double set of airlocks. They proceeded in a hallway with many doors. John began scanning the vicinity as the airlock closed behind them.

- There is no breathable air. The generator must have been shut down for power saving. Do you know your way inside, Abigail?

She went towards one of the open doors near their location and looked inside. It was empty. The footlockers and storages had been emptied.

- I've never been here and I have never seen anything about the place. We'll have to access one of the systems.

- Can you do it? I mean, if you don't have knowledge of this place, will the main computer still be accessible?

She came back towards John.

- Nobody else could open the door. It was left untouched ever since. Edwards and Ericsson made sure Holling could not get here in any way without me. They wanted to hide things for me to find.

A loud metallic clanking came from the far end of the corridor. All three were startled. John turned around nervously.

- What was that?

Alan smiled.

- Probably a ghost, John.

- That's enough picking on me with these dumb ghost stories. Let's go check out if they are survivors.
They proceeded through the hallway. The walls were lined in white metallic alloy using a very light insulation. John looked around, noticing the station would be a hazard in case of a meteor shower and wondered why no incident had happened. It was roughly done, the type of quickly assembled unit made for a few months long space mission. His guess was that it was assembled on the spot, making it impossible to return to earth; it would burn down to a crisp in the atmosphere. He hoped that the trajectory would not change in while they were inside.

They entered a dimly lighted area behind a broken automatic door. John pulled out on one of the panels in order to gain entry. Everything was upside down, like if a struggle had taken place. As they began looking around, Alan found a still working tablet computer. Browsing through, he stumbled upon series of emails and he began reading them.

One of the texts caught his attention. It was titled "Re: The Operation". That made him smirk, but when he read the content, he understood that it was not a laughing matter. He looked at his two allies, brandishing the electronic device.

- Guys, you'll have to hear about this. Listen.

He began reading.

- We are aware of the situation and have willingly taken part in cutting all ties with ground control. There are a lot of variables to consider, and I believe that the one implying that we must remain here, cut out from the entire world without any hope of going back to our loved ones on earth was not considered. As much as I want to make Holling pay for what he is about to do, I don't want him to go after my wife and kids. Edwards seems bent on ignoring us. We have no choice but to either turn ourselves over to the GDF or take control of the station. Whatever we decide, the risks are numerous. I'm ready to fight if it means to save my kin.

Abigail asked:

- What's the name of the person writing it?

- It's only signed as "Simon".

John finished searching in his corner and came towards his brother.

- Well, if the crew did not agree with their fate, they might have caused a mutiny to ditch the commanding officer. I wonder… There is no record of the GDF raiding this place or even setting foot on it.

Alan raised a brow.

- How would you know? You haven't been hacking in theirs files again, have you?

John remained silent. He had done it multiple times; the security of the GDF's database was known to have a few flaws. The space monitor was the one who discovered them but never disclosed anything about them, preferring to keep a hand in and, in turn, provide security from outside hackers. He basically put EOS in and had her copy a bunch of files at irregular intervals to add them to his own database.

More noise coming from an adjacent room redirected their attention. This time, it was closer. They nodded silently and began flying around, trying not to bump anything on their way. It was easier for John and Alan to move around, Abigail was lagging behind. The two young men turned to witness the faint outline of a figure going around the corner and entering a room. They followed, asking him to stop with their usual "This is International Rescue! We're here to help". The room
they entered in was very dark; John began scanning as Alan took out a flashlight to look around.

The walls on either side looked as if they were scorched. Burnt debris everywhere littered the ground, nothing was recognizable. Alan was the first to break the silence.

- There must have been an incident here involving fire when the station was fully operational. Fire requires oxygen…

John stumbled upon a large metal grate that was splitting the room in two. The door was barred from his side with a padlock and a chain coiled-up around the bars. As he began scanning the ground, his face paled. He motioned to his brother to come this way. Alan turned his flashlight towards the locked compartment. The astronaut let out a shriek and let go his light. Both brothers looked at each other and gulped as they turned away from the gruesome spectacle.

Bones. Charred bones. And a lot.

Such a sight made both of them head for the exit quickly. They took a minute to regain their senses, holding on each others' forearms.

- This place is weird and creepy. Let's hurry and get the hell out of here.

John turned towards his brother, still a bit shaken but managed to express a smile.

- Talk about not being afraid of horror movies. You wanted to come along, might I remind you.

- It's not the same! Those are movies. They don't use any REAL scorched human remains. Something happened here… those people were caged and burned to a crisp. It's giving me shivers.

- Don't worry. As soon as we find out more about this place, we'll leave. Now, where is Abigail?

- Let's backtrack. Maybe she found something on the way… or she's stuck somewhere.

He laughed and sighed. John cocked his head.

- Don't make fun of her like that. Do you want me to remind you of what happened during your first zero-G training?

- Alright! Alright! That's embarrassing, don't relate to that. Let's go.

They proceeded back in the corridor, making sure to cover each other.

Abigail had lost John and Alan in their chase of the elusive figure. She had not seen it and was a bit skeptical when they went after it. As she was trying to go faster, she kept pushing herself too hard on the sides, ending up in doing barrel rolls all the time. Also, her prosthetics being a lot lighter than limbs, she had to fight against the lack of gravity to keep them close to her body. She did not control her strength very well and decided to move while hanging on the walls instead, making her more steady but a lot slower.

Instead, she continued her search in another compartment. A locked door stood in front of her, prompting her for identification. She stated her name; the door did not budge. Instead, she turned towards the door's controller and tried to connect to the node with her cerebrum computer. She established a link: her helmet would probably not be able to be used as an inductive screen but it would at least reflect the image projected in her mind. It was a very, very complicated science, and Edwards was the one who helped her create it. She had grown the biological computer and he did
the code. It was an amazing piece of technology, the most advanced bio-computer yet. It was then implanted onto the lower part of her brain by a neurosurgeon. She had noted a few changes in her brain waves through electromyogram, but nothing extreme. Her reflexes, her perception, and coordination were still good although she did suffer a bit of a downfall when she was recovering. The fact that she could do some simple hacking with only the power of her brain was both amazing and dangerous.

It was as she had thought. Edwards loved mind games and puzzles. He even programmed some in his spare time, for his colleagues' enjoyment. Abigail never really tried them, but Ericsson was a fan. The only reason why she played them was to make him happy. She accessed the game on her cerebrum computer when John called.

- Abigail? Where are you at?

In an adjacent corridor. Come back the way you came, you'll find me. Have you found your guy yet?

- No. There was nobody there. We're coming towards you, don't move.

She concentrated on the game, succeeding in winning. Next to her, the locked door unlatched noisily. She was closing her connection when she felt a terrible sting on her right side. She let out a small cry and turned immediately to witness a man in a dirty patched space suit. His bearded face and mean grin was clearly visible through his broken visor, pushing on the sharpened screwdriver still wedged inside her wound. With her free hand, she tried to put a hand on the man's helmet; he evaded being a lot more agile than she was in zero-G. He grabbed her from behind, still holding his weapon tightly. She tried to fly backward but had not enough strength to hit hard enough against the wall. Drops of blood were filling the air. She had not to keep her cool and not panic. Before he could make a move, she felt him being dragged backward. John had taken hold of his suit, pulling him further in the corridor. Seeing both young men, he tried desperately to run away. The space suit ripped in John's hands, exposing the man's naked arms and back. The attacker began panicking as breathable air was replaced by the void. The space monitor tried to correct his mistake, realizing a bit too late he could not do anything. Alan approached Abigail and looked at her wound. The weapon was still lodged inside, she was about to pull it out when he grabbed her hand. He noticed she was wavering.

- Don't. Let go to Thunderbird Three, now!

Alan carried Abigail; she was holding onto his sash on his back with one hand, the other pressing on her wound to stop the blood from flowing freely. She had to hold out until they reached the ship.

They entered the rocket, closing the airlock. John pressurized the cockpit quickly and fetched a first aid kit. Abigail lay back in the passenger's chair, her side beginning to throb anew. The youngest Tracy began soaking up the blood with a gauze sponge, pressing on the wound to stop the bleeding. John shook his head.

- We're going back. You need medical attention.

Abigail lifted her gaze to meet his. She interjected, trying to hide her panting from the pain.

- No! We stay! I managed to open the door. Let me go back there and finish what I started.

Alan grabbed the weapon and nodded at the young woman. He pulled it out quickly; more blood
flew from the wound. The bioengineer hid her screams behind her clenched teeth. He quickly applied a dressing on the wound, the white bandage reddening at a disturbing rate.

- It looks deep. We can't have you go back there with a torn spacesuit and that kind of puncture wound. John's right, we need to fly you back down to Tracy Island.

- We need Star Alpha's black boxes… This might be the only chance we get. If Holling gets his hands on them before… we'll miss our chance. My nanites will kick in, don't worry. The bleeding will stop.

John frowned.

- Don't you have any consideration for your well being? You're not going back there. This could have been dangerous for us, too, had we stumbled upon that guy. He's dead now… to think we would have done something like this…

He felt the guilt behind his actions. At first, he did not even realize what he had done, but now that the adrenaline dropped, his thoughts raced in his head. Abigail went on.

- We have to try! What if the GDF comes by? They'll find out we're here and start asking questions.

He sighed. She was right. Somebody was bound to detect their presence there. John thought about Ridley for a minute; Alan woke him from his reverie, asking:

- What now?

Abigail was tending to her wound, applying bandages to try to stop the bleeding. It seemed to subside after a few drenched gauze sponges. Alan helped her as much as he could, while John was looking away. The sight of blood was not something he enjoyed. He turned towards his brother.

- Contact Tracy Island, ask if…

The bioengineer cut him off.

- NO! You can't tell Scott about this! Please..? It's only going to make matters worse!

The space monitor turned towards her.

- What will be worse is if something happens to you up here and we did not do anything about it!

- John, stop, please.

As soon as the astronaut spoke, his brother turned around. There was a lot of tension in the air; John waited to hear what Alan was about to say.

- I'm going back in. We're going to get the black boxes and get the hell out of there.

The youngest turned to Abigail.

- As long as you stay in an oxygenated environment, you'll do fine.

John sighed.

- Alan… we can't…
- We can. I owe her for saving my life and giving me the opportunity to fly again. I'm going to help her and see through this matter until it's over. Plus, I have seen the speed at which the nanites healed my wounds. She will be okay. Are you with me, John?

The space monitor knew his daring brother was going to put himself in danger. He nodded, intending to watch over him inside the station. They put their helmets back on. Alan turned to the bioengineer.

- We'll exit through the cargo bay. The cockpit will remain pressurized so you won't start bleeding again. Make sure you take good care of your wound while we're inside.

She smiled.

- Thanks, Alan. Keep the channel open, I'll help by guiding you through comms.

Both young men exited through the cargo bay.

The space station was completely silent now. They proceeded through the airlock Abigail had opened before the incident. There was nobody inside. The door closed behind them and began pressurization. John looked at the computer.

- It's still active… could it be that there are survivors on this ship? Or… were?

Alan looked around. The room was clean and showed no signs of having been inhabited in some time.

- We'll find out soon.

It looked like a central command, with an imposing chair towering over lower stations. The astronaut sat down in the black leather seat; it was custom made, a lot larger than normal. Abigail spoke.

- This is Edward's chair. He was a bit… large. Once he got nanites though, he began losing weight critically. It led to organ failure and eventually his death. At least, that's what I heard. After the trials, I didn't get to see him anymore. Try looking around, you might find something in this room.

The boys began their search. John tried to scan the inside of the room; as soon as began, alarms rang. Abigail reacted.

- John, don't! Chronos is monitoring everything you do in this room. Stop your scanning immediately.

The alarms stopped as soon as he turned off his scanners. It was as if something was watching him. He looked around, trying to find whatever would be causing this. The bioengineered had an idea.

- Try to hook me to the main computer.

- How do you want me to do that?

- You still have the link I gave you when I arrived at the Island? Used this as an address for a remote connection and send it to me through your communicator. I'll do the rest.

He was skeptical.

- Will this really work? I'm not sure about this.
- Do it. I'll manage.

The space monitor programmed the remote connection and input the link to the main computer. Abigail relaxed and concentrated. She was able to pass through all the security levels and get through Edward's personal files. She selected one of the videos labeled "All our voices unite" and put it to play.

A very thin and sickly looking dark-skinned man appeared on screen. He had no hair and a very severe look on his face. His crooked fingers were joined together as he looked directly towards the camera. His voice was deep and his pronunciation slow.

"Today is a day to remember. We have officially cut ties from ground control at thirteen hundred hours, Eastern Standard Time on this day, June 18th 2060. We declare ourselves free from the clutches of Marcus C. Holling, our oppressor. We shall remain in orbit and gather sufficient material in order to bring him to justice for the murder of Charles Ericsson and the experimentation he has been doing on Abigail Shaw. All the data protected inside Cradle Alpha and Beam Alpha has been gathered in one single database, ready to be exposed to the World Council. To whoever wishes to add his voice to ours, we shall welcome your aid and wish that more would rise against the man whose terrible crimes speak for themselves."

Cheering was heard in the background. The video stopped. Alan smiled.

- That was something. He really wanted to expose Holling… it's sad he did not succeed.

Abigail found another video; this one was addressed to her. Edwards looked like a cadaver. His eyes were hollow, his cheekbones standing out in his face. He was holding onto his seat with his scrawny hands, shaking.

"Dear Abigail. I do hope you will stumble upon this video one day. My health is declining rapidly. Some of the men have deliberately turned against us, afraid that Holling might go after their own. We have tried reasoning, compromising… nothing has worked so far. They are bent on ripping our heads off to get command. The entire crew has been sealed inside this station and will never be able to escape. Whatever they have told you about me is wrong. I am still alive and I will remain as long as I have a will to fight. He will be brought to justice for what he has done to us, and mostly, for what he intended to do to you. I have gathered a gold mine of information, including a backup of Cradle and Beam Alpha's computer databases. You were powerless to stop him, but we will not remain idly by as he goes along with his twisted ideas. Olympus was more than just a rich men's escape from war; it was meant to be where a new breed of humans would see the light of day. The black boxes are in my personal chambers along with the Chronos AI. Bear in mind that its removal will trigger the self-destruct mechanism. You will have one hour to leave."

He paused, coughing.

"If I can't win, then win for me. And for Ericsson. We are counting on you".

The recording stopped. John and Alan resumed searching the room. It was a dead end; they had to go back whence they came in order to proceed further into the ship. Abigail continued browsing the files and found a map. She broadcasted it.

- I found this. I don't know if it is up to date. Move up the corridor then turn left. You'll get to an airlock. That area seemed to be pressurized.

John answered, taking the lead.
As they proceeded in the corridor, they witnessed signs of a struggle having taken place. Bumps and nicks in the walls indicated that some kind of battle had taken place on this side of the ship. They entered the airlock, the door closed behind them, beginning the pressurization of the interstice. The air was breathable on the other side, yet they decided to keep their helmets on just in case.

The area was littered with debris. Books, broken electronics, clothes and miscellaneous equipment were flying around. Most of the rooms’ doors were opened, the place completely looted and sacked. Only one door remained closed. It was badly dented as if somebody had tried to open it but failed. John touched the holo-pad; it prompted for a voice pattern. Abigail accessed it through the main computer, hoping it would work. The door unlocked but was wedged badly and had to be forced open.

The place was very clean; there were no signs of a struggle in this particular room. Three reinforced suitcases were strapped to an adjacent desk, bearing the symbol of Holling Military Research. Alan looked at the setup.

- Abigail, is that what we are looking for?

She answered, sighing. He could guess her wound had not improved.

- Yes, I think that's it.

- Good.

While Alan was untying the cases, John began looking around. He stumbled upon a particular room where less debris were floating. The inside was dark; he looked for a switch of some kind to turn on the lights. A faint glow appeared in the back as he flipped what he thought to be the main room switch.

He regretted his move instantly.

A decapitated forearm was flying around in the room, clearly showing bite marks on the skin and tissue. A cadaver lay in a corner, half torn and decomposing badly. He turned around, feeling a sudden urge to retch, trying to regain his composure. Alan was exiting the room with the three cases in hand when he saw his brother.

- John? What's wrong?

His elder only pointed the exit in a motion that indicated him to hurry. He did not speak a word. Alan understood that something was wrong, preferring to follow the advice. An alarm rang. As Edwards had stated, once Chronos was getting out of the room, the self-destruction sequence would begin. They hurried out and back towards the ship. John remotely moved Thunderbird five away to make sure that the station would not be caught in the aftershock.

They entered the ship, taking their seats. Abigail opened her eyes when they came in.

- Did you get it?

Alan took place in the pilot seat, putting the cases in a safe spot.

- Yes. We have to move away now. The self-destruction sequence has started.
John sat in the co-pilot seat. He accessed the computer.

- We must warn the GDF about this. Is the trajectory calculated for the debris to fall in an uninhabited area?

The young woman looked at the space monitor, her eyes giving a hint that she was still in pain.

- I don't know.

- I'll contact Ridley and have her keep an eye on the situation. We can't risk it. Alan, head for Tracy Island directly. We'll drop Abigail off.

- FAB, bro! It really feels good to have you as a co-pilot for a change.

- Tired of Scott?

- Well, it's just not the same.

Alan's comments lighted up the atmosphere. Abigail smiled. She felt the wound becoming tighter, an indication that the nanites had begun to work, but the bleeding did not stop entirely. She was beginning to feel dizzy.

John contacted Ridley.

- Hi, Ridley. I'm sorry to bother you this late. I need your help with something.

- Anything for you, John.

Alan smirked. His brother looked at him and frowned before going back to the Captain.

- You remember the space station I told you about? I want you to keep an eye on it. It might enter the atmosphere soon. Can you monitor its descent and make sure it is not oriented towards an inhabited area?

- What happened exactly? Why is this station suddenly going to fall?

He remained silent. Lying to a military officer is an offense. He would not go so far and gave her a short and simple answer instead.

- I don't have time to explain right now in detail, but I swear I'll break it all down to you when you come back to Thunderbird Five. Right now, we simply need to make sure nobody is in danger.

She seemed to understand or, at least, she did not ask any more questions.

- Were there scientists on board?

- No. That's the catch. The station is a hazard and nobody was on board.

- Good then. I trust that you have done your job and made sure everybody would have escaped safely. I'll put my people on this and warn you if something changes.

- Thanks. I owe you.

- No, I owe you for saving my life. Twice.

He smiled as she disconnected. Alan whistled innocently. John's smile faded.
Thunderbird three landed at Tracy Island in the dead of night. Scott had not received any news from the crew and was beginning to worry a bit. The three brothers had gathered in the living room, waiting patiently. They were surprised to see both Alan and John come up from the hangar. Abigail was sitting down, holding a bandage at her side. Virgil stood and hurried towards her.

- What happened?

He looked at his space-bound brothers, trying to find out if any of them had something to do with her state. Alan held his hands out.

- Nothing bad, don't worry. Just some very light incident.

John shook his head.

- There was a crazed survivor inside. He attacked out of the blue, it was impossible to stop him. Turns out he… well… his spacesuit tore and he died from decompression.

Abigail looked at everyone, her head still dizzy from the blood loss and the pain.

- I'm fine. I just need to rest.

She took a step forward; she felt her legs becoming numb. She fell, witnessing only the blurry figures of the Tracys learning to catching her before all turned black.
All went well...

Alan and John caught the bioengineer just in time as she fainted. The other Tracy boys wanted to intervene, surrounding them. Virgil was particularly insistent in taking over. He had caught a glimpse of the bandage on her side and the speckle of blood on her suit which made him frown. He took her in his arms while his brothers withdrew and brought her towards the med bay with John following close behind. Scott approached his youngest brother, pointing him angrily.

- Did you give her the re-entry speech?

Alan slapped his forehead: he did not. She fainted since her body could not adapt quickly enough when they came back to earth. Her blood loss had not helped, making her a lot more vulnerable to the shifting of pressure in her body. Thunderbird Three was an incredibly powerful ship and could fly so fast, the astronaut sometimes forgot about the fact that others, unlike him, were not accustomed to it. Scott crossed his arms.

- Now, I want your full report. Why did she have a bandage on her side? You'll have to tell me what happened.

He barely finished his sentence when the remote console began to beep. A call was coming in from the GDF's Space Control.

- Calling International Rescue, this is Captain Ridley O'Bannon. John, are you there?

Scott forwarded the call to the central computer.

- He's not here, I'm Scott. How can we be of help, Captain?

- He has asked me to monitor the fall of a space station through the atmosphere. My assistants have calculated the trajectory of the debris and we have bad news. It will crash in a populated area. We need your help.

- FAB. We're on it.

The elder summoned all of his brothers back while he gathered the necessary information from the GDF. John arrived quickly, taking over his task of data collection. Virgil followed close behind; he seemed a bit reluctant but it was his duty and he could not ignore it. Everyone was listening while John gestured towards the computer, gathering the holo-screens close to him.

- Let's see. The station seemed to have mostly disintegrated when entering he atmosphere but some of the exterior panels were made of sturdier material and resisted the heat. We'll have to find a way to divert the trajectory of the debris. There is a small town right underneath where most of it is supposed to fall.

He programmed calculations for EOS to work on while all the brothers took place in their respective seats. Scott was already on his way, ready to assess the situation on site as his role of first respondent required him to. Gordon and Alan took place in Thunderbird Two while Virgil went down his chute, devising a strategy on how he would stop airborne burning debris dropping at a dangerously high speed. Brains came back from the med bay to help, completing the team. John spoke their usual rallying cry as everyone was ready for launch.

- Thunderbirds are go!
And they were off.

It was a very hot and damp afternoon in the southern pacific jungle. Doctor Chang had spent most of her time trying to gain an audience with a government official in order to discuss Holling's partnership. She had met with a politician at the parliament, succeeding in her negotiations for a new clinic and funding from the joint effort of the government and the private company. Unfortunately, she failed to secure a direct implication for Holling, as the official was reluctant to ally with a foreigner linked to corruption at some level. He was very strict about that.

She came back to her apartment and nodded at the maid upon entering. The doctor was not used to be home this early; she instructed her to leave, lending her extra money to treat herself for the bother. Taking out the whole bottle of Baiju, she sat down in a large armchair and rested her head, looking at the ceiling. She could have done the same thing for herself and secure funding for a better facility; she felt stupid for not having thought of it before. Now, Holling was implied, and she would have no choice but to obey him or he would have her head. A thought crossed her mind: running away to Tracy Island. She couldn't. The wolf would find her and would wreck havoc on the Tracys. She already exposed Alan to danger and had not gotten over the guilt and anger she felt about herself.

She brought the bottle to her lips, indulging in the ridiculously strong liquid burning down her throat. It felt very good; after a few sips, her head was spinning. It was like this mostly every night in order to clean her mind from the psychological weight of all her patients' pain and worries. Her eyelids were heavy; she began dozing off.

A noise woke her up. Her communicator was ringing. She had hoped it would not be an emergency as she was in no shape to fly. She picked up.

- Doctor Chang here.
- Good evening Doctor. I hope you are doing well.
She rose. It was Marcus Holling. He was smiling.

- I see you have been to the parliament. What news do you have for me?

The doctor rubbed her face.

- They welcomed your investment in the clinic but not through a direct partnership
- Very good. It is better than what I expected. You have done well.

- What did you expect? Rejection? So, you were deliberate in having me killed.

He laughed.

- Of course not. I am a civilized man. But now, we are business partners approved by the government. Your clinic will be upgraded; you shall have new state of the art equipment and materials and will be using Holling Pharmaceutical's products.

She took a deep breath and let it out.

- I am seeing through your game. I wish not to be implied in your human experimentations.
It is a shame that you realize it a bit too late. You are stuck with me and will have no other choice than go along with the whole deal if you value your life.

She closed her eyes. Did she really? Holling went on.

My employees are satisfied with their working conditions and advantages. Stop demonizing me and accept your fate. Very soon, you will be glad to be on my side.

He disconnected. His last words echoed through her head. She was in no condition to ponder on their meaning. Instead she fell asleep, exhausted, as the warming feeling of alcohol invaded her.

The rescue mission lasted throughout the night. With Brain's calculations and Virgil's quick thinking, they succeeded in pushing the debris further in the sea. Scott had given the last details to Captain O'Bannon. He was exhausted as ever with the late-night mission and his lack of sleep had done nothing to improve his mood since Kayo had gone and made the announcement. It was as if his world had collapsed around him; he needed to speak to his dearest confident to get all this off his chest.

Virgil was in the kitchen having a snack before turning in when his brother arrived. They were both alone; John had taken the elevator back to the space station to monitor the rescue, Alan and Gordon went directly to bed and Brains had turned in when the boys stated they were on their way back home. Scott sat at the counter and looked up at his brother, his head hanging low.

Virg… mind if we talk?

Virgil smiled.

I'm always up to listen if something is wrong, bro. Go on.

Scott took a deep breath.

It's… delicate. Between Kayo and me… I mean… she just told me she…

He could not bring himself to say it. He had not seen her since then, expecting her to be trying to cope with the news herself. He tried a different approach.

Would I be a good father?

Virgil looked at him for a good minute, not saying anything, puzzled. It was as if he was trying to process what his brother had asked him. He laughed.

Scott… why? I'm sure you would be.

I mean, it's not like I have any time to take care of a kid or anything … International Rescue comes first and, well…

Is it true at least? Are you two going to be parents?

He nodded, taking his head in his hands. Virgil slapped his shoulder and smiled.

If it's the case and you both are happy with this decision, then I could not be more.

The problem is… I don't think she is. And I am not. How can I be?
Virgil went around the counter and sat next to his brother. He grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to look at him.

- Look around you.

He freed his right hand to designate his surroundings before putting it back on his brother's shoulder.

- This is dad's dream. We are honouring our father by carrying on International Rescue. This is our legacy, something in which we invest our whole lives. Who will carry on once we get too old? Will strangers have the same dedication we do?

- There are a ton of people out there that would do this, I'm sure… It won't matter in twenty or thirty years, I'm sure we'll get recruits.

- Scott. This is the dream of our father. Remember how he enrolled us, how we were all so eager to join and how we studied hard to achieve what we are now? It was our driving force, what has led our family for so long. You cannot ignore that. It is a family business…

- I know, I know. But I don't think I'm cut out for this.

- I'm sure nobody is. At least you should talk to Kayo and settle things with her. Make sure you two are on the same length.

Hiding in the shadow, Kayo had been listening to the conversation since the beginning. She was sad to see Scott hurting himself even more as time passed and that he could not cope with the news. She had wondered all day how she could approach him to speak but did not find either the courage or figure out the appropriate approach to take. It was going to be another rollercoaster ride for him, not to mention her own worries about the fact that she might be sick. Luckily, when the crew came back from Star Alpha, she had found something to take her mind off this whole mess by watching over Abigail.

She took a few steps towards the boys. They watched as she approached, Scott lowering his head again.

- I overheard. Scott… I'm … sorry.

He got up and took her in his arms. Virgil was about to leave but his brother motioned for him to stay. He would find courage with him around. Before the elder said anything, she spoke.

- I went for a blood test and it was negative. I'm not pregnant, Scott.

His face changed to a welcomed feeling of relief. He held her tighter.

- I'm … kind of glad you are not. I don't think I could have coped with this…

- But listen, there is something else.

He looked into her eyes. She went on.

- Since the day I faced that man, I felt like something in my mind snapped. It was like if I was clinging to life so tightly, I became afraid. I don't know how it happened, just that it did. The first thought that crossed my mind was that I might have been pregnant. Now that I know it's not the case, I am relieved.
- I'll have Mei called in as soon as morning comes to check on you. I'm sure it's just an aftershock.

- No, don't. I've got this covered.

- Kayo, be serious. Brains is not that reliable...

His face changed, his traits turned to resent.

- Is Abigail implied in this whole story? Tell me, what has she done to you?

- She helped me get the real result. We'll talk about this in detail once you're fully rested.

Virgil approached Kayo. He was ready to reply boldly to his older brother to defend his protégé if need be.

- How is she?

- Better. Her wound is healing. She had trouble adjusting to pressure during re-entry and began feeling faint. It was once she tried to stand that things went bad. Alan failed to give her the recommendations during landing but after they fled the space station, I guess the events unfolded like crazy and he did not have time to explain. I don't blame him.

- Thanks for looking after her. I'll leave you two alone to talk now.

She smirked as he left. She knew he was going to go and see Abigail before going to bed. Scott touched her cheek; she turned his eyes back to him.

- Let's get some sleep. We all need a good night's rest.

He held her by the waist as they left for their sleeping quarters. A weight had been lifted off Scott's shoulders; it could be felt from miles around. Kayo was happy to have finally sorted this whole mess out; there was still the matter of whatever ailed her that was on her mind, but that would have to wait. She would not want to bother him more.

Heading towards the medical bay, Virgil was surprised to see the empty bed. Lights were on inside the laboratory; he turned around and went towards it. Abigail sat behind a microscope, studying some slides. He approached slowly not to startle her. Hearing some noise, she turned around; her neck was stiff and her left side still throbbed in pain. She held back a grimace.

- Hey. So, how was the mission?

He took a chair and sat down near her.

- You're supposed to be in bed.

- I've slept enough. Kayo told me how to rid myself of that feeling: I'll hit the pool tomorrow.

- With that wound? Are you serious?

- Dead serious. I'll patch myself with a waterproof bandage. I really need relief from the strain. Plus, I've got that weird neck pain since I woke up. It's either the pillows or the space flight. My money is on the pillows.
- What are you working on?

She turned the microscope off.

- Some cellular mutations. Nothing very interesting, really.

- It does sound interesting.

He had this kind of fascination for her work that she found a bit invasive. She hated when people asked questions; it was hard to explain. It was also very late and her patience was not at its peak. She sighed.

- If you insist, I'll give you a lecture tomorrow. Right now, I really am not in the mood. I've just been killing time.

He took her hand.

- Were you waiting for me?

- Something like that…

She breathed deeply; the pain was beginning to increase. She could not suppress it so she had to endure it. This tired her even more. He helped her rise, keeping her hand, still.

- Want to join me tonight?

Abigail smiled. She had hoped he would ask but not under these circumstances. If she wasn't wounded, they would have engaged in a wild night again.

- Only if your brothers don't make a show of it. They seemed eager for gossip.

- If Gordon bothers you, let me know. I'll smack some sense into him. This does not concern him.

She could sense a bit of irritation in his voice and dropped the subject. They walked side by side; every step taken tired her. She had gone passed her pain threshold as her body was becoming weaker by the minute. Not only was the pain an issue, but her limbs still felt heavy. Virgil noticed it in the way she walked; he slowed down and made sure she would be able to grab his arm if need be. She remained strong, concentrating in taking her steps forward.

When they reached the room, she was relieved. She hissed from the pain, trying to lie down; he helped her lay on her back. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. He lay at her side, watching her. She felt his gaze as if he was trying to pierce her thoughts. She opened her eyes and turned her head towards him.

- You should sleep too.

- Yeah, I should.

- What's bothering you?

- You got hurt and still act as if nothing happened. You should take better care of yourself.

- Are you scolding me?
- No. I just want you to understand: I worry about you. Very much. And I don't want you to go through all of this alone… You don't have to. I want to help you, so don't keep everything inside. You have the right to speak and be heard, I'm here to listen.

She began wondering why he was onto her. Had she not refrained from speaking, she would have asked him silly questions, the kind reflecting teenage insecurities. "What do you like about me?", "Why do you worry so much?", "Was it merely a one night stand at the resort? Was it only because of the way I dressed?". It was childish and dumb to ask herself these things; she had to have confidence in him. Right now, he was looking out for her; she was glad he did. She began regretting not letting John warn the island when the incident happened.

Her breathing slowed, she was slumbering. His relieving presence eased her thoughts. She closed her eyes as he drew closer to her, gently kissing her cheek. He stroked her hair as she fell asleep. He smiled, closing his eyes and following her to the dream world.

It took a lot of tea and thinking for Lady Penelope to make sense of her recent findings. She had read the entire file the Director had given her and found a lot more than she bargained for. Some of the information could even place her in a delicate situation if made public in the wrong context: never had she possessed such valuable documents in her hands. Bank statements, testimonies from suspected allies, entire files about the Olympus and Veterans projects; these documents were used during the trial but never got out of the courtroom. It was unbelievable that so much proof would fail in proving Holling's guilt. Only one thing could have saved him from his fate: bribes and high ranked allies.

The Director's word still troubled her. The replacement minister would have to take over the cases at hand; that meant learning about a lot of secrets from his predecessor and possessing dangerous information about International Rescue. Minister Sawhney was a friend of her father and recommended her for the Secret Services once she came of age. He was a good man, but a serious one, never letting anything escape his attention. It had taken its toll on his health and his humours, making him a bitter man in the end. The fact that he was about to leave his seat seemed unreal. Whoever had kidnapped his daughter knew exactly where to strike in order to exhaust his last breath.

The aristocrat was startled by a call. It was Gordon. She looked at the time: it was very early morning on the Island. She picked up, wondering why he would be calling at such a time. He was sitting on his bed.

- Hello, Penelope! I was… I mean, how are you?

She smiled. He was missing her. That was so sweet of him.

- Fine but busy, and you? It has been a while since we had a nice little chat. Why so call so early? Is everything all right?

- Yeah. Just came back from a rescue mission and thought I'd speak to you a bit before I turned in.

- What a nice thought, Gordon. I really appreciate your concern. I have been doing a lot of reading since my return and plan on joining the efforts for finding the minister's daughter soon. I cannot ignore it much longer. The GDF does not seem to be able to seize the culprits. I will lend them a hand.
- Do you have an idea who did this?

- Suspicions. But let's not get ahead of things, shall we? I do not have any proof to make accusations but I have doubts.

- Just be careful then. You never know who you're going to go up against.

She shuffled her hair.

- Enough about me now, what about you?

He smiled.

- Well, the usual. Nothing's really exciting around here. Just a few new things but, you know... it's kinda the same.

The Aquanaut was usually very chatty about everything even if it was boring as hell. She wondered if he did this only to evade a discussion or if he wanted her to insist.

- Tell me about the usual, then. It's not like you to have nothing to say.

He lied down and crossed his arms under his head.

- It seems Scott and Kayo are going to be parents. Isn't it exciting? They are not sharing the same joy as I am, though.

She frowned: they had only recently begun showing their affection publicly. To have a family was a big surprise and could not have been planned.

- Are you sure about this?

- Yup! I saw the test and all.

- Why did you feel the urge to tell me? Shouldn't it be more appropriate for them to make the announcement?

He sat back down, his cheeks reddening.

- Well, yeah but... I thought it could be something to talk about and that you would have been happy to know.

- Listen, Gordon, it was not for you to announce such an important event. I believe it is left in the hands of the concerned individuals to do so, don't you think?

She turned her head towards the door, disregarding the young man's answer. Parker came in with a tablet computer in hand.

- M'Lady, sighting of a suspicious vehicle was reported to the GDF by a dairy farmer in the east. Here are the coordinates.

He gave her the tablet on which the information had been communicated. She input the coordinates on her computer and looked for a match. It was mainly farmland with no real place to hide other than then farm houses and barns. She expanded her search to a larger area. This time, there was a very interesting find: about twenty kilometers from the sighting, there was a warehouse that belonged to Hezra Synthetics, the sister company of Holling Pharmaceutical.
Gordon looked away, crossing his arms.

- I'm sorry, okay. I thought we could talk. It's been a while and I know I haven't been doing stuff half as interesting as what you were…

She smiled, her face softened.

- Listen, Gordon. How about I meet you at the island in a few days? As much as I would enjoy a leave from all the trouble we have had in the past few weeks, I will have to settle this whole mess first. If nothing else comes up, I'll meet with you so we can relax and spend some time together. How about it?

His pout changed to a smile.

- Yes! Tell me when you'll be leaving London and I'll be waiting! Thanks, sweetheart!

He blew her a kiss, she did the same before he disconnected. He was always rushing things; that made it harder when Penelope would have to change plans and his mood would turn sour for a while. The only thing that seemed to draw her towards him was his free spirit. That would become a nuisance in the long run if he wanted to expect anything serious for the future. She proceeded to contact John. He picked up after a few rings, rubbing his eyes.

- Yes, Lady Penelope? How can I help?

- John, I'm sorry to wake you. I require a scan of a specific area.

She sent him the coordinates. He programmed the probe according to her needs and made sure that all the images and scan would be sent to her.

- EOS will help you with that one. I'll hit my bunk; we have been through a lot of emotions…

- You will have to tell me about that once you are rested. Very well, I shall do my business with EOS. Get some rest.

He disconnected. Penelope instructed her driver to bring the car around and dressed accordingly for her mission ahead: a black one piece suit with a pair of flat soled shoes and a short black leather coat with a knitted lining comprising a hood.

Twilight was a perfect moment to set out and prepare for their task ahead. Parker changed the car's color to best fit their surroundings as darkness was setting in. While heading towards the target destination, the AI began sending detailed images. Penelope instructed it to check for a safe area to approach the warehouse: they either come from the north, which meant to go by air and landing closer than through the other venues. She chose this path as it would not be wise to arrive from the front with reportedly armed men on the site. Luckily for her, she too possessed weapons and would gladly use them if need be.

The warehouse was quiet. There was no night or evening shift and the front gate had been closed. So far, she had to thread lightly, knowing they had to walk to reach the perimeter fence. Surveillance cameras were covering the rear area; Parker watched around through binoculars and spotted the lot.

- I'll disable these, m'Lady.

The Lady nodded as her right-hand man installed a scope and a silencer on his gun. He began sniping the camera lens, taking them down one by one, creating a blind spot. They could now
easily approach the fence and cut it to get inside the perimeter.

It was quite dark; the lights were mostly oriented towards the front. The fireproof door of the rear exit was cracked opened. They entered through it, advancing slowly, ready to fire if anything was in sight. There would not be much time for negotiations.

Their eyes took about a minute to adjust to the darkness. Only a faint light was visible in the center of the warehouse. A figure was sitting down, back against a wooden crate, hands and feet tied, with a cloth bag on the head. Loud cursing was heard on one side. As they went closer, they could see two men struggling to remove a cloth tarp from what looked like an Heli-jet. A small, scraggy man was trying to cut off the tarp, having a hard time doing so. It was their chance to act while the criminals were busy and noisy.

Penelope signaled Parker to move on one side while she went the other. She thought a pincer attack would take the men off guard and have them surrender. Gun pointed, she sprung up from her hiding place, shouting:

- Hands up, now!

The two men instead took cover inside the aircraft, one grabbing the hostage while the other was using cover fire. Penelope ducked and moved behind the crates, instructing Parker to keep shooting through her headset.

Joseph Herring was inside the helijet, trying hard to get the young woman inside while pulling her by the collar. Bullets flew in his direction: he got hit in the shoulder, dropping his target and taking cover. They could hear a rumbling up overhead as the articulated doors were opening, revealing their intended escape route. Parker shot another round, succeeding again in landing a hit on the giant red-bearded man. He fell down from the aircraft in a pool of blood as the helix began turning at full speed. Penelope raced for the aircraft; she held on the side step railing and climbed inside as it was lifting off the ground. Parker tried to follow her but was cut off by the helijet dangerously spinning around uncontrolled.

Regaining her balance, she made it for the pilot's seat. There was nobody in the pilot's seat; a course was set in auto-piloting. She was about to turn back when she was hit at full force in the back of the head. She fell down instantly, feeling hot blood slowly dripping down her neck as her body was becoming numb. The throbbing was too much for her to bear, she closed her eyes. A man's aggressive voice came from above her.

- Bitch!

She felt a kick in the ribs, grinning from the sudden surge of pain. All that she perceived was the deafening beat of the rotating helix above over her heart beating in her ears.

The man seemed to be talking to somebody through comms. She could not make out any of it, confusion setting in. Trying hard to get her act together, it was still too early; her strength was not returning.

Parker went in for a second try. As he caught the railing, the ship turned at high speed. He had to release his grip lest he would have been squeezed in between a pallet and the craft's railing, which would have been likely fatal. He cursed as he tried again to climb and enter the ship. It was ascending quickly and was soon out of range. There was not much more that he could do other than follow in FAB1. He ignored the hostage and the wounded man, concentrating his efforts in saving his Lady.
Sheinor rummaged through Penelope's pockets, looking for identification of some sort but found nothing of value. She was not so dumb as to carry anything that would give her off. The pain was excruciating, yet she remained still, not wanting her attacker to know she could hear him. He must have done some sort of 3D scan for she felt a tingling on her skin.

Again, his voice echoed in the cargo bay of the ship. This time, it was so loud she could hear.

- So? Can I throw that bitch overboard?

There was silence. He began moving around. She tried again to gather her strength in case he decided to throw her from the sky. She hoped to be able to disable him or buy some time for Parker to act.

There was a loud noise from behind. Parker had caught up with the helijet in FAB1. He was trying to get close enough to open the door and jump. Sheinor headed for the pilot seat and noticed the presence of the flying pink Rolls Royce at his side. He spewed a shower of curses, getting up and going back in the cargo bay. He opened the side panel slightly to be able to shoot through. Bullets ricochet on the car; Parker moved away from the aircraft, trying another approach from underneath.

Their struggle caught the attention of a nearby GDF aircraft. It came closer, trying to contact either the flying car or helijet. Parker was bent on keeping up with the chase, thus did give a very limited amount of information via the radio. Sheinor tried to evade the military aircraft by doing a sharp turn and heading towards the south east. Surprised by his opponent's manoeuver, Parker did the same, thus also flagging himself as a fugitive. The GDF aircraft issued a final warning before beginning to shoot missiles. FAB1's radio flashed. It was Colonel Casey.

- FAB1! Please, stand down! Leave to our flyer the task of pursuing the criminal.
- No, Colonel ma'am. The runaway has taken milady instead of the hostage.
- What? Where is the Minister's daughter?
- Inside the warehouse, ma'am.
- Leave it to us. We'll get Lady Penelope back.
- No can do. I am in charge of m'lady's safety and will pursue as long as needed.
- Don't be a fool, Parker. You'll only get yourself killed. I order you to cease your pursuit immediately and leave it to the GDF.

Three unidentified aircrafts appeared in front of him, arriving at very high speed. He dropped his altitude as he noticed they were swift military fighter jets. The fighters began circling the GDF aircraft still tailing the helijet. Missiles were fired, exploding near the front of FAB1. Parker had no choice to either land or fly at very low altitude. He chose the safe route, preferring to leave the dogfight to the GDF. He tried to push the car at the very maximum possible speed to escape while gaining on the helijet but was cut by a fighter. There was the sound of a machine gun fire; armour piercing bullets cut through the car's hood. A cloud of smoke began rising up from the engine. The Rolls Royce lost altitude, making a quick descent as alarms rang and blinked on the dashboard. Through a combination of rogue piloting skills and luck, Parker managed to land on a country road in eastern France. As he looked upwards, he noticed the GDF flyer being under heavy fire. An explosion illuminated the sky; the left wing of the large aircraft broke under missile collision, sending the giant towards the sea to crash.
The car seemed stable once the engine was turned off. No flames, no explosions, its driver was relieved at that. The spectacle that went on in front of his eyes was unreal; he could not believe that anybody would attack the GDF head on. He had a very bad feeling about things to come, cursing openly as he looked at the now tranquil skies. He tried turning on the comms; nothing worked. He opened the hood trying to work something out, with no success. The electrical components were damaged and beyond repair. Some parts would require replacement. Parker sighed as he stood stranded on the tranquil road. He needed to find a place to contact International Rescue at once.

Thunderbird Five was eerily quiet. John had gone to bed, leaving EOS in charge. His sleep was disturbed by flashbacks from the previous mission. He had killed a man; it was an accident and probably bound to happen since the spacesuit was damaged and patched, but he never imagined that it was going to be his fault. Now that Star Alpha was gone and with it the proof of his guilt, there was no way anybody else would know. He would be haunted forever by the memory of the man's face as he struggled for air, his bloodshot eyes and dirty face. There was little choice if he did not want to suffer the same fate Abigail did, and she was lucky they came in time. No matter how hard he tried to convince himself, he could not shake off the cold shivers down his neck.

He was awakened from his half sleep by EOS.

- John, Captain O'Bannon wishes to come on board.

He rubbed his face, looking at the time.

- That early…?

He opened a comm.

- Hello, Ridley. Is there something wrong?

- Rise and shine, John. Life goes on even if that rescue kept you up till the first lights. I need your report.

- Wait… my report? It's Scott's job, not mine.

- I want to know what happened in that space station and I have a hunch you know. Please, let me in. This is official GDF business.

- Well, okay. But you'll have to make do with my bed head.

She laughed.

- Not a problem. See you.

He stood, heading quickly to brush his teeth and get ready for her arrival. He was still sleepy as hell and could not imagine she would want to see him that badly. There might be something else behind all this.

Ridley arrived, making her way towards the gravity ring. She knew the way well enough now not needing to be showed around. John made his way towards her and smiled despite his lack of sleep.

- I'm glad to see you.

- You should not say this, John. You barely had enough sleep. I'll be quick and then you can go on
with your routine.

- What is so important that you'd need to be here so soon?

She looked at him and sighed.

- I want to know what happened to that station. What went wrong? I have a feeling I have not done my job correctly. Were people inside in danger?

Luckily, throughout all his brothers, he was the one who could tell lies and keep a poker face. He was the most mischievous of them all and he hated himself for it. That was a trait that served him well as space monitor. He was not much of a sweet talker but a straight one. One thing was certain: he could not tell her everything.

- There was something wrong with the signal. We went to check it out and we found the station was derelict.

She looked at him, having a hard time believing what he said.

- Are you sure? The signal was genuine.

- Did you ever speak with a crew member?

- No… not that I remember. There are at least a hundred stations out there. A ping is all that is required for them to be kept active.

- The ping was automated. It was made to react to your approach. We went inside, there was nothing.

- Then why did the station fall?

- It was not of our doing. We went inside and investigated then we heard alarms. There was a self-destruction mechanism that activated. I did not want to remain inside to find out why and how.

- I find all this hard to believe, John. The station has been there for a while and nothing had happened.

He studied her face. She was just like him: he could not read her emotions. She knew more than she let show, he was certain of that. He had an urge to confront her about it.

- There is something you are not telling me. Why did you need to know?

Her smile faded as she pinched her lips.

- I cannot speak about this matter, John. It concerns the military. Let's get down to business. Who was with you?

- My brother. That's all.

- And why did your brother join you?

- He was there to shuttle me. It's always useful to have an extra set of hands in case we need to save people.

- Why didn't you contact me?
- It was our job to see if there were people needing help. There was nobody. Even with you along, we would not have been able to change the station's course.

- But I am in charge of patrolling, John! You have to report to me!

She sighed. There was more. He understood that she believed he had no confidence in her. He brought her closer.

- Listen. I do not want to expose you to unnecessary danger. We are here to help out in case such incidents happen. Everything is back to normal and there is nothing else we need to worry about.

- But what if something happened to you?

He stood, surprised, at her question. He did not expect that. He held her in his arms.

- If anything happened, I would have let you know. I can take care of myself.

- You always say that.

- Don't worry about a thing.

His face was flushed red. He did not want her to see as he kept his head high. He was never the best at expressing his feelings and when he did, it usually came out wrong. She withdrew from his arms.

- I'll make the report and hope that it covers everything. Please take care.

She left. He watched her go; this time, she had turned her back on him without a kiss on the cheek or an embrace. Was she as awkward in expressing her feelings also? He hoped that was all.

EOS's LED lights blinked red as she watched the Captain leave the ship. She approached the space monitor, turning back to green.

- John, there is something I would like you to see.

He rubbed his eyes.

- Can it wait, EOS? I'll try to go back to bed.

- You have programmed automated notifications in case an update is done on Holling Pharmaceuticals' main web platform.

- I think it can wait. I'm in no mood to read right now.

- It's only a picture. Here.

She put up the picture. John's eyes widened. Doctor Chang was shaking hands with Marcus Holling, holding a symbolic check of 2 million dollars. The article was in foreign language; the AI had done the translating through its algorithm. It read:

"'Impressive donation to the Chang Foundation fund'. The Chang foundation can now count on its newfound partnership with Holling Pharmaceuticals for its need in supplying vaccines and necessary drugs to aid the poor and vulnerable people from the remote regions of the Pacific Rim..."

He clenched his teeth. Mei knew about all their identities, their in-depth medical records and, most
of all, about Abigail's presence on the island. He tried dispelling his thoughts: it was normal for a
doctor to obtain funding for such projects in third world countries with terrible conditions. He
hoped there was nothing more behind all this…
To the new era!

The French countryside was calm and quiet. Parker followed the road ahead, hoping to find a town in which he could contact his allies. The car's communications being busted and his commlink attached to it, he had little choice but to rely on broad communications in order to talk to his friends.

He walked for hours on end without a single car passing by. The night began shifting into day. His legs grew weary and heavy, unaccustomed to long strolls. He had stopped training after the war, thinking he could finally rest and enjoy his pension. Little did he know that the bureaucracy was about to cut it from him, judging his years of service were not sufficient to obtain a substantial amount of money. With a criminal record consisting of a history of thievery and break-ins, he could not find himself a job and had to sustain on a meagre wage. It caught up with him, going back to his shady lifestyle until he stumbled on Lord Creighton-Ward, his old regiment leader. He had known Parker for his generosity towards his men, his hard at work and dedicated attitude for which he was decorated. But medals had very little meaning outside of the battlefield; the Lord knew it all too well. He presented Parker with a rare opportunity: to be the lawful servant of his daughter, more precious to him than all the jewels in the world. He accepted and, with a lot of adjusting, ended up to be the man he is today. Looking back, he had gone quite a long way in order to learn etiquette and satisfy the Lord's wishes. Not one single time did he complain.

The weight of failure began to fall on his shoulders; along with the lack of sleep, the car being damaged and the inability to contact anyone for help. Damn did he love his ride! Driving, showing off his boldness, the sheer feeling of freedom was all he needed to be happy. Now that he had lost the Lady, he had lost a part of himself. Still, he could not give up. He would need to wash it down with a good whiskey, his favourite liquid courage, before engaging in the Herculean quest of finding her. Wherever she would be taken, surely John would monitor it: almost all the important people were equipped with a subcutaneous RF chip and could be found with a scan if need be. He was hoping the lady had time to reactivate hers after the Eaux Claires episode and that her kidnapper would not think of disabling it. But right now, without comms or anything to link him to his friends, having gone miles by foot without a soul in sight he had little choice but to go on regardless.

It was almost midday when the honk of a vehicle horn was heard behind him. He turned around to notice a truck slowing down near him. A man wearing a cap hailed him, motioning for him to hop on.

- Hé! Mon Ami!

Parker accepted the invitation, knowing full well he could disable the driver if he was up to no good. It appeared that he was a delivery man going to the neighbouring village. They had a very short conversation as the Butler was in no mood for a casual chat, but his bagged eyes told enough to his saviour that he did not insist.

The man dropped him off in the small town, bidding him farewell. The village was far from being up to date with the newest trend; it would have to deal with older communication means. It was a classical backwater village, far from the big city, where people lived their lives at a slow pace. Upon setting foot inside, his attitude contrasted with the villagers; he was clearly edgy and had depleted his endurance. The first building he encountered was an inn. He entered and collapsed on the first sofa he saw, unable to make one more move as his legs gave up. He cursed at his aging body, had the ride been too much? Or was it the emotions that got to him? He could not give up.
Not now, not ever. Penelope was in danger and he needed to persevere.

The inn's tenant came towards him: a woman in her mid-thirties, wearing an old-fashioned flower print dress. She took Parker's hand.

- Monsieur, you should take a room. Please, let us help you.

He waved at her.

- Sorry, missy. I cannot. Need to make a call, a very important one at that.

The woman went behind the counter and handed him an old cordless phone. He looked at the antique in a disgusted way. It had been a long time that big cities had ditched phones and regular land based communication for broadcast ones. He had not seen anything like it in at least thirty years. International Rescue did have the most advanced meaning for communication via the space station yet he would have to rely on what was available for him now that he was in trouble. He looked at the woman.

- Do you have a digital communication network? Through satellites?

The hostess looked at the phone and back at him.

- Try the gendarmerie. We live in a remote area, monsieur. We do not need all this fancy technology and newest trends.

He looked around to notice the place had not had a makeover in some time. The walls were decorated of fancy wallpaper and white painted wainscot, a trend that was in vogue around 2020. This was reminiscent of his early childhood as the family house was decorated as such, with darker colors. The inn looked more like a regular two-story house; it was not a tourist attraction or anywhere near a very busy place.

The woman left him, heading towards the kitchen. He took the phone in hand and began dialling a known number that would forward him to Thunderbird Five. It was a long shot, but he had to try. There was a tone that indicated the call had not come through. Cursing again, he hailed the woman for a glass of whiskey. She brought him some liquor, French Bourbon instead. In exchange for his glass, he produced a hundred pounds from his wallet, advising:

- For your trouble ma'am. Thank ye.

She smiled, looking at the bill with wide eyes. He mustered all his courage to get up and head for the gendarmerie. It was a few paces away from the inn. Inside, an old man greeted him, dressed in his policeman attire. He was smoking in his office; as soon as Parker came closer, he extinguished the cigarette and opened the window not to bother his guest.

- Bonjour monsieur. How can I be of help?

Parker had to tread lightly in case the man decided to do a background check on him. Without Penelope around to vouch for him, he could get in trouble with zealous men of the law.

- Bonjour, officer. I am in need of a bit of help. I need to communicate with my colleagues; you see, my vehicle has broken down on the road and I have lost all means of contacting them.

The man examined him from head to toe.

- Is it a pink Rolls Royce with enormous bullet holes in the hood and door?
- Yes sir. I happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. I would like to contact the GDF at once concerning this event.

- I see. Never had so much excitement in such a short time! Last night, a rumbling noise was heard in the sky, sounded like thunder but there weren't any clouds. Few people saw fire. It was pretty far away, beyond the northern hills. Care to tell me more about that? And why contact the GDF yourself? Are you an officer?

The man leant forward, waiting for a reply. Parker told him the entire story, romanced to a fault, without the part of the abduction. This made him look like a true hero. The policeman listened eagerly as if it was the best story he had heard in a very long while.

- I'll tell you what, monsieur, let us help you. We will bring the vehicle in town and see what we can do to help. Meanwhile, feel free to contact the GDF.

Parker seemed satisfied yet suspicious. Either the man wanted to stick his nose in his business or he was looking to investigate further. He hoped it would not be the latter but could not misbehave as the man still was an officer of the law. He had a feeling he already saw him somewhere, too.

He was shown to a booth where state of the art communication equipment was installed. He was in direct contact with the GDF, in the investigation division. It took him a while to have the call forwarded to Colonel Casey and even after all the administrative fuss, he could only reach her secretary. He cursed, closing the comm, thinking he could have been simpler to call John directly but on an unknown channel, he would not be able to get through the usual direct channel. His only hope was to try the way anybody would. The officer had left him alone and was nowhere in sight. He gave it a shot.

- Calling International Rescue! Please respond.

The robotic voice of EOS answered.

- This is International Rescue. Please state the nature of your emergency.

The driver was a bit perplexed when he heard the voice, expecting it to be John. He looked over his shoulder to make sure that the officer was not back before speaking.

- This is Parker. Is John there?

- I'm sorry, John is unavailable. Please, state the nature of your emergency.

- Bloody hell, listen! Milady has been taken. You need to monitor her whereabouts quickly. The kidnappers have taken her in a helicopter….

EOS matched Parker's voice pattern and immediately alerted John. He had gotten but a few hours more of sleep still it did not improve his mood to be awoken a second time. His plea did catch the attention of the space monitor who made his way in the ring.

The whole event was explained to John as he was working on localization. He blinked often, his eyes still not rested enough to dive in another day of hard work.

- Her signal stops near the Romanian border. You know what that means do you?

- That bastard has carried her to the rogue state of Bereznik? That fuc…

EOS beeped as soon as the man swore. That made John smirk, the AI was unaccustomed to when
filtering profane words would be necessary. Still, there was nothing funny about the situation. The space monitor gathered the data screens closer to him.

- What's the GDF going to do? We can't just hope to barge in there to save her. They'll wring our necks.

- Since my communicators are offline, I can't get through to the Colonel directly. Can you patch me in?

- Hold on. The comms you are calling me from are not secured. I won't send you to her direct number, we can't risk it being compromised. Let me speak with her instead. What about your status?

- Stranded, in a small village. They offered to tow FAB1 in and give it some repairs. The police chief is helping right now but I am afraid he might run a check on me some time soon.

- Let me try my luck on him, just in case.

It was rather quick. The man was a decorated officer during the war and had taken the position as chief commissioner in this village afterwards. He had been wounded and could not go on with his military career. Instead, he chose to settle the in this tranquil region. All this action did stir something inside of him and there was a chance he might have recognized Parker.

- Don't worry about him. Just make sure you can at least repair your comms. I doubt a regular mechanic will be able to do anything for FAB1. You will need Brains' help ASAP. We'll talk about this later, I'm going to speak to the Colonel now.

He hung up. Parker was relieved knowing more about the man but fatigue caught up with him once the adrenaline had dropped. He had to sleep, only a few hours; International Rescue had this covered for now. But he would not just stand by idly and watch.

John could not get through to the Colonel. The recent events made the Council call an emergency meeting. It gave him a bad feeling: relations had been very tense between the Council and the ruling General but never to a point where an aircraft was shot down. This rimed as war in the space monitor's opinion and he truly hoped a peaceful resolution could be found instead. There was no place for armed conflicts in the modern world, he could not believe that their rulers could consider it. Bereznik had been a thorn on their side for a very little long time, and the failure to help the poorer countries had resulted in having them side with the enemy.

It was Lieutenant Colonel Baker who took the call after a long wait. She listened to John's plea.

- We will do all in our power to find her, don't worry. We have leads.

- Can you give us some details? We would like to help in the research. Our equipment might be useful and we are not affiliated with anyone.

- We can't let you do that. It is very risky to approach the border. I suggest you wait for news from us. Agents will be deployed and will begin the search on the other side. Unfortunately, this is not our jurisdiction but the Secret Services division one. So right now, we can't do anything else than wait.

- We can't stand idly by…

- You have to. If you interfere, you might cause more harm than good. I'll keep you updated when
we get information

- Thank you.

She disconnected. Her answer was not good enough for him. He would have to tell the island too since their number one agent had fallen to the hands of the enemy. But why did they take her? He was puzzled, thinking some foul work of Dasha Kaczynska might be at work there. But even so, why didn't the woman abduct her when she had the chance in Eaux Claires? This might not be a calculated move at all.

His brothers had not gotten up yet. Kayo had left the island early to reach doctor Chang's office. Other than Brains and Grandma, everyone else was still in bed. He had no other choice but to wake everyone and summon them to the living room in order to break the news.

The alarm rang. Grandma was the first to arrive

- What's up, John? You look exhausted, kid.

- I want everyone here immediately. We have a situation, a very bad one.

- What do you need? Where is it? Patch me the details while we wait, I'll give you a hand with monitoring.

He remained silent as the other Tracys came one by one in the nick of time. It took less than two minutes for all the boys to report. Even Alan was there quickly, dragging his feet on the way.

- Guys, I have very bad news. Yesterday night, Lady Penelope followed a lead to find the Minister's daughter. She was successful in retrieving her but ended up sharing her fate.

Gordon leaped from his seat.

- Whaat? H… how? Is she…?

John motioned for him to sit down.

- Calm down. The latest telemetry data I have from her was about twelve hours ago. She was taken towards the Bereznik borders. Her signal stops there.

Gordon's face was flushed red. He clenched his fists.

- I'm going after her...

As he was leaving, Scott caught him by the arm.

- Gordon, stop! You can't just run out there like this. Wait till John gives us the full breakdown of the situation.

He shook his arm wildly, removing Scott's grip in a vulgar way.

- I won't stand there and do nothing! What do you expect? Launch the Thunderbirds! What use are those crafts of ours if we can't use them to save one of our own?

- Gordon, enough! You want to get yourself killed?

- I'd rather do that then ignore her being captured like this!
John cleared his throat, bringing the attention back towards him.

- Scott is right. There is more. Three fighters shot down a GDF military carrier yesterday. I don't think we should wait but we need a plan of action. Flying boldly near the frontier might get us killed.

Gordon was raging like a child. He could not take no for an answer.

- Where is Parker? He was supposed to protect her!

Scott grabbed Gordon by the shoulders; this was bound to end badly. Virgil intervened to prevent the old situation from getting to blows.

- Gordon, we are all worried about her. Now calm down, we're going to think of something.

As much as he wanted to shove him away, the aquanaut piped down. There was something soothing about his brother that made him lose all desire to scream and punch. Seeing that Gordon was better, the space monitor went on.

- Parker is stranded and without communications. He was lucky to be picked up by a truck passing by; he could have waited a long time where he was. It's a rural area with little traffic. FAB1 needs fixing too. He caught stray bullets from one the fighter crafts.

Scott inquired:

- Is he wounded?

- No, he's fine. Exhausted but fine. I'll have to contact him once we make up our minds.

Gordon found the perfect compromise.

- I could fly Brains there for him to fix the car. That way, you won't be short on staff if a rescue mission comes up.

Scott thought for a minute and looked at Grandma. She shrugged.

- Your call, Scott. I'd say it's better to keep all hands at the base until we get more information. And we'd better not challenge the GDF now; they are on high alert. I don't want any of you to be shot down by a zealous officer.

The elder nodded.

- You have a point, Grandma. Gordon, you'll fly Brains there. Don't get any funny ideas or I'm sticking Kayo to your butt when she comes back. Did I make myself clear?

The aquanaut seemed satisfied.

- Yes sir! I'll get ready.

Brains followed him out of the room, heading for the lab to gather some necessary tools and material. Scott added before they left:

- This is no official business of International Rescue. You can use a POD but don't wear your colors. We can't risk exposing ourselves.

They agreed. As they left, Grandma crossed her arms.
I didn't think I would ever hear anymore talk of war in my life. Brace yourselves, boys. This might become a tough time for International Rescue.

Alan, now fully awakened by the shock of the news, asked:

- Why is that? I don't think this will change anything. We'll still save lives, right?

- Yeah, but who's? The allies? The enemies? There is no such thing as saving everyone during the war. To the eyes of one or the other, we will be traitors. Without mentioning who will try to buy or threaten us to their side.

Scott frowned.

- We are not at war yet. Let's not get ahead of ourselves and think about how we can help Penelope.

His words raised everyone's spirit a little bit. There was no point in being negative. What they needed right now was to concentrate on the task at hand: find Penelope.

Kayo had not been aware of what happened at the base a little earlier. Following Scott's very serious recommendations, she headed to Mei's clinic in order to get a full checkup, her blood test results on hand. She was surprised to see so much traffic around the small jungle clinic, and most of all, a sign depicting a modern building to replace the existing one. The name Southwest Pharmaceuticals, which was not one she had ever heard of before, was written on the sign board with the symbol of Holling Pharmaceuticals on the bottom. At first, she did not know what to think of this: he was a businessman and it might have been a donation made to improve the quality of life of the people around. Marcus Holling was not an asshole to the eyes of all the common folk; to many he was a savior, a provider of care for families and children. She had learned that much through Lady Penelope and John's research on the matter. Regardless of whatever sign or poster she saw bragging the merits of advancement, Mei herself could answer her questions and it would be better to get the truth directly from her than resort to presumptions.

The clinic was full of people coughing, children crying or running around and playing. Looking at them, she had not second thought about not be willing to have children as she thought them annoying as hell. She filled a form about her current health, indicating she had no cough, no fever, no rash to the skin or to her private parts. She was tempted to check all of them in hopes it would shorten her wait time but it would not be very nice for those who were really sick. Luckily, the nurses were calling the patients in very quickly: there was more than one doctor in surely.

She waited about one and a half hour before seeing Mei. The doctor smiled as she saw her come in.

- Why hello, Kayo. It is nice to see you here. Is there an emergency? Why did you want to see me so soon? Nothing serious I hope?

- It's … complicated. I have this to show you.

Kayo sat, smiling. She handed her a data stick containing the medical analysis and the screenshots of the slides. The doctor inserted it inside her computer and begin browsing.

- Please, tell me what happened.

- I have been having weird headaches after the sickness had gone. I felt less energetic than usual. I have been through some emotional stress, too. It's not like me, I don't understand…
- If you have problem with your reflexes or your thought pattern, there might be more to it. I will prescribe you a full body scan.

She began writing down a prescription on her computer. Kayo thought it the right moment to ask her about what she had seen outside.

- Congratulations on your partnership. I didn't know you had such a strong ally on your side.

Mei was startled. She gulped and looked at Kayo, trying to look casual.

- It is rather recent. This clinic is falling apart and we had a very generous donation to keep it running.

- Do you know him? Holling?

- Very little. I have only shaken his hand to accept the money, then he left. Why?


The tension dropped as none of them spoke. It was awkward in Kayo's opinion, something was up with doctor Chang. She sensed the woman becoming tense when she spoke about Holling. She regained her composure before speaking.

- We shall talk about all this some other time. There are a lot of patients waiting and very little time to have a chat. Here is your prescription along with the details of the Healthcare facility you will be referred to. It's located in Australia, near the city of Newcastle. I know it's not very far away, but you'll be able to spend the night if required. It's quite charming, you'll see. They have top of the line equipment. Your appointment is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon: make sure you follow all guidelines written in the pamphlet. The results will come to me electronically and I'll call you as soon as I can revise them.

- Good. I don't plan on staying there very long anyway.

The doctor gave her back the data stick, smiling.

- All will be well. Eat healthy, exercise to tolerance and rest.

- Got it, doc. See you.

The young woman exited the office, looking around. Mei's attitude was a bit weird, she would have to look into that later.

The meeting lasted until nightfall. All ministers and high brass of the military attended. Discussions were all about how to replace the Minister of Defense during his leave. Now that he had learned that his daughter had been found alive, he wanted to take time to enjoy life with her. That would mean he would be away from the Council for a long time but he was going to keep his position. His opponents were somewhat angered by the announcement but refrained from making a scene considering they were not expecting a Bereznik attack. They might not fare so well in the tense political climate that had set itself on the world the day before. One man was going to replace him temporarily. Everyone had heard his name during the meeting and a few strongly disagreed, while others were indifferent. All this man's decisions would be respected as the Minister's.

His name was General Neil Dixon; very few people knew of his background other than the fact that his swift actions helped win the Global conflict. He was reputed for being a born leader and
also feared for his intelligence and cunning. Fine strategist, he had graduate at the top of his class at the military academy and won many medals and honors to prove he was not just a show off.

Marcus Holling was expecting an honored guest that night at his residence. He was waiting in the living room, rare alcohols and hors d'oeuvres were set on the low table. A servant entered, leading General Dixon towards him. Standing more than six feet tall, Neil Dixon was one imposing piece of a man. His jet-black hair was licked backwards perfectly, fitting his black, red and silver uniform to perfection. He had chosen to wear an officer's vestments for this meeting, representing his colors during the last war. From his looks, nobody could tell that he was almost in his sixties, a result of the many rejuvenation treatments he had done to look younger. Holling was finding the General's habits of clinging to youth very amusing. They shook hands as they met, patting each other in the back.

Dixon smiled.

- Happy to see you, old friend.

- Same here, dear fellow. I have waited for this moment for a long time.

A servant came inside to serve drinks. Dixon motioned for him to exit the room. Once the man met his azure eye; he quickly turned back. His gaze was sharp and very expressive, there was something in his eyes that dissuaded anyone who wanted to put up with him in a rhetorical fight. The General went towards the bottles and chose a rare fifty years old port wine, pouring two glasses.

- I see you have not changed one bit, Marcus, ready to impress on every occasion.

- This is how we conclude good business. Have you forgotten who I am?

Dixon smirked.

- I have not forgotten, no. It's hard to forget somebody whose failures speak for him. After all you have gone through, you still carry them around on your back an old decrepit snail would for his broken shell. It's a shame.

Holling laughed.

- You fail to remember who you are. Luck is on your side, Neil. Have you not had your records bleached, you would still have been enlisted as a member of my father's personal military during the war. Two can play this game.

Neil conceded.

- True. Still, all of your projects have crumbled to pieces, and where do you stand now? Other than the Council's number one weapon provider, which is nowhere near an achievement considering the biggest manufacturers are in Bereznik. Where do you stand in all this?

- The awakening is now...

He laughed.

- Don't fuck with me. This whole joke of Olympus is still around? Have you at least done some progress?

- Very much, yes. It is almost complete. You see, when people do not see what is happening in
plain sight, it's when they believe it is long dead. It will rise soon enough.

- Where's the girl?

Holling sat down.

- In a safe place, for now. I will need your help to fetch her.

- It's been more than six months. Does she still lie with the fishes?

- No, she was rescued. And by that, I mean by our top rescue artists.

Dixon laughed

- International Rescue? Those clowns? What the hell do they think they are doing with her?

- They have managed to infiltrate Cloud Alpha and get to Star. This much I do know; the seals on 
  the doors have been breached. Olympus' computer is still connected to those locations. Only Beam
  Alpha remains, though I doubt she will be looking for weapons.

The General took a sip of his drink, listening to Holling.

- What if she is?

- That would be stupid. The GDF would be after her and she could not go anywhere. I cannot risk
  having her turning to Bereznik, that would foil my plans.

- Your plans! Marcus, you are a terrible calculator. Have you had a single drop of my talent, she
  would have crawled back to you already. On her knees. But no matter, as long as Olympus is
  successful. I have invested too much efforts and money for it to go to waste.

He downed his drink in one gulp and grabbed himself an appetizer. He went on.

- Which reminds me… you did keep the samples safe?

- Yes. Nothing has been touched. The cryogenics facility lies underneath Olympus. As soon as we
  get the girl, we will be able begin. We will win, in the end.

- Good. But tell me, how do you plan to have her do all of this willingly?

Holling smiled.

- We have the Zeus chip. She was the only one on whom we could use it.

Dixon smiled in satisfaction, biting in the cracker topped with shrimp mousse while Holling

continued.

- Her neural network is lined with conductive metallic particles that are persistent in her blood. If
  we activate Zeus, her cerebrum computer will take over her body. As simple as that.

- Marvelous! This rig sounds right out of a sci-fi movie. How are you even sure it will work?

- She wore it for a while when we were working on her. We know she reacts to it. Unfortunately,
  we had to remove it before putting her to sleep, otherwise, she could have found out of it's
  existence and worked out a thought pattern to counter it. She does not even know we possess that.
- Good then. As long as your mind control game works, I don't care how you pull it out. Now, what do you expect of me?

Holling took his colleague's glass and went back to fill it with more port wine.

- I need her back. For this, I will need an arrest mandate and for the GDF to aid me in her retrieval…

He gave Dixon his glass. Before he could finish his sentence, the General raised a hand.

- The GDF is not your little bitch, Holling. You can't use it as a personal militia. I won't allow it. I have a better idea.

- Which is?

- For too long now, International Rescue has been doing whatever the fuck it wants, whenever it wants. I have a file on hand in which they are shown disregarding a dozen laws. If some millionaire playboy wants to burn his money on fancy ships flying around the world to save idiots who got what they deserved, then he will have to pay dearly in order to keep his privileges.

- How much do you know about them?

- Just the basics. I still do not have the entire pedigree of Jeff Tracy's organization, but it should not be long.

- I might have something for you. Provide me with backup whenever I need it an I will give you the coordinates to their fabled lost paradise.

Dixon cocked his head.

- You know where they hide?

- Yes, and there is a lot more when that came from. Do we have a deal?

The General shook Holling's hand. He got up.

- Deal. As long as your demands are not otherworldly, I shall be able to fulfill them. Make sure that project is ready in time. Oh, and do give my regards to the beautiful Zeta. I would hate to see her delicious face scared if she does not come back to our side in time. I will leave you for now. Proceed with your projects, you will get updates from mine as they are made public.

- Good. Now, one last drink. To the new era?

- To the new era.

They toasted and drank.
Dear readers!

Summer time was a busy time! Sorry for this very long delay. I am back from a long deserved vacation.

Thank you for your continued support. Like always, good reads to you and feel free to leave a review! :)

The air around was cold, a bit too much to her taste. The light of day was filling the room; it kept her awake as she struggled to go back to sleep. She did not want to wake up, even if the alarm called everyone to report. She opened her eyes and looked around: the walls were decorated with paintings, inspirational posters, shelves holding small replicas of various classical sculptures from antiquity to renaissance, a folded easel with a dirty painter's coat hanging from it. It did not appear to her as a bedroom but more like a studio. She did not want to move, she was relaxed and comfortable. She continued to study the room from her point of view, examining every detail; John had told her about Virgil's talent but she had not stopped to contemplate it fully. She caught sight of a painting, half finished, picturing a foggy forest scenery with a small stream running in the middle. The fog was darker in the center, revealing a blurry silhouette. All the details were perfectly drawn, from the shade in the leaves to water splashes, it was a shame it was not finished, she thought. She tried closing her eyes again and going back to sleep; her wound began hurting. "Damn! Not now...", she endured it until the spasm passed and she was once more at ease.

It took a few minutes to dissipate. She felt safe inside this room, this one in particular. Virgil had risen a while ago; his spot was not warm anymore. She moved towards it, as if drawn by his scent. "Humans have pheromones... it is only natural" she thought, trying to logically explain why his' was so enticing to her. He had been so nice to her and they spent a lot of time talking during the day and even the night, she knew he felt something for her. But did she? Was it only infatuation? Could she place her full confidence in him? Even as hard as she wished to believe it, her logic overthrew her feelings "You can't have confidence in anybody if you want to survive. You are like an animal; somebody is bound to prey on your weaknesses".

But, why?

Why keep on believing such a dreaded thing? She was not captive anymore; she did not have to endure the constant bullying of her guards or the incessant bad treatments from the doctors. She was free to do all that she pleased and could disappear never to be found again. But something inside was telling her she would never be completely free unless Marcus Holling was dead. Maybe it was time she told everyone the truth about herself before they learned it from the boxes.

John's words echoed through her mind "If you hope to leave one day, I suggest you put a stop to this now". She sighed, he was right. Unless she could convince Virgil to let her stay, she would have to leave. Would he still accept her after she told him the truth? He would be hurt anyway, it could not be worse than him walking on her with her hands bloody. She was tired of all this, what if she put an end to her own life? That could not work, they would resuscitate her body and keep it in suspended animation. "Stop thinking... Rest a little more..." she whispered to herself as she closed her eyes and fell back to sleep.

Abigail felt a warmness on her forehead, a sweet and light touch. When she opened her eyes, Virgil
was at her side, checking her temperature with the back of his hand. She asked:

- What time is it?

- Early afternoon. Stay in bed, you need it. You've been feverish all night.

- Have you been checking on me the entire time?

- You were shivering. I could feel you tremble and it woke me a few times. Your skin was burning.

- Sorry… I'm feeling better now.

She looked at him in the eyes: his smile was genuine but something seemed to bother him. She rose to sit down; her limbs felt a lot less stiff than the day before.

- Something's on your mind… What's wrong?

He sat at her side on the bed.

- Lady Penelope has gone missing. We don't have any leads other than the fact that her signal was headed towards Bereznik. It looks like she was abducted but I can't say for sure.

The young woman frowned.

- You think Lady Dasha is behind this?

- I don't know. I'm on standby now. John is doing everything he can to find her.

- Can we do something?

- Not until we have more information. The GDF speaks of war; one of their carriers was shot down by an unidentified fighter. Things are getting very serious.

- That's not good…

Penelope was her only hope to bring down Holling. With her gone, it would be difficult to work alone on the project. Scott would doubtlessly refuse to take part in any way. Now was not the time to open up, she would have to wait. As she tried rising from the bed, Virgil helped her. She felt her bandage damp but it did not show any signs of bleeding. She believed him now about the fever, this might explain why she slept for so long. Her legs had regained their strength and the only feeling remaining was the pain from the wound she brought back from her first trip in space. The young man brought her close to him slowly, making sure he would not hurt her. It seemed so natural for him; his gestures were soft and kind. He was never rude or displaced, smiling to her all the time. "That can't be real... this is just a dream..." was her first thought but the pain was real enough. She smiled back, the smile he so enjoyed seeing hanging from her lips. Holding onto him tightly, she did not know what to say. He approached his lips and kissed her.

Their moment of intimacy was cut short by a call from John giving an update on Penelope's case. He broadcasted to the entire island. Both of them listened carefully.

- I have traced Penelope's full signal from the day she reactivated her chip. It stops right after crossing the security perimeter around Romania. We know she might have gone towards the north. I could try to hack in their communications in order to follow her but knowing they were able to cut our link before, I doubt I could make it unscathed. We might succeed if we disable one of their
satellites and force them to resort to ground communications. This sounds dangerous, and it is, but that's one option.

Scott answered.

- Too risky. If Alan is spotted, he might be shot down before he can come back home. I don't know the extent of their forces, but if it is like in Dad's stories, they have very advanced spatial weaponry.

- Yeah… that was just a suggestion. At least I'm doing my best to try to find solutions.

- We all are. It's not easy. Gordon has set out with Brains a few minutes ago in one of the pods. They'll reach Parker in about six hours and get to work on FAB1. I trust that, by then, we might have had news from the GDF.

- FAB! Keeping an eye open.

The communications stopped. Abigail smirked.

- Your brother John is an amazing chaperone. His timing is always right.

Virgil sighed, not wanting to add anything. He was about to walk away but she held his hand. He was irritated, as if the interruption did trigger in him the feeling that they were being watched. She smiled.

- Don't take it personally; I'm sure he did not do it deliberately.

Virgil remained silent. He changed the subject.

- Get some rest now. You need to heal.

- I'll heal regardless of if I rest or not. Give it a day or two and it's only going to be a scar. Besides, with Brains gone, who is going to explore the entire content of the boxes? And there is the Chronos module we picked up…

She seemed to have a sudden revelation. Her worried face turned to a smile.

- We could use Chronos to find Lady Penelope.

He seemed unsure.

- You have an idea how it could be useful?

- Yes. Remember in Cloud Alpha when our signal came from somewhere else? Well, the communications were passing through it. I'll need your help with this, care to give a hand?

As much as he wanted to agree to this, he remained reluctant. She was wounded and he did not want to approve of anything crazy, but that idea seemed to be simple enough.

- As long as you don't strain yourself, I'll help.

- Good. Let's go to the lab. I need my suit's helmet, too.

Virgil nodded. As they left, he took her hand. She was a bit surprised at first but enjoyed it. There was no time to speak to him about anything now, she had to concentrate and try to find Penelope.
Light shone through the dirty window. The putrid smell of a rotting wet rug, mixed with dust, greeted her upon waking to her now tragic reality. She had overheard a man and a woman speaking briefly before being carried and thrown into a vehicle. Their voices were not really clear; her mind was playing tricks on her. There was a fight: gunfire and screams, screeching tires and the loud banging of metal on metal.

"Get 'em!"

"I don't care how many you kill!"

She heard curses in German and Russian, this gave her a hint of her whereabouts: they had crossed the frontier and she might be near the state of Bereznik. This wasn't at all how she imagined she make it there.

Penelope's head was still hurting from the blow. As she opened her eyes fully, she studied her surroundings: an old decrepit room with most of the previous owner's possessions scattered about. Rugs and tapestries decorated the walls. She could hear loud coughing and footsteps behind the door. She had to find a way to leave and quick. She tried to rise, her movements clumsy still, when she felt something heavy on her ankle: a pair of handcuffs closed on one end in the loop of a chain bolted to the ground. It was long enough to permit her to walk around the room but not to reach the door. The thought that first crossed her mind was that she had taken the place of the Minister's daughter and would share her fate, whatever these people had in store for her. They did not want to kill her, she was certain, for getting her this far away would only mean that she would be held for a ransom… or worse. Political prisoners were seldom treated as human beings in the Slavic states.

She heard the door unlatch and open. She stood, ready to clobber anyone who might show a hostile behaviour. Instead, it was a young girl, about ten or twelve years of age, with a platter of food in hand. She slowly laid the platter on the floor. Penelope remained at a distance and tried to converse with the young lady.

- Well, hello. What a lovely young lady you are. Can we chat a bit, please?

The girl looked at her and smiled before exiting the room, giving no reply to Penelope's plea. The platter contained a flatbread, a bowl of goulash, a glass of murky water and an almond paste treat shaped like a Christmas tree. It seemed rather odd to see such a generous meal served to her if their intentions were to keep her prisoner. As the agent's code went, she would not even take a single bite to prevent being poisoned and would continue to refuse food until her captors negotiated with her, if she really mattered to them, that is.

She toured the room: there was a cupboard on one side she could easily reach, in which women's clothing hung. The fabric smelled of mildew but the clothes were not damaged. This could help her fit in better than with the black leather and denim suit she was wearing right now. The rest of the room contained books written in Russian, statuettes, religious icons and broken toys. There was no hint as of where she might be, no address. She sat down on the bed, inspecting her handcuffed ankle. It was a standard lock that could easily be picked if she could find a needle or a hairpin. Looking through her hair, she was astounded that all her hairpins were gone; her captors were smart enough to have searched her thoroughly and take away all her gadgets, too.

She took a look through the window: it was dirty enough she could not see anything on the other side, not even getting a hint about how high up she was. She would have to wait for her captor to manifest.

The day was waning when she heard the door open again. This time, a woman came inside: she was tall, with long slick black hair, piercing greyish blue eyes and a silhouette to put others to
shame. She was all dressed in black form fitting clothes with a short cloth coat on her shoulders. Behind her, Penelope saw two armed men, wearing the colors of the Bereznik army with matching berets and assault rifles. They entered the room, following the woman who addressed the aristocrat in very good spoken English.

- Penelope Creighton-Ward. You are the first living agent of the Council to ever meet me. The others were a bit too quick to draw their guns.

The woman looked at the untouched platter.

- It's very sad for you to waste such good food. With all the love and care Babushka put in it…

The Lady stood. She frowned.

- Let's cut the taunting short, will you? I am in no mood to be playing this game.

- Good to hear you speak more sense than most. All right, we are going out for a walk. We will speak on the way.

She issued commands in what seemed to be a Slavic dialect, ordering one of the men to remove the handcuff from the Lady's ankle. He unlocked the heavy chain but replaced it with some kind of electronic device. Her desire to run away was suddenly cut short; it was a remote-controlled explosive. The woman seemed satisfied as she exited the room, followed by the soldiers who remained at all time at Penelope's side.

The room was on the second floor. They had to go down a flight of stairs in order to make it to the front door. To her left, she noticed an old woman sitting down in the living room, knitting and singing while rocking herself. She coughed periodically, loudly, as if struck by some kind of ailment. The house was in good general shape; the usual belief about Bereznik was that people lived in utmost poverty, in ruins, with little to no access to water or sanitary services. Once they stepped outside, she was charmed by the beautifully preserved town square paved in reddish brown stone and decorated with luscious greenery. There were flowers everywhere hanging from the windows and from pots scattered around. Very little people were outside and none seemed to find Penelope's case weird. There were other soldiers walking around, all wearing weapons. Some civilians looked armed, too.

They walked towards a park further down an alley. In the beginning, it was beautiful and green but the path was cut short by the rims of an enormous bomb crater stretching as far as the eye could see beyond the trees.

They stopped there. The woman began to speak:

- This is where one of the battles took place, one of the deadliest. Decontamination is finished; we'll be able to start levelling the ground soon.

Penelope could not help but watch the gigantic hole in front of her as a cold shiver ran down her spine. Victory had come at a cost, and it was the quality of life and health of the locals. There were still a lot of debris and traces of abandoned vehicles in the crater, vestiges long abandoned from the Global Conflict that seemed so long ago. It was not that far away, only a few years after her birth, but it was a forgotten memory for those who did not live close to the war zone. For those who did, the nightmare was real and years would be necessary to rebuild and regrow.

The woman turned towards her.

- How do you feel when you see this? What does an agent of London, aristocrat to boot, thinks
about such a desolate pasture?

- It is sad, but a direct consequence of the war.

- We did not want war. We were a peaceful town before it all happened. You will never experience such a tragedy…

She looked down at the aristocrat’s leg.

- … but in another set of mind, I am quite satisfied to see you subjugated as such and away from your allies. Let’s continue.

They walked further from the crater, returning to the greener environment. Through the northernmost path, a cemetery could be seen. Penelope could not be broken by feelings, maybe the woman did not know that. She took the liberty to express herself:

- I am no journalist who will live to tell your tale but an agent for the Council. You are making a mistake by keeping me here. Delving in melancholy will not move me.

The trees were spaced and the grass scarcer as they neared the graveyard. The woman stopped at a park bench and sat down. The soldiers instructed Penelope to do the same. The woman smirked.

- All right then. Ask me three questions. That will be all you will know for now.

Penelope did not hesitate.

- What is your name?

- They call me Zeta. I will not disclose more at this time.

- So, you are Zeta. Why kidnap the Minister’s daughter?

Zeta smiled.

- You are not selfish enough to ask me about your personal safety? This is a good start.

- There are things far worse to worry about. You have not been hostile towards me, so why should I be?

Zeta laid her hands on her thighs.

- Very well. Initially, we required her aid. This is why we asked someone to stage and abduction. Yet, it did not go according to our initial plan and ended up in a bloodbath. You should be grateful for me saving your life, one of these brutes was about to throw you off the heli-jet in flight.

Penelope remained silent and waited for Zeta to explain all she wanted. It felt unbelievable.

- Why kidnap her? You think she would have agreed to help you then? This is plain stupid.

- Yes, she would have. Knowing the extent of our situation, and with her background in working for humanitarian causes, she would have accepted if we did not murder her friends and ran through half of England with her tied up that is…

- I do hope you realize the crime you have committed. You will not get away with it.

- The work was sloppy and there were casualties. There is no way to correct our wrong now. We
still have you and you are worth a lot more than her.

- Last question then. Are you working for Marcus Holling?

This question caught Zeta off guard. She smiled to cover her anxiety.

- Yes and no…

- This is awfully evasive, I want to know the truth.

The woman took a deep breath.

- Yes. At one point, we had no choice to side with him since we required weapons. The village is an isolated node, protected by its own people and the mountains all around provide us with a natural barrier. All the soldiers you saw are locals who are willing to give their lives for their kin. Our history is splattered with terrible ordeals that struck us one after the other once the war ended.

There was a silence.

- Since you seem inclined, tell me what happened to your people.

- Border villages suffered the most from the Council's refusal to provide care and food for the people. They decreed we were too close to the enemy territory to help and were afraid of retaliation from the General's men once the war was over. They abandoned us. To cite an example, babushka's sons were killed by a bandit raid on our village. He daughter was raped by passing patrollers of the General's army and committed suicide out of shame a few years later, leaving her only daughter in the old woman's care. When it's not the bandits or the soldiers, we get a visit from the slave traders. They ask for our young and are often too many for us to fight back.

Penelope listened, hoping this was not a strategy to catch her off guard. The woman's face was twisted in anger, it made the aristocrat certain that she did not lie. Zeta went on.

- You have it easy in your cozy homes with nothing to fear. We have to fight for our lives, even if the war was twenty years ago. Vestiges are all over our nation… If only your Council understood and provided protection for us all, we would not be doing this.

- I see. You know I cannot do anything while being restrained here?

- Yes, but you must prove to us that you are willing to cooperate. Otherwise, you will keep your irons.

The woman rose.

- We have been out for a while now. Let us go back. You have some apologies to give our babushka for the wasted food.

Penelope followed her close, not wanting the soldiers to get near her. She had to find a way to send a signal or anything to let her friends know of her whereabouts. Maybe in cooperating fully she might get a chance to access any means of communications available. Even so, sending a message outside of Bereznik was not easy since all broadcasts were intercepted and spied on. Running away was also out of the question; the layout was unknown to her and she could be running to her death. She would have to thread lightly and wait for an opportunity to arise.

The POD landed about a kilometer away in an opened field. Prior to their arrival, Gordon had
contacted the gendarmerie to make the arrangements for the commissioner to pick them up. As requested, he was waiting near the landing site, leaning on the side of his vehicle.

When the two men exited the POD, he approached and introduced himself. They loaded the car with tools and replacement parts for FAB1 before making their way into town. Parker was waiting near the pink Rolls Royce parked in the back of the mechanic's workshop. The butler greeted both his friends, offering help with bringing the material to the vehicle.

- Mister Tracy, Mister Brains, you are a sight for sore eyes. Been waitin a while now. Thank goodness you came in such short notice.

Gordon was still worried about Penelope. Her whereabouts unknown, he was edgy as ever and kept looking at his computer watch to see if John sent updates. So far, nothing new had come up. He had to revert into helping Brains out to keep his mind busy, else he would question the faithful servant in a burst of anger.

The trio worked on the vehicle until dusk. Brains did not want to leave until the car was fully repaired, so his two friends went and get some rest. The innkeeper provided them with a hot meal and lodging. It was the aquanaut's chance, the one he waited for since his departure from Tracy island to question Parker one on one.

While they were enjoying their meal, alone in the small dining room, the young man inquired:

- Tell me, Parker, what exactly happened?

- As I have told earlier, Mister Tracy, we infiltrated a warehouse where the kidnappers were hiding. They tried to escape with a helijet and the Lady jumped inside. I was using cover fire; tried to jump after her but were too slow to follow. I hopped in FAB1 and followed them until the GDF arrived. That is when the fighters appeared and shooting began. I could not retaliate, they were too quick.

The butler's long face said it all as he was ashamed of not being able to save the aristocrat. Gordon listened to each word he said, until he was finished then went on.

- You saw fighters bring down the GDF aircraft?

- Yes. It was going directly for it. I caught some stray bullets, otherwise I might have made it further and fire a missile or two. Been stranded here ever since.

- Do you think there is a chance they might have ignored you if you were not hit?

- I cannot say. Maybe not, considering they were protecting the heli-jet. I am glad to have landed safe, else I could not have warned you of the incident.

It struck Gordon that, if the butler had insisted a lot more, he might have died in the crash and nobody would have ever known about the Lady's disappearance. Instead of being angry at him, he felt gratitude but did not find the words to express it.

Still looking periodically at his watch, he sighed. His appetite was light; he did not even finish his serving, even though the food was exquisite. Parker dug in to regain his strength. It was the first time he could relax a bit after this whole ordeal.

The aquanaut's voice broke the silence.

- Do you want to go after her?
Parker raised his head, like if Gordon's question was the bit of motivation he was waiting for.

- I would, mister. And right away if I could. But how can we track the lady appropriately?

- Thunderbird Five's database is public for us. All the information John is working on live is available as mission data. Since he's been trying to locate Lady Penelope, I'll read the info he has gathered up till now. Let's hope he has a lead.

- Let's hope this works, Mister Tracy. What will we do then?

- I'm up for some action. Why don't we try to go by foot and get close to the border? We'll improvise once we get there.

- That will not be easy. Are you sure you want to do this?

- I'd do anything to find her. I won't do like Scott and stand idly by while she might be needing us!

- I could not agree more, sir. Sorry for asking, but will this not put you in trouble with your brothers?

Gordon stood.

- I don't care what my brothers think. I want to do something. Paperwork and administrative delays from the GDF are likely to make us lose precious time. We can't be sure they will even be able to do anything. Scott will not send anybody out until he's certain there is no danger and the Colonel might be preventing us from going, too. But nobody will be able stop only the two of us.

Parker's spirit seemed to have been lifted. His face did not look as dark as it was at the beginning of the lunch. He got up.

- Good then, sir. I'll go find a car. You make sure to look the information through. We will leave in the middle of the night not to raise any suspicions from mister Brains.

- Agreed. Good luck.

Gordon sat down in the rented room and began going through the data John had gathered. He stumbled upon a map with calculated trajectories and quickly downloaded it before logging off, in case his access was detected by his brother. The interactive map detailed the estimated destination of the heli-jet from its flight pattern, the location where the GDF flyer was shot and crashed and FAB1's crash site. The calculations pointed to a set of coordinates near Romania, on the other side of the borders of the Bereznik state. There was a 15% margin of error, though, which meant about a 20 kilometers offset if the destination was not right. It was worth a shot.

Parker succeeded in dealing a 2048 small truck with a low cab and good tires. It had an electric motor with a redundant generator, which meant it could go very long distances without needing to recharge. The price he paid for it was a lot more than the value of the truck, but its previous owner would be able to purchase a newer model with the generous offer he received. While driving back to the inn, he noticed Brains coming back from the mechanic shop, exhausted. He lay low not to be seen and entered a few minutes after him. The engineer sat down in the dining room and ordered some food; the butler approached him to inquire about his work.

- How are the repairs going, mister Brains?

The engineer was a bit startled but calmed down upon seeing the familiar face.
- Very well. There are still a few adjustments to make, but in all, the car will be ready in two
days. The engine took a beating and we need some time for the Neterium ingot to stabilize inside
the combustion chamber before we can start it. Otherwise, the synchronisation of the motor will
not be efficient and its power output cannot…

Parker seemed lost, Brains could tell. All his engineering gibberish did not mean anything to him.
The innkeeper came in with a platter of cheeses and pâtés. She excused herself for the kitchen was
closed at this time, and had prepared a light lunch for him, promising a hearty breakfast the next
morning. This seemed to satisfy the engineer who thanked her as she left. Parker yawned:

- I will be hitting my bunk, sir. Getting some rest while we can is not a luxury.

- G..good night then, Parker. Sleep well.

The butler left for the second floor.

It was passed 2 a.m. when both Parker and Gordon met near the front door. Silently, they headed
towards their new ride; the electric engine produced very little noise compared to FAB1’s roar.
They left the village and headed east on the main road, Parker at the wheel.

Gordon was still groggy from not having a full night of sleep but was determined enough to remain
focused for the duration of the trip. They did not know what to expect. The butler looked at his
young sidekick.

- Don't worry, Mister Tracy. We'll save her. Rest now.

Gordon nodded before resting his eyes. The journey ahead was not going to be an easy one.

Kayo's intention was to solve her problem as quickly as possible. She flew directly to the
healthcare facility, asking to schedule her scan ahead of time. The personnel showed her to a small
room where she could undress. More blood samples were required and she would have to ingest a
contrasting agent. It took a full four hours of waiting, during which she felt impatient and
powerless. Scott contacted her and gave her a breakdown of the situation, explaining up to the last
detail about Penelope's abduction. Her only wish was to leave and jump into Thunderbird Shadow
to begin the search. Scott calmed her.

- Kayo, don't. Think about your health. Right now, there is nothing else we can do. I'll keep you
informed.

- Scott, I can cancel this appointment. Finding Penelope is a lot more important than doing all this.

- No. I'm forbidding you to come back until you're done. You already waited for so long, why not
see it through? Call me back once it's finished. It won't do you any good to stay home and pace
around. Get better; we need you at your best.

She sighed. He knew her so well; if she was back home, she would look for any opportunity to take
Shadow out and patrol the Bereznik border; that could be very dangerous. A nurse came inside the
room, cutting her reverie short. She proceeded in taking the samples and leaving her a bottle of
milky liquid. The taste was far from milk: it was sandy and tasted like cough syrup. She downed it
in one gulp. It took about fifteen minutes between the ingestion and the moment she was
summoned for the exam.

The entire procedure took two hours. Right afterwards, she was taken back to the same room to
dress and meet the doctor. She was tempted to call back at home and get fresh news from Scott but
remembered his words and waited instead. A small white-haired man entered; he was all smiles. His round face and reddish cheeks reminded her of a character straight out of the circus. He sat down near her, nodding politely as he introduced himself.

- Greetings Miss Kyrano. I am doctor Hanse, practitioner in Internal Medicine, specialized in Genetics and Pathology.

His presence did not bode well in her point of view but she refrained from making any comments. Instead, she remained deceitfully positive.

- Happy to make your acquaintance, Doctor Hanse. Please, give me the news.

The man looked at his tablet computer then back at Kayo.

- I have good and bad news. Which one do you prefer first?

She rolled her eyes; he looked like a classical buffoon and was starting to get on her nerves.

- Bad news first, Doc. Give me the hard truth so I can wash it down with the good one afterwards.

- You are very lucky Doctor Chang has sent you to me. We see here in your body the progression of a very rare disease that affects the brain mostly. Tell me, have you been in contact with lead, contaminated ground or exposed frequently to chemicals? Or even near areas where biological testing occurs?

- I'm sorry, I can't think of a moment when I might have been. But I spent my early childhood in an area where the air was foul from a processing plant.

This brought back memories. It was before the Tracys took her in, before she could enjoy a normal life: she had gone through tough times with her parents. It was better for the doctor to believe in her story than to let him know she had been infected with a man made disease. The doctor was reading on the tablet as she spoke. She stopped and waited, believing her statement was enough.

He did not raise his eyes.

- The good news is treatment is available. But…

"What else?" she thought. The more he spoke, the more annoying he became to her.

- I can prescribe you a long list of medication to take for years to come. This will regulate the chemical balance in you body. Or, we could go for a quicker solution, which is unfortunately an experimental treatment.

It was not the answer she was expecting, but the latter seemed to please her a lot more than spend her entire life swallowing pills.

- Explain to me what it implies; the experimental treatment, I mean. And how long will it last?

- It is merely a week. We have tried it on a few candidates; eligibility is determined by the progression of the disease. In your case, at such early stages, you have a almost a hundred percent chances of recovery.

One week was an eternity with Penelope's disappearance. She would have to consult with Scott before taking any decision.

- Can I make a call? I'll give you my answer right after.
- Take your time. Notify the nurse once you have made up your mind.

The old man stood and left, bidding her farewell in a nod. She immediately called Scott.

- Hey. So, what's new?

- Nothing. The GDF is silent and still no sign of Penelope. Her captors have crossed the border, we confirmed it. How was your examination?

- It was… fine. The doctor gave me two options.

- Which are?

- One is to be addicted to a cocktail of drugs for the rest of my life, the other consists of some experimental treatment, but I'll have to be away for a whole week.

- Why do you even ask? Isn't it obvious that the week-long treatment is better, or is there a catch?

- None. He told me I had good chances of recovery if I stick with it.

- Then go for it. And don't worry about what's happening at home.

She was wondering if her leave would hurt the organization in some way. After all, being the head of security was a full-time task and her absence might be felt.

- I want to be part of the action too, you know. Don't cast me aside!

- That's not what is happening. You need to get well. I'm expecting you to come back healthy.

- Don't worry. I'll be up and ready in a week to get things done.

Scott smiled.

- Sure you will. Get some rest now.

Kayo looked at him for a while. She knew he was itching to confess his love for her but doing it in public had always been a struggle for him. He ended the conversation with a simple blown kiss; this melted her hearth, even if he did not pronounce the words. She got out and met with the nurse.

- I will go along with Doctor Hanse's experimental treatment. Just tell me what I have to do.

The nurse gave her the instructions; all was going to be done at the Newcastle facility, in the medical research ward. One week would pass quickly enough, a sacrifice she was willing to make in order to keep on going.

The communications were opened and broadcasted to Tracy Island every single detail John could find out about Penelope. There was nothing new, and everyone expected the Colonel to report in any minute, as if her intervention was going to be the relief they were all waiting for so eagerly. Nothing came through from the GDF, not even the Lieutenant Colonel's report. Still, there was some research to be done and the space monitor was determined to see it through.

While he was gathering more data, EOS answered a call on her side. He paid little attention as he was fully committed to his task. The artificial intelligence spoke aloud.

- John, we have a request from the island. Abigail is going to set up Chronos. She requires a
broadcast channel from the station. It does not need to be secure.

He waved his hand as to dismiss the AI.

- Is it important? I don't have time for this, EOS. If it does not interfere with our search, let her borrow one dedicated frequency. We can see to this later. Right now, our main concern is pinpointing Lady Penelope's whereabouts and relaying the information to the GDF.

EOS's LEDs flashed green and yellow before it moved out of sight, away from him.

A call from a GDF frequency came in, but not the one he was expecting: it was Captain Ridley O'Bannon.

- Greetings John. I trust you had a bit of rest since my last visit?
- Not really. Something came up; can I talk to you later?

Her tone of voice was stern. She was not smiling as usual.

- Actually, no. The high command wants to have a word with you. It concerns the incident with the space station that occurred a few days ago.
- Can it wait? I'm in the middle of finding a missing person. Just give me an appointment tomorrow or when it fits their schedule better. Right now, it's impossible.

She looked at him and frowned. She insisted.

- This it not my order. It's from the high command. I cannot buy you time nor can't you try to escape the meeting. You'll have to come with me, immediately.
- What if I don't?
- John, don't make things harder than they already are. General Dixon has ordered you to be questioned about the incident. It will only take a few hours, nothing more.
- Ridley, please. Lady Penelope is missing. I can't just leave things as they are and do nothing. Let me get in touch with the General so I can make arrangements.
- Suit yourself, John.

She disconnected. He opened a communication to GDF headquarters and asked to speak with General Dixon himself. The dark-haired man appeared on screen, sitting at his desk, not even looking at the screen. He began without even waiting for John to introduce himself.

- I trust this matter is of high importance if you disregard an order. Do tell me what makes you think you will be getting out of this one?
- Sir… I mean greetings…
- Enough of the courtesies and your silk-tongue, I trust you did not call to woo me but to escape the meeting we are supposed to have.
- Sir, I am currently working on a rescue mission. The meeting will have to wait until this matter is resolved. A life is in danger…

The General lifted his eyes towards John's holo projection.
- One life is enough for you to risk going to jail for defying my authority? Put all what you are doing on hold and meet Captain O'Bannon. She is waiting for you.

He was right. Ridley's ship was near the station. At first, John had thought she wanted to visit; it was no surprise for him to see her navigate around Thunderbird Five. This, however, was something else. The space monitor asked:

- Have you spoken to our leader? He is the one issuing my orders.

- He is in no position to make decisions, I am. Listen to me, Mister Tracy, if you are not out of this station by midnight, you will be labelled as a criminal and the Captain will have no choice but to bring you in by force. Now behave and report, or face the consequences.

He disconnected abruptly. Scott had heard part of the conversation; the comms broadcasting to Tracy island. He replied to John.

- Do not give in to these threats, John. I'll contact the Colonel and have her calm things down. Meanwhile, get on with what you are doing. If we can find Penelope before the GDF does, we'll be free to act without them.

- FAB, Scott. I'll let you in on the details if anything else comes around.

- I'll disconnect for now and let you concentrate on your task.

Time was passing by quickly and still no word from Colonel Casey. John kept staring at the international clocks anxiously; was the General mad about the incident at Star Alpha? He finally got word from Scott.

- Tracy Island here. John, I can't get through to the Colonel. All I get as an answer is that she's in a war meeting and that she cannot see to anything else right now. I have also tried the Lieutenant Colonel, without success. Tell me if anything comes up.

The space monitor resumed his work. There was an alarm indicating a security breach coming from Tracy Island. "What is this? I don't have time..." he thought, turning his full attention to the matter. Chronos had been set up and was scanning through the channels, triggering in its wake the security measures of the GDF's detection spectrum. John tried to cloak the broadcast and succeeded just in time; he hoped nobody would have noticed the intrusion. The frequency module was working at its full potential, saturating the allowed frequency and spreading to other like a virus. It shut down the communication to Tracy Island. Holo screens began to pop up everywhere. The space monitor was powerless, as a dozen of simultaneous communications opened when he tried to shut one down. He reached out for EOS' help in a scream; the AI did not respond. The mobile camera seemed to be caught in a loop, unable to move, its LEDs blinking rapidly.

- EOS! What's happening?

The AI seemed to lag.

- J.. ohn... Ov... erloading...

The ship powered down suddenly. Emergency systems came on, lighting the ring in an eerie orange light. There was no power feeding the computers, communications were down, as were the engines. John's attention was drawn to the exterior: he noticed that the ships nearing him also had a power shortage. He reached for his helmet and floated towards the engine room. At that precise moment, power came back up. He heard EOS's voice pronouncing random words until it died down.
- EOS? Answer me! What is happening?

The camera remained silent and immobile. John stretched a hand to touch it. It came to life, red lights blinking.


The ship's systems seemed to have been reset; John could see the oxygen concentration decreasing in the ambient air.

- EOS, what is wrong?

- Voice pattern not recognized. Please input valid voice pattern.

He moved away from the camera that followed him throughout the ship. He tried to exit manually; there was still a way he could restore communications if he used an isolated communicator located near the engine room. As he opened the airlock manually, alarms went off. EOS, or whatever it had become, was following him around and continually prompting: "Please input valid voice pattern". At one point, he thought about shorting circuiting the systems in order to stop it, the volume of the voice seemed to become louder and louder every minute.

Upon reaching the backup communicator, he hooked it up to a power node and tried to contact Tracy Island. No response. Something was preventing him from accessing any communication frequencies in the vicinity. He realized it a bit too late: the space station had been taken. His doubts were confirmed: this all happened after Chronos was allocated a broadcast frequency through Thunderbird Five's systems. His head was spinning round with theories, was it what Abigail had planned all along?

No. It could not be. She had proven a good ally up until now. Until now… was that a subterfuge? He had lost all means of communicating with the base, it would only be a matter of time before Thunderbird Three was launched to come after him. Even with the instruments being standalone, there was no way he could speak to his brothers.

For the first time in his life, he really felt alone.

Looking through the ring, he noticed the GDF fleet still around. If he could reach Ridley in time, he would be able to contact the island, even if it meant to surrender to the General. At least, he had to try.

Outfitting himself with his suit was difficult without the help of the automated ring. He had to activate it manually. He had to use a crank for the system to operate. After a good fifteen minutes, he had his gear on and was ready to go. His helmet's systems indicated that there was 0% of breathable air inside the cockpit. Life support had not come back online. He had no choice to leave; with his helmet's oxygen reserves down to two hours, he made his way towards the nearest ship.

John turned around for a brief moment: Thunderbird Five's gravity ring was bathed in reddish orange light, as if fire had engulfed the once blue and calm interior. The letters were barely perceptible, blending in with the interior lighting. He approached the GDF's ship airlock: there was no response when he tried pinging to gain entry. He had at least expected them to notice his approach, yet he stood outside for a while before deciding to go inside. Activating the door's exterior release handle, he entered the ship, locking the portal behind him. He waited for decompression to occur; nothing. There were no active systems, no short-wave communications
came through to him either. Something was very wrong.

He opened the second airlock; the air inside the ship was not breathable. His gaze caught a floating inert body; the man's face was frozen in fear, his lips blue and eyes watery as he had died out of breath. A cold shiver ran down John's spine: was this what had happened to the people of Star Alpha? Only one thing was in his mind: Ridley. He had to find her. Floating through the ship, he came across more dead bodies, soldiers, officers, all which seemed to have died from a sudden decompression, unable to reach their helmets in time... His heart began to race. Where was she? He could feel his hands shake and sweat as he entered the cockpit. A feminine figure was floating lifelessly with two others, their helmets on. He approached and grabbed her, his eyes tearing up.

He let out a scream, hugging Ridley tightly, alone and helpless until his voice died and gave way to a bone chilling silence.
Thank you all for the wonderful reviews and for keeping up with the story so far.

This one is lighter, enjoy because you'll get a "special" format very soon! Stay tuned!

The meeting had gone for six hours already. Colonel Casey cursed at the useless administrative necessities, all the which were delaying her from acting on the field. General Dixon had walked in, ready to hear what his officers had planned with all the information they gathered so far about the incident. A black unidentified flyer had shot down a GDF military carrier on a mission to rescue a captured agent. Dixon listened very carefully as the Colonels and Captains explained the whole situation in detail. Once they were done, he began asking questions the way he usually does: aggressively and with a strong tendency for accusations.

He looked at Colonel Casey.

- You are telling me that a civilian vehicle belonging to this agent was heading towards the border, following the Heli-jet when it was intercepted by a GDF military carrier? And that the fighter shot down the carrier but not the pink horror? Is this a joke?

- No Sir. This is what happened.

- Now, don't tell me Bereznik fighter pilots can't aim, for they are the most accurate shooters in all the world.

- Sir, with due respect, I don't read minds. If the fighter shot the carrier, it's angle was surely better…

- … or your agent is in league with the Bereznik state. Have you ever thought about this?

- I can assure you that she is not. Her allegiance is without any doubt for the Council and she would never betray it.

- Are you so sure?

He fiddled on a tablet computer in front of him, sending images to the holo projector at the center of the table. Pictures of Penelope and a young unidentified woman meeting with Dasha Kaczynska appeared. He turned around and stared at the Colonel, an arrogant look on his face.

- Fraternizing with one of this world's most wanted, of course. Curiously enough, Kaczynska was missing when the avalanche hit the complex, as was Creighton-Ward. Both of them had bailed. Care to explain this?

- This is a matter for the Secret services division, Sir. This does not concern me.

- That, my dear, is where you are wrong. Because, right afterward, International Rescue came and saved the day. During this diversion, the English agent helped the criminal to escape. There is no mention of any mission regarding the Eaux Claires resort, a place famous for its low electronic surveillance. The perfect place for such a meeting, don't you think? Just after three Bereznik agents fled a high-security detention facility in Germany. Weird, is it not?

- Sir, you are clearly mistaken…
The officers began to whisper around her. She looked at the attendance, frowning, before tapping the table loudly and regaining the attention of everyone.

- General Dixon, our agent Penelope Creighton-Ward has always been faithful to the Council and her motives have always been the greater good of all. If she has met with this woman, I can ensure you she did not wish to do anything wrong. I beg you to reconsider before accusing her of anything this harsh. She cannot speak for herself and we should provide her with assistance now…

- … now that she is with her allies? Listen, Colonel, I have no desire to hear more nonsense. We will not mobilize troops and risk a war for one single woman. In another set of mind, the attack on our flyer is clearly a provocation of their part. We should not take lightly such an insult on our own ground.

The General stood. Everybody watched him as he opened a map. And began detailing his plan.

- Since I am acting instead of the Minister of Defense, here are my commands. We will reinforce the border in the north and west. Increased security will be mandatory and all people leaving Bereznik will require a permit in order to walk around freely in Europe. Nobody is allowed to enter. Everyone seized at the border trying to sneak in will be detained. We shall increase the number of military carriers roaming the mountainous regions and the forests. Report in every single detail. If it is a war they want, they will get it. This meeting is adjourned.

Dixon left the room accompanied by all other personnel while Casey remained until the end, insulted as ever. That man was a literal snooty asshole, the kind of rich guy who succeeded in gaining ranks during the war through his status and could now impose his twisted view of the world on others. He was not all that young: it was well known he had received rejuvenation treatments in order to cull a few years. His face was free of lines and wrinkles, his hands were too; collagen regeneration treatments were a very sought off trend. She hated his way to question her words and the fact that nobody else had risen to her defense. The Lieutenant Colonel had been intimidated by the man's gaze, too.

She returned to her office and was about to call Tracy island when she received an immediate summon to meet in private with the General. Sending a quick text message to the Lieutenant Colonel, she went on her way to meet with the resentful man. He was sitting behind his desk, but he was not alone inside the room: Marcus Holling sat opposite to him. The General designated the chair in front of him with an opened hand, inviting the Colonel to take a seat. Dixon began.

- Colonel Casey, no doubt you already know Marcus Holling, as I was made aware of.

Holling nodded politely to the Colonel before the General resumed.

- It has come to my attention that you have a sick daughter, afflicted with a terrible disease.

- In due respect, Sir, I doubt this is something that might concern you…

He raised his finger.

- It does. You see, Mister Holling was nice enough to explain me the whole situation. I am not a monster, Colonel, and I do understand what it means for a loved one to be suffering while we are stricken with grief, unable to do anything, powerless before the law of nature itself.

Casey did not understand what he meant by this. She was expecting a threat and ready to hear it, even if it meant her heart would break and she would ask for an extended leave just to be away from that hateful man. The Colonel seemed to read her facial expression. He showed a
compassionate smile.

- Colonel Casey. Mister Holling was coming to ask me if you could be freed for a few days in order to be with your daughter during her treatment.

Her traits softened. She had to contain herself not to fall into melancholy. She looked at Holling who began to speak.

- The drug is ready. We have high hopes that it will stop the progression of the disease and ease the pain. Treatment on mice was successful and the test subjects were even able to walk after a week.

It was more than she could wish for. If the treatment worked, her daughter would finally be free from the chair she was confined to and appreciate life again. She went back to the General.

- If I may, General, I would like to close my current cases before leaving. Would that be a problem?

Dixon rose an eyebrow, curious.

- Do think that I would rather see you at your daughter's side than crawling under a ton of paperwork. You can delegate to the Lieutenant Colonel; I will appoint her to your task until you come back.

Holling looked at the General and quickly replied to the Colonel.

- There is a slight detail: the shelf life of the product is ridiculously short. One dose requires a whole week to prepare and needs to be administered in the next forty-eight hours else the potency is greatly affected. I suggest you do not waste too much time on administrative duties. We have a dose ready that has to be used tomorrow, otherwise, there will be another week of delay.

There she had it, the proof that Holling and the General were both looking forward to removing her from her station. Dixon had a sharp tongue and his face could fake any existing emotion from compassion to anger. It disgusted her; since the beginning, she had doubts that Holling was keeping close in order to get some favors from High Command. Now that Dixon was there, he had a formidable ally at his side. This would not bode well. Yet, her daughter's life was on the line and she had to behave in order to have her treated.

- I will give a full report to the Lieutenant Colonel and head for the hospital. Expect me at 7 a.m. tomorrow morning.

- Excellent. The word will be sent to the personnel.

Dixon went back to his computer.

- Off you go then, Colonel. You are dismissed.

He ignored her afterward, resuming his work. Holling was contemplating a gigantic tapestry representing the world map circa 2040. She exited the room, feeling manipulated and used. There was nothing she could do now and nobody would believe that the two men forced her out of her station using her daughter as a pretext. She felt powerless but her daughter's life mattered more now.

"No, no, no! Not like that!"
It was blurry, but she could see Dennis Edwards standing in front of her, straight as a rod. The fat dark skinned man was frowning at her.

"Are you doing these mistakes on purpose? Damn stubborn mule! You are making me lose precious time instead of helping!". In her hands, she could see various colored wires stripped from their sheath. At her side lay a plastic box with parts to craft molex connectors. She looked at him, puzzled; no words came out of her mouth. He took one of the wires right out of her hand "This one needs to be connected to the modulator. You have to understand that the power output signals are not the same, thus you cannot pair both. Silly novice, I'll do it". He turned around and left, disappearing into the distance.

There was the ringing of alarms before all became dark. Then, nothing. She could feel her head about to explode. Her first reflex was to remove her helmet and throw it as far as she could, tearing herself away from the multiple frequencies bombarding her mind. She tried to stand, but could not walk, her senses confused. She fell down on the cold concrete floor, trying to shake herself back to reason.

The room had been dark for a few seconds until the generator restarted. Virgil noticed Abigail trying to get up. She fell down face first but succeeded in bringing her left arm forward just in time to absorb the shock. Her eyes were fixating and she was panting. He rushed to help her.

- What happened?
- I'm…. sorry. I did a mistake… The power output…

She brought a hand to her face quickly; her nose was bleeding. There was no time to stand still, she had to fix this mess. Virgil stopped her.

- Stop straining yourself! Tell me what I can do and I'll help.
- Get me up to the console, remove the power from the helmet, reboot the computer, quickly.

Abigail rose to her feet; her legs still numb from the shock, wiping her upper lip with her sleeve. She would pay dearly if anyone was to understand the gravity of her action. Luckily, Brains was away. Virgil accessed the console. He frowned and rose his head towards the bioengineer.

- Thunderbird Five is… offline? What the hell!?
- Rookie mistake. John allocated an open channel but did not specify the bandwidth and the maximum traffic. Chronos began scanning and overloaded the entire systems. I should have given him more details.

- As long as he can come back online, I'm sure he won't be that angry about it. The problem is Scott; he won't take this incident lightly

The young man stumbled upon the data gathered by Chronos during its short scanning span. It was incredible; there were conversations from private networks and even as far as GDF protected frequencies. There was information gathered from the borders of Bereznik but very few. He looked at the young woman.

- Woah! Are you sure it was not detected? There is so much confidential information in all this.

Abigail wiped the remainder of the blood with a handkerchief before answering.

- It's impossible. Chronos does a powerful short burst and scans randomly. You can connect it to
one particular frequency but it takes time to narrow it down. Did you find anything that seemed to come from Bereznik?

- Yes, there are some recordings originating near the border and on the inside. It's all detailed by coordinates. We'll have to get through to John to make sure he's okay.

- Any way you can send him a message and ask him to reboot the systems from his side?

- Other than setting out to reach him, no. We have to get Alan up there. I'll go speak with Scott about all this. Meanwhile, try not to confront him until I tell you it's okay to do so. Consider lying down a bit, too.

She nodded, heading for the stairs, head low. She bumped into Scott as she was on her way; his mean glare meant it all, the bioengineer had no choice but to go back. The elder looked at the getup around him before asking.

- What is this? What do you think you're doing?

Virgil took a stand and answered him.

- We were working on a way to locate…

The second eldest was cut short by his brother.

- I don't want you to answer this, Virg. I want HER to tell me what the HELL is going on!

Abigail sat down and looked at Scott. He approached her in a menacing way.

- I installed Chronos to find Lady Penelope but did a mistake while allocating the power output. The maximum traffic output was…

- You mean you didn't know how to do this and you rigged this piece of tech to OUR computers? You dumb idiot, what were you thinking? We lost all communication with Thunderbird Five and our ENTIRE network has crashed!

Virgil went closer to interfere.

- Scott, that's enough! Brains already did some mistakes before and you never got all out on him for it!

- The time for doing such an irresponsible and reckless act is ill chosen! Penelope needs to be rescued and fast! We're also waiting incessantly for the Colonel to manifest! Whatever you were thinking, it was inconsiderate and dangerous.

Scott's voice rose, his finger pushing the young woman's shoulder. He was about to get physical, his anger uncontrollable. She gazed at Virgil a second before clenching her teeth; it was no use to argue with him. For now, she remained silent. The second eldest grabbed his brother's hand.

- Calm down! She's not solely responsible for this, I'm taking the blame. I'm the one who agreed to take her here and help her setup this whole mess. We're going to fix this.

He turned to his brother, shaking his grasp off.

- Fix it. And make sure it works.

Scott turned around, ready to leave before he added.
- Once Thunderbird Five is back online, you're leaving, Abigail. This was one mistake too many.

Virgil gasped, as did Abigail, her eyes tearing up.

- Wait, you can't...? You're not thinking about turning her over to the GDF?

- I've been thinking about it... but we all know Holling works for them. I don't care what happens, we'll drop you off anywhere you want. Make your choice. My decision is final.

- Scott, you can't....

- Yes, I can. I'm in charge of the organization and I know what's best for it. I can and I will. And don't try to go against my order or I'll guarantee you that, Holling or not, you're going to the GDF. I won't jeopardize International Rescue for the likes of HER.

Virgil stopped any more attempts at trying to convince his brother; he was literally pissed off and nothing would make him change his mind. Abigail took a deep breath, disconnecting Chronos from the main computer and detaching all physical connections. She remained silent; this was bound to happen eventually, she had expected it. Virgil went closer to her, slowly resting his hands on her shoulders.

- Don't worry, I'll speak to him. He didn't really mean what he said...

She turned around, escaping his hands.

- That's your usual excuse for defending him. If he didn't mean it, then why does he still go overboard? Why doesn't he learn from his previous outbursts of anger? You're shielding him too much from himself...

- Abigail, please. He's my brother, I know how he is. He could have punched you...

- If he did, I would have had a good reason to finally smack him good. I'm fed up with his abuse... I don't fit in, and I never will. I'm not a member of your organization.

He grabbed her again, tighter this time.

- You are a friend of ours, that's how it goes. You helped us countless times and proved that you are not ill-willed.

- One single mistake was enough to erase that from your brother's memory it seems.

- He's just angry. My other brothers know the good you did. They would acknowledge you any day.

- The same brothers who gossiped about us?

- What's wrong about that? We're adults, what have we to hide? Or are you ashamed?

She bit her lip. Her last comment sounded terribly wrong.

- That's not... I mean, no. I'm not ashamed. I just don't like it when people go overboard and start making shit up to make fun of a situation or simply render it awkward. We're not teenagers anymore, you'd think we've outgrown this kind of humor.

His face became neutral. Whatever was going on in his head looked like he did not like her answer. He opened his mouth to speak, no words came out. She went on.
- I'm not ashamed of anything we did. I just hate to see people question it.

- Then, are you questioning us?

She saw on his face that her words seemed to hurt him. She tried to walk away: he caught her arm, insisting on her giving an answer.

- Please, stop. We need to fix this mess.

- No. Tell me.

She rose her eyes to meet his, struggling to find words that would not hurt him.

- I am happy. Perhaps... perhaps I am afraid of that. Like if it was an ending, a finality. I can't explain why, but I always got away from responsibilities in my life. Until we went to the resort, I thought I could get away and free myself anytime from any kind of grasp... but not yours, for some reason. I like that, the way you're binding me to reality and making me realize that I messed up so much by trying to leave everything behind.

Abigail was still staring at his eyes. He was listening carefully, unmoved by her discourse.

- I'm not ashamed of anything, I'm afraid. I always wondered what would happen when your brother would want to see me off. Or if the GDF did come to get me.

Virgil brought her closer, hugging her. The more she opened up, the more he could see her for what she truly was. It was like drawing a portrait of her inner self: an emotionally frail young woman, shunned and wronged in her youth, who sought escape to ease her pain. That much he did know and could not hold it against her. She closed her eyes, her head on his chest, holding back tears of relief as he held her close.

He let her slip away and looked at her as she made her way for the console. Was Scott really serious about sending her away? He hoped not, he was happy with her being here and he was intending to keep her with him: she needed him and, in return, he enjoyed her presence. Once the console would be fixed, he planned to discuss the matter with his brother. Right now, the priority was to restore Thunderbird Five and find Penelope.

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Silence.

His scream had died out, choked by his sobbing as he was holding Ridley tightly. The lights began to switch on and off, showing that the electrical systems of the ship had been severely damaged. The communications were out, there was nothing he could do. Despair began to catch up to him as he looked at all the lifeless floating astronauts.

He was startled by a sudden nudge on his arm. Ridley's hands were moving, trying to push herself away from him. He turned her head towards him, enabling his external radio.

- Ridley! Can you hear me? Please, be okay!

She breathed deeply, her breath fogging her helmet. He looked at her suit and made sure there was no tear and that her helmet was correctly installed. The GDF's suits were cheap and often had failures on security locks. There was one not latched properly which he corrected instantly. A few seconds later, as the oxygen had stopped leaking, her eyes were wide open and she began speaking, holding onto John.
- I'll live. Thank you. I need to make sure my people are safe. Can you help me, John?

- Yeah. I've come across a few of them… without their helmets. Tell me, what happened?


They flew through the ship, gathering the survivors. It took them a while to go through some portals, barred during the system failure. About two hours had passed when Ridley was done with her counting. The dead had been left in a room further down the hallway.

- That's… forty alive, sixty dead. How… how am I going to explain this to high command?

Some of her officers were slowly waking up, recovering from the sudden depressurization that occurred on the ship. The lucky ones had their helmets on hand while others did not have time to put them on, were sleeping or unable to get to their life support gear in time. The Captain was anxious but calm, tending to the remaining living people.

John had done all he could; the crew sought comfort with each other, ignoring him completely. One of the engineers came towards him, visibly angry.

- Why did you do such a thing? How could you? See what you've done! You deserve to be framed!

He was coming towards him as John held out his hands.

- Woah, wait, I haven't done anything. I'd like to know what happened.

- A shockwave. Literally a shockwave. It was a frequency induced bomb you release there, you idiot! Don't try to hide it! See the state the ship's in now!? Not to mention all the people who perished because of you!

The man came closer, poking hard on the space monitor's chest with his finger, cornering him. Ridley's voice broke the argument.

- Stop it, now! We'll have time to state the facts once we get the communications back and running. Engineers, to your stations. Try to do something about those lights, too. We need to get through to high command.

Her voice was stern and authoritarian. John remained silent; was this all his fault? He knew it was not, he had been tricked. Brains would be able to solve this mystery if only he could contact him. It was a bit too late now. He remembered the General's warning and looked at his clock: it was almost midnight. Considering the break in the communications, Central command would have already sent reinforcements by now.

They did and they were there twenty minutes later. But there was no way to indicate the ship had docked and, considering the state of the instruments, they had no choice but to barge inside. They were special soldiers, armed with gravity rifles and stun guns, wearing reinforced suits. This did not bode well as they went towards John upon entering the room, grabbing him with their giant gauntlets.

- International Rescue. You are to be taken to earth and questioned by General Dixon.

- Stop! Let me go! I'm not going to resist so please, don't bully me.

Ridley turned towards him, her face still serious.
- That was not what was initially intended, John. You are under arrest.

One of the soldiers took John's hands and handcuffed them. The man began explaining:

- International rescue space monitor John Tracy, you are suspected of having used a prohibited category weapon in order to disable the GDF’s command ships. You are also accused of trespassing and vandalism, along with the destruction of private property. You shall be placed under protective custody until you get yourself a lawyer and then trialed accordingly.

- What?

John turned towards Ridley.

- Why didn't you tell me this?

- I wanted to help you, go down to earth with you and settle this whole mess. But now… this?

- Ridley, I'm not responsible for this incident.

She was clenching her fist as she spoke to him.

- I can't… I don't believe you did it… But the ship's last reading was a burst shockwave coming from your space station. If you want to get to the bottom of this, I suggest you answer the General's questions. We'll look into what happened… and mourn our dead.

The space monitor lowered his head, ashamed. The shockwave burst did also have an effect on his ship, disabling all his systems. That was right after EOS was taken over by something. Chronos… was it built to hijack space stations? Thoughts flew through his mind as he was being dragged by the armed men towards a transport ship. They strapped him in a seat and fired the engines, going back down to earth. John tried speaking with the men around him, with little success. His only salute was to contact Scott as soon as possible and have him work out the details with the General, hoping both of them would not come to an argument as they would most possibly have a personality conflict. He had to have faith in them now, he could not watch over his family anymore.

Brains was awoken by the cry of the rooster. He jumped out of sleep, terrified, grabbing his glasses almost instantly. When he realized it was only the gallinaceous bird, he wondered how people could withstand such an early morning cry as a wake-up call every day. He dressed up and went down to the dining room, looking forward to his promised breakfast. The innkeeper greeted him with a wide smile, serving him his share. He had taken a table for four, hoping to break his fast with Parker and Gordon and tell them more about all the repairs he had done the day before.

He waited for a while, not touching his food. He was about to call them when the innkeeper came forward, wiping her hands on her apron.

- Is everything your liking, monsieur?

- Yes, v… very! But, I am waiting for my colleagues.

- The young man and the elderly gentleman?

- Absolutely! You did meet them.

- I found the key to their rooms on the counter this morning with a note and some money. I believe
they left during the night.

Brains looked at the woman, perplexed. Why would they leave in the middle of the night, and without FAB1, mostly? He began realizing he was deceived: Gordon wanted to rush in to save Penelope and Parker was only looking for an excuse to tag along. He sighed, understanding there was nothing he could do.

- T… Thank you, madam.

He ate his fill, leaving a rich tip to the lady as he left, taking his tools with him. He tried contacting Scott on his way but there was no answer either from the island or from Thunderbird Five. This made a chill run down his back: he was completely alone and normally socially anxious without anyone he knew around. Luckily, FAB1's communications were back online. He tried to call the island through the car's private network. Scott answered.

- Tracy residence?

- Scott? It's m… me. What is happening? I cannot get through to Thunderbird Five.

- Brains, I'm glad you called. You need to report in quickly. We have a very bad issue with the space station.

- Can you explain? I'll t…try to fix it from here if it's not too bad. Did Alan play with the general settings of his hub again?

- No. It's worse. Abigail took the liberty of hooking Chronos into a channel and tried to broadcast through Thunderbird Five… or so it seems. I don't know the details of what happened, just that all communications came down. The computers crashed, the power went out and the station is offline… a real mess.

- Oh. That?

Brains sounded like if it was a normal thing. Scott asked:

- What do you mean, "that"? Isn't it enough?

- Well, the first time we put Thunderbird Five online, your father and I have done some communication testing. The space monitor at that time was named Richard Anderson. He was a gifted officer from the army in communications and frequencies but not very good at hacking and computer systems. One day, he tried to open a wide link but ended up crashing the entire station.

- How is it even important? Get to the point.

- From what I already read, Chronos is a wide link system but a lot more advanced. It will try to gather a lot of frequencies on one single channel. If you do not restrict its output, it will take so much power it will overload the systems, putting all the resources at hand towards his task until it is done or until it crashes everything.

- Okay… so what do we do?

- There will be no other way than to reboot Thunderbird Five locally. Since we won't be able to contact John, you need to send Alan up there. First, I'll explain what to do. Make sure the computer at home is rebooted properly and the Chronos module disconnected. Then all will be back online.

- You make it sound so simple… We have very little time before General Dixon goes in for John.
Hurry.

- What? Oh, y… yes. I'll send you a recording. Alan will be on his own and will not be able to rely on communications, only on navigation. Make sure he's up to the task or go with him.

Scott seemed to take a deep breath.

- I can't. Gordon is with you and I can't get through to John. With two men away and one I'll be sending to space, I need to remain here.

- Give me a few minutes to record the procedure then I'll send it to you normal means.

Brains had forgotten to tell Scott about Gordon. He was about to speak when he was cut short by the elder Tracy.

- Make sure you get FAB1 in order then come back ASAP. I can't spare more people like this, I need you back home.

- FAB.

The engineer was relieved to have the fabled pink Rolls Royce at hand for a task like this. It provided him with all the tools he needed to record the procedure and even draw a small schematic of some systems that needed to be unplugged in between two manipulations. The file was compressed and sent to Scott. He hesitated to call back to speak about Gordon but, judging from his tone of voice, he did not want to make him angrier. Instead, he dove back into fixing the car. He still had one whole day to wait before starting the engine and making the final checks. His presence would not make any difference in the matter, knowing Thunderbird Three would not have any communications with Earth. Deep down, he was also happy not to fly out this time, as he hated adventures more than anything.

Scott sat down behind his father's desk. It was one place where he felt like having a firm grasp on the organization. He always thought of himself as a good leader; that was until his father disappeared and he had to take the head. He did not feel ready, considering his mentor was not there anymore to help him. Sometimes, he needed guidance but could not find any suitable tutor to ask for advice. He took the decisions by himself, trying to include all the factors, but would feel guilty afterward, telling himself he could have done better.

Right now, he only wanted to speak with Kayo. No matter how much time he tried to get through to her, she never answered. She had chosen to go to Newcastle immediately, hoping to have the matter solved quickly. It did not please him, not with the current situation of things. As much as his egotistical desire to have her back was starting to show; she had to heal and get better before thinking of coming back. Having another fit of panic out of the blue would not help in any way.

The living room was calm; only the ambient noises of the day were setting the mood. Scott heard heavy footsteps coming towards him. He took a deep breath, not willing to lift his head from his tablet computer.

- Virgil, I won't back out on my orders. It is final.

The second eldest drew a chair and sat in front of the desk.

- Scott, look at me.

He turned around, trying to keep a stern look at his brother and not break down. He had no control
over all that was happening and that was hurting him.

Virgil ignored his look and went on.

- Where do you want her to go?

- She must have some relatives? Friends? People who can take her in?

- Don't you remember? She told us she didn't. Do you want to drop her off somewhere with nothing in hand, hoping she would just disappear from your sight? I won't let you.

Scott was beginning to boil in anger. Virgil was calm during the entire discussion.

- Virg, listen. Since she arrived, a lot of things happened… for the worse. I'm not saying it's her fault just that… don't you think she brought us enough bad luck for now?

- Luck? You believe in such things? Scott! Be realistic! The only reason you want her off is that you don't want the GDF to find out she is here.

The elder remained silent for a while before answering.

- The GDF wants to question John about the incident at Star Alpha. He will tell them what they want to hear, I know and try to shield all of us from the possible accusations. He'll take the heat for all of us and I don't want that. What if he must tell about her being here? He can't lie about her implication.

- So, you'd rather put the blame on her? That won't work, you know. They will still know we were there.

- And without Lady Penelope, we're as good as already shut down. I thought about selling her off for our own safety…

Virgil slapped both hands hard on the desk, a fit of anger grasping him.

- WHAT?

- Calm down… I won't do it. I have too much respect for you to do that. I know how you feel about her and this is why I…

- That's all the respect you have for her? After she saved your life? And Kayo's, and Alan's and Mei's… even my own? How inconsiderate are you?

Scott rose.

- Five days, Virg. She has five days to find some lodging, somewhere she can be safe. We'll spare some money so she can make a head start. And I want you to go with her to make sure she's all right. That way, you will be able to know her whereabouts… and say goodbye.

- Wait, what? What if a rescue comes up?

- Until Brains gives me all the details and I send Alan to Thunderbird Five, we're officially out of service. That pains me so we must hurry to get the station back online but I don't know how much work is required and how much time we need… I'm sending Alan out as soon as Brains sends me the recording.

This pained him as much as it did pain his brother. Virgil turned around and left the room, irritated
by his brother's decision. Scott realized he was sending another of his brothers away, the exact opposite of what he needed to do at this time. He would be left alone on the Island, but his stubbornness was getting the better of him. He mumbled to himself "I'm not leaving this ship, I'm the Captain" even if he knew that, right now, his ship was slowly sinking. He needed to rally his people, now more than ever but, until then, he would have to work on the only virtue he did not master: patience.
Dear readers,

The next few chapters are made as a writing challenge I decided to impose on myself.

The concept is the five days Scott mentioned. Throughout these few days, you will read the stories depicting the various events the characters have been through. I made this so the story could also be read through each of the five days and make it coherent.

Hope you have fun reading it as much as I had fun writing!

Five.

A few number of GDF flyers and fighter jets passed overhead, heading for the border checkpoint. Parker and Gordon stopped at the nearest village and went to rest in the local tavern. The place was not crowded but the regulars turned around and watched the newcomers entering the place. The butler ordered two beers, hoping the waitress would understand English; she nodded, it was a relief. Folks turned back to their initial occupations, leaving both men alone. The frothy beverages arrived on time, Parker had some international credits on hand, which pleased the waitress. These credits were worldwide currency accepted mostly everywhere after the war, even if some countries still clung to their own money. In some parts of the world, it was worth a lot more than the local currency.

As the woman walked away, Gordon leaned forward and addressed his colleague in a low voice.

- You think the flyers were going to attack?

Parker was looking around, spotting the local colors that would spell trouble.

- Nope. The carriers are mainly used to bring troops and material. The aircraft themselves are armed but not very efficient in a fight.

- I see. So, what do we do now? You have a plan, right?

The butler took a long sip of his drink, quenching his thirst and mostly calming his nerves. Gordon was anxious, waiting for an answer. He repeated:

- … right?

Parker laid down his tankard and wiped his lip: the beverage was exquisite. He looked at the young Tracy.

- Don't worry, Mister Tracy. We're going to do a bit of information gathering. There is bound to be someone here who can help.

- Except, we don't speak any Slavic languages. They will know we're foreigners.

The old man seemed a lot less nervous than his young acolyte.

- During the war, I fought alongside men from all over the world. Even if we did not share the same language, one thing was gathering us all and making us chums. Beer, mister Tracy. A good
drink speaks all tongues and means much. We shall drink with the locals and learn more.

Gordon sighed, still anxious.

- You mean to get drunk? We don't have time to do that! We need to cross the border and find Penelope…

- Don't you think I know that? We can't rush things, let me work it out.

Parker went over to the bar and began chatting with the barmaid while Gordon remained alone at his table, eyeing every single person in the establishment. The aquanaut was nervous; he always pictured himself working in covered ops with Lady Penelope but he never expected it to be this way. The stereotype of the Super agent meeting very beautiful women was shattered; he might even have to waddle in sewage in order to achieve his goal. It was a lot less glorious than chatting alongside a pool with fancy champagne and exquisite platters of entrées.

He sighed. Someone grabbed a chair at his side and sat down. A young androgynous looking person sat and smiled to him, head completely shaven, tattoos on the skull, piercings and dressed in leathers. He thought she might be a girl because of her dark purple lipstick and her eye liner. He wasn't sure what to do or say but he was very inclined in refusing any possible advances from this person. He confirmed she was female when she began to speak in English with a strong Russian accent.

- Not from around here, are you?

He nodded, relieved this person was not about to ask him anything weird or sexual. He remained vigilant. She went on.

- What are you doing in these parts? A bit far away for a pretty American boy like you.

- Well... huh… We travel a lot. We were heading east.

She smiled, never taking her dark eyes off him.

- East, you say? You know what's in the east?

- No… not really. That's why we're going.

- Who's that man, at the bar? He was with you before.

She designated Parker, pointing to him. Gordon answered lowering her arm.

- A friend. Please, we're not here to stir up trouble, I promise.

The girl laughed loudly, a few patrons turned around to look at her. She seemed to enjoy the attention.

- Listen, pretty blonde, going East is not a choice destination. It's dangerous. Petty tourists are not welcomed there.

Gordon stared at his tankard, drinking while she was speaking. He replied briefly.

- We're not tourists…

Having gathered courage from the booze, he risked himself. After all, nobody here knew who he was, he could lie all he wanted and they would believe him, provide that Parker did go ahead with
his game.

- My girlfriend, she's missing.

The girl slapped his shoulder.

- Aahh! Could have said so before. The traders took her?

He did not know who the "Traders" were but nodded, knowing it was the key to get the woman the speak. She shrugged.

- She must be pretty, fair skinned with straw blonde hair.

His face enlightened.

- You know about her?

- How could I know a random girl? But I know all the rich men in the state would pay to have such women. It's a trend, they're into blondes right now, the slender type. The more beautiful, the higher the price.

Gordon gritted his teeth. He wanted to slap the table in anger but did not want to become the center of attention.

- Enough! I'm hoping I can still find her alive and well.

- Maybe, but it does not mean she won't be broken some other way. If you are really serious about going in the State, I suggest you visit us. The security at the border has been increased, patrols above ground too. We could benefit from a mutual partnership.

She took out a paper business card. The aquanaut never saw one in his whole life; cards were given electronically now or consisted of a simple QR code. The girl got up and grabbed his beer. She finished it in one gulp and brought the tankard down with a bang on the table before leaving, wiping her lip on the way. The young man did not know if he had to be enraged at her behavior or laugh at it. The patrons had ignored her last attempt to get attention, at least. Parker watched as Gordon spoke with the woman and concluded his discussion with the bartender, bringing another full tankard at the table.

- Made a new friend, mister Tracy?

- More of an obnoxious bitch. What's her problem?

He looked at the card, taking his new beer in hand. Parker looked at the cardboard card, whistling.

- Genuine print! This is precious. Did she give you this?

- Yeah. I don't like her attitude. She's trouble, I know.

The butler could tell his friend was upset about something. He did not inquire. Instead, he read the card. Gordon explained his discussion with the young lady. Parker nodded.

- Been talking to the barkeep, seems like some soldiers come here sometimes and do ID checks. We should leave before they come.

- Why check the IDs? Have they the right to do that?
- If they are suspicious, yes. I wouldn't put it passed them considering the political situation. Now, did this lady tell you about what kind of partnership?

- No. She told me we should visit her there to talk.

- Might be safer to talk to her before braving the frontier on our own.

Parker held up his tankard.

- Let's drink to our adventure, Mister Tracy. I do think we will have quite a nice one, indeed.

- Hope you're right. Now, I'm just feeling like we're looking for a needle in a haystack.

- Don't lose hope!

They clanked their beers. Around them various other men began joyfully doing the same, unaware of what they were toasting too. Parker smiled and cheered at the others while Gordon remained a bit intimidated by the people around him. He wished only to get out of the place.

His wish was granted as they heard the roar of vehicles outside. It was not the GDF but a rather loud bike gang that decided to invade the place. A lot of the patrons left, the two men followed in their wake. This was the call Gordon had been waiting for to escape the crowded area.

They returned to the vehicle: the aquanaut was tempted to log in to Thunderbird Five in order to gather more information. His requests did not go through: something was wrong.

- Parker, I can't get through to John…

The butler instantly grabbed Gordon's communicator and slammed it shut.

- Woah! What the…?

- Don't! The airwaves around here are partially controlled. If we give them an address to connect to, they will rip off all information they can find from the destination. We cannot speak with anybody until we are at least two hundred kilometers away.

- So, we're going in completely blind?

- Afraid so. An adventure I said, Mister Tracy. Getting in won't be easy, getting out either.

Gordon grabbed the card and looked at it. He tossed it; it landed on Parker's lap who took it as if it was precious. The young man looked through the window.

- What the heck, let's visit them.

Parker drove the vehicle towards the designated address. It was a general store. At this time of day, there were but few customers. Both men got off the vehicle and headed inside, trying not to get too much attention from the old-fashioned bell bouncing wildly on the door, emitting a loud noise. They looked around for a bit; nothing seemed suspicious. Parker decided to go to the counter and ask for some cigarettes. It was the first time the man ever felt the need to smoke after entering Lord Creighton-Ward's service. The clerk handed him a pack of Blumshers king sized. He stood there, trying to converse with the man for a bit until the last customer exited. At that moment, he took the card out. The clerk did not utter a single word and showed them to the back store.

Behind some shelving, the store clerk pressed a button on the wall. A large trap door hidden under the floor boards opened, revealing a staircase. The two men entered, as the trap closed behind
them. They ventured through a long lighted concrete corridor until they stumbled upon a door with no knob or handle. Parker knocked. Gordon was quite unsteady, he kept looking around nervously. The young man did not know what to expect from this "adventure", it felt like dangerous territory to him and made him have second thoughts about this whole ordeal.

The door opened; loud heavy metal music could be heard in the distance. A large dark-skinned tattooed man with a bit too many piercings on his face stared at the two men, studying them with attention. He issued a loud command which neither the aquanaut or his friend understood. Parker brandished the card. The man's mean grin melted in some kind of twisted smile, pointing in a direction leading forward. He expressed himself in a broken English with a strong Slavic accent.

- See club. Up on terrace.

Both men followed the indicated direction, as the music became louder and louder. They opened the door, revealing the interior of a night club. A group of young women was hanging out, smoking, drinking and enjoying themselves when Gordon went passed them. One of the women took his arm and whispered something in his ear he didn't quite understand, but it sounded kinky enough he knew blushed. He gently pushed her aside; the woman pouted but gave him a kiss on the cheek before going back to her friends at the bar. He winked at them, still trying to follow Parker through the crowd.

They made their way towards the staircase leading to the terrace. Two massive bodyguards were standing right in front, prohibiting anyone to go up. Parker showed them the card. The two men signaled for Parker and Gordon to enter the lobby before they were pushed against a wall and searched thoroughly. The aquanaut let go a few whims of discontent but knew he could not really oppose himself to the massive man who could crush his skull with one hand.

Once they had been cleared, they made their way up. The androgynous looking woman was sitting next to a very sexy middle-aged woman, both enjoying the loud show that was held on stage. She looked at the door and noticed them, rising to go and meet with the two men. She brought they to the older woman: a tall and slender dark-haired femme fatale wearing a long stretch dress hugging to all her curves with a very, very low neckline. She looked at both men, more precisely at Gordon and asked something of her acolyte in a foreign tongue. The young woman shook her head negatively, replying to her elder before speaking to the duo.

- Good to see you came. Boss here, Lady Zima, wanted to know if the young man was for sale. I have told her you are not. A pity, she said.

Gordon frowned.

- I'm not a boy toy…

Parker squeezed Gordon's arm, dissuading him to continue his sentence.

- Very sorry to bother you m'lady. We wanted to speak about work.

The young woman smiled.

- Yes, of course. Come, we will not bother Lady Zima with trivialities.

She led them through a corridor on the second floor leading to an insulated room. Both men could rest their ears in there, as the sound was dampened inside. She sat and indicated them to do the same. Gordon spoke first.

- You should at least tell us your name. Or a name, whatever you want.
- Let us say, Petra. Does that sound good to you?

- That's fine with me, Petra. Now, what exactly do you want us to do here?

Petra reached for a roll of paper inside her pocket. Again, Parker was amazed by the fact that they still used paper in these parts. It might be a matter of traceability as this kind of written document could easily be destroyed. She showed them a map.

- We are here. If you want to go through the border, pass the neutral zone an inside Bereznyk, you need to cross that road over there. We have a safe hidden passage, but we only give it to people willing to lend us a hand.

Parker spoke.

- We are willing to help. What do you want us to do?

- You are to deliver a cargo. It needs to make it to the other side quickly and without question. There is no option of failure: either you go or you die. Simple.

It was quite categorical. Gordon gulped as he looked at Parker who kept visual contact with the woman at all time. The butler responded.

- We'll do it.

- It is a one-way trip. You are on your own to make it back.

- That was to be expected. When do we leave?

- As soon as you are ready.

The young woman gave them information where to pick up the shipment. They would be provided with a vehicle and sufficient fuel to reach their destination. Before leaving, the two goons from before entered the room bearing a suitcase. Petra took out what looked like a needle gun.

- Just a little detail to make sure you are of good faith: you will be wearing a tracking device. It will hurt, but a lot less than a bullet through the chest.

The goons approached Parker and Gordon who was as ever reluctant. Parker rolled up his sleeve and stretched his arm out; it looked like he already had done this before. He looked at Gordon, who did not want to do the same until one of the goons took his arm and almost ripped his sleeve off. Petra injected their forearms with the needle gun. Gordon let out a squeal of pain, making both goons grin.

- You will go unnoticed to the eyes of everyone but us. We will track you through fluorescent radars. You have twenty-four hours until the device disintegrates completely in your body and kills you. Upon reaching your destination, and once all the shipment has been accounted for, our client will give you the antidote to counter the poison. A small dose is enough to paralyze you if left untreated in your body. Do not try to remove it.

Gordon paled. He began shaking while Parker casually buttoned his wrist cuff like if nothing happened. The woman put the needle gun back in the case before giving it back to the goons. She motioned for the men to follow her back in the corridor and through a back door. It led into a warehouse connected to the General Store. A small pickup truck was waiting, fully loaded with wooden crates covered by a tightened brownish-green cloth tarp. She gave Parker a map and a compass. Gordon looked at her and sneered.
- We are not boy scouts. How are we going to manage with this?

Petra grinned.

- If you want to survive, I'd suggest you stay low and use these. And keep that pretty mouth of yours shut. You might one day meet someone who will not like your jests; he'll cut that smile of yours open from ear to ear. There is also a man who collects lips he cuts from trespassers he catches on his orchard…

- Okay! I've heard enough disgusting things for now. You people are such barb…

Parker hit the young man in the ribs with his elbow. It was not a friendly nudge but a very strong hit. Gordon let out a loud "Ow!" and held his side. The butler approached Petra.

- I'll see to it that the cargo is delivered safely.

- Good. You seem to have more sense and experience than your friend. Try teaching him a few trick, or he might not live long.

- Yes, m'lady.

Gordon frowned and got into the passenger seat. Parker lent him the map and compass.

- I trust you know the basics of navigations, Mister Tracy?

- Yeah. This is ridiculous. Why can't we just try hooking up a transmitter to Thunderbird Five?

The butler started the engine as Petra opened the warehouse door. The old man engaged the transmission to drive.

- This is no regular rescue mission, Gordon. If you want to live, you will have to follow my lead. We deliver the cargo, get the antidote and look for m'lady.

- Yeah… About that thing? She was bluffing, right?

Parker did not answer, keeping his eyes on the road. His silence indicated that the woman did introduce a poison into his body. He was beginning to panic deep inside. The butler took at look at his co-pilot and pointed the map.

- You'll be my navigator. Judging on the map, it will take us eight hours to get to Brasov. This is where the cargo needs to be dropped.

- So, this whole twenty-four hours thing is mainly just to scare us?

- No. It is considering the fact that we might have to change roads, evade patrollers and checkpoints, hide and wait for the night and face road hazards… we can't be really sure that we'll be able to do it in one single ride. It is the basics of smuggling.

Gordon gulped. If he was caught, he was going to be trialed as a criminal and this action would follow him everywhere. He would also even be stripped of his Gold Medal from the International Olympic committee they revised his actions. That did not please him. He had been curious since the beginning about what was inside but he refrained from asking Petra. Parker would probably have a good idea.

- So… What's inside?
- Better not to know.

- What do you think it is?

- Drugs, weapons, maybe also people. Now stop asking questions and tell me where I have to go.

He read the map, acting as navigator, trying to keep his mind off the cargo. The road was dark; there were no lights to be seen anywhere. It was going to be difficult to navigate considering the conditions but the fear of dying was encouraging the young man to be focused on his work. He looked at his watch; he had disconnected it from the international satellites not to be tracked, so he adjusted the time zone manually for where they were going. It neared midnight and neither of them had had a proper night's sleep. He looked at Parker.

- Are you sure it's wise to keep on going?

- We have to, Mister Tracy. For m'Lady's sake and ours as well.

Gordon sighed. He was beginning to regret embarking on that journey that was turning into a nightmare. His only thought was to get the hell out of this place once they had found Penelope. A quick thought went for his brothers at home but the need to focus on the road woke him from his reverie. The sinuous mountain path before them was not going to be easy to cross.

Four

Penelope awoke to the sweet scent of freshly baked pastries. It was morning already as the sun was shining through the dirty window. She had trouble finding sleep, thinking about all that Zeta had told her during their walk through the city. She had yet to know the name of the place and why it had suffered so, but her guesses seemed to be good: Bereznik was not faring so well and rebels were trying to force a war to have the Council react and invade. Whatever the cost, they required the eyes of somebody who had a high position outside; it so happened they were lucky to have caught Penelope. Any other agent would only have had a bullet in the head and being thrown in a pit, his body forgotten there forever. But before attempting anything, the Council had to be convinced it was a good idea to take arms. Nobody wanted to disturb the world peace, be it either the Council or the State of Bereznik. It had to change, and this was why she was told so much.

The young lady came to deliver food again. The aristocrat had apologized to Babushka about not eating her platter from the previous night. It only resulted in the old woman crying and wining in a Slavic dialect with nobody wishing to translate her words. From then on, she ate her fill; the food was very good and prepared with a lot of love and care. It was always delivered by the girl and every time, she dared not look at Penelope.

That morning, however, was different. It was Zeta who brought the tray. She sat down in front of her captive and waited for her to begin eating before speaking.

- Good morning, Agent Creighton-Ward. We will be moving you today. It will be a long trip; eat your fill and don't drink much, there won't be any stops before we get to Kiev. There, you will meet with one of the rebel leaders. You will be under his care then.

The Lady did not reply instantly, concentrated on eating. Eventually, she gave an answer.

- What will it be this time? What use am I to that leader of yours?

- You are a token of negotiation. Both with the State and the Council. No harm will come to you if you speak in our favor to the Council and make sure they understand the need to strike.
- Are you aware that if they refuse, it might be war? More people are going to lose their lives that way. Why not settle for independence or even trying to annex the rebel cities with near countries?

Zeta sighed.

- You have seen the desolate area outside the village. That is what surrounds the entire country of what used to be Romania just twenty years ago. Most regions have been devastated, people have little care for such places. We are too far away for them to reach and much of the barren land is either still emitting radiations, contain land mines, cadavers, remnants of biological weapons and the such. People have forgotten us. But we still live. If the Council was to strike the State, it would win.

- You seemed so confident… I was told that the Council does not even possess enough weapons to be effective. What about that?

- The arsenal of the General is huge but nothing compared to what the Council has.

Penelope wiped her mouth with her napkin.

- I beg you to reconsider: Bereznik's and the Council's weapons have been provided by Holling military for very long now. I doubt you ignore that. He plays double.

- I know. But that does not mean the Council is powerless.

- Until we are sure about the numbers, I don't think anyone would start a war for your sake. I am very sorry to bring this up to you, but even if your claim is legitimate, it is not the way to make your approach and try to become part of the world once more.

That answer irritated Zeta. The woman rose and left the room. Penelope discarded the tray on her bed and rose to look in the mirror. She had not bathed in a few days and the black leathers were starting to feel moist and smelly. Instead, she donned an old pair of pants she found in the closet, with a turtleneck shirt and a vest, all of which were oversized and reeked of dust and mold.

The soldiers came and took her away, reinstalling the bomb on her ankle instead of the chain. She took place in the back seat of a car; there were no handles to open the doors or windows from the inside. The soldiers were driving and they were followed behind by another vehicle where Zeta took place.

The journey was uneventful. The road was quite bumpy but the pastures were enjoyable. Penelope could make out from the road signs that they were going towards a city named Brasov. That was one hint she would need to remember.

Five hours had passed. As instructed, they did not stop. The aristocrat's attention was drawn towards a vehicle on the road in front that was driving quite erratically. The driver noticed as he slightly pulled over to let it pass. The passing vehicle went towards the car, accelerating as it could. There was little time to maneuver and evade it: both cars crashed in a horrible noise of metal on metal. It all felt so familiar to her, that exact moment as if she had felt it already. A dream perhaps? No, never so clear and vivid, yet…

There was gunfire; she ducked on the seat. Once it had calmed down, the door of the car opened. A masked man entered and tried to pull her out of the vehicle. She began kicking and punching him, trying hard to resist. He tried again, grabbing her leg and pulling her towards the exterior. She delivered a sharp kick to his face: the man reared and fell behind, his mask bloodied by his broken nose. Another man was behind the wrecked car and aimed at her with a gun. She dove just in time
to avoid a bullet. Zeta was behind her own vehicle, undamaged but full of bullet holes. The young woman was shooting at the men. Penelope crawled towards her, succeeding in getting behind the car. It was a short victory. Two more vehicles came from behind, all of which were masked men. This time, they could do little but drop their weapons and put their hands up. The men loaded both Zeta and Penelope in the back of a van, issuing commands in a Slavic dialect. Zeta glanced at the aristocrat.

- Do as they say. And whatever you do, don't give them your real name.
- Why? Who are these men?

A man pushed Zeta in the back, projecting her on the floor of the van, followed by Penelope. They tied their hands together in their back. Zeta replied.

- Slave traders. If we are lucky, they will be rebels. If not, I doubt you'll ever see England again.
- Who are they working for? Why did they follow us?
- I don't know. Something tells me it was deliberate. Somebody wants us.
- Like whom?

The man screamed before closing the door behind him, telling them to shut up. The women remained silent for a moment before Zeta whispered.

- The Queen of Trades. She might be up to something.
- Who?
- Dasha Kaczynska.

Penelope smiled.

- Good then. I have a feeling this might be easier than you expect.

They remained silent as the vehicle began to move.

The mountainous region was a lot more dangerous than they expected. By now, they had covered a lot of ground but had to stop once to change a tire and replace the cargo that was about to fall. There was even a time when they noticed lights and waited, watching a patrol crossing with armed vehicles at a distance. Luckily, the cover of darkness and the foliage provided with sufficient stealth to be overlooked. That did not prevent Gordon from whining about fatigue and being hungry. Parker remained silent, concentrating on the road. He knew time was of the essence if they needed to begin their search and making it to Brasov would prove the first step. It was the biggest city after the crossing, he remembered. All other large cities split in smaller, easier to defend settlements since there were not many stationed troops outside of the border. He knew that much and explained to Gordon all he knew about the Slavic state. The young man kept asking questions, often not understanding the whole extent of the people's struggle. As Parker thought: Gordon was a spoilt rich brat. His opinion of the boy was not improving. He let it go for now.

It had been almost twelve hours when they reached a road. They were far enough from the border according to the map. It was a paved road, Gordon was relieved to finally rest his back. He smiled.

- What I'd do for a nice hot shower, food, and beer!
Surprisingly, Parker smirked.

- Clean water is scarce in these parts, Sir. Food will be expensive. We'll blend in the population once we get to Brasov.

- Now that I can think of it, couldn't you have negotiated a reward for this mission? I'm starting to believe we've been had.

- Being alive and well is a reward in itself.…

They neared a very busy road. Gordon looked at the map.

- It wasn't supposed to be that crowded. That's where we were supposed to go.

- Is there another way we could go around all that traffic?

The young Tracy calculated the distance.

- It might be a four-hour detour.

- I wouldn't mind following that one if it meant to arrive faster.

They were back to the bumpy scenic route. After four more hours, three herds of sheep and one duck crossing, they managed to enter the city. It was another whole hour of searching for the warehouse where they had to drop their cargo. Luckily, Gordon had it well marked down on the map and the address was easily spotted.

The place was a very busy warehouse near a train station. Both men approached one of the foremen and gave him papers. He answered them in Slavic. Gordon tried to mimic something that meant "I don't understand a thing you say" but did not succeed very well. The man pointed a spot in the warehouse and gestured for them to get the truck there. Parker brought the truck to the designated area and entered small shack where a rather strong shaped man was sitting. The smell of tobacco was invasive; Gordon was not used to it and coughed as he entered. The man laughed, speaking to him in Slavic. He then understood they were not locals and began speaking to them in English.

- Thank you for the delivery. We will account for the goods now.

Gordon inquired.

- How long will this take?

- A few hours. Come back tomorrow.

- WAIT! We can't! You see, that girl Petra gave us some kind of poison.

- Oh, yes. You did well to inform me. I was about to forget!

The man let out a loud laugh while drops of sweat were forming in Gordon's brow. He had no intention of dying here, not before they had found Penelope and taken her to safety. The man took out a bottle from a cupboard and served them both one shot glass. The two men drank; it was a foul-tasting liquid. He then used an ultraviolet light on their forearms.

- You will be okay now, I think. That is the antidote. The light stops further degradation of the chip under your skin.
- How do we remove it?

- With a knife? I'm no doctor, I cannot help you with that. Right now, you can rest, have food and drink, sleep, whatever until we count the shipment. If it's complete, you get to leave alive. If not, well, you will have some explaining to do.

- That's… nice…

- Oh, and don't try leaving before we are done. We are good at tracking foreigners. Don't go too far: there is an inn on the other side of the station. Go there. Meet us here tomorrow early in the morning.

Parker did not seem to be impressed by the man while Gordon was trying to keep his cool and not panic. Both men stood and left.

They walked a bit on the main street: Brasov was a beautiful city. It reminded Parker of his youth in England before the war: a classical city with no invasive technology. The invention of holographic signs had revolutionized the world as publicity became so present, it was appalling. Algorithms calculating the habits and suggesting products to people based on their needs were used every day in every circumstance. There was not a single day passing where you could not get an add directed to you from your habits or behavior. But here, on this street, he rejoiced to see a handmade wooden sign hanging outside a store. Gordon smiled as he looked around.

- This place looks old.

Parker smirked.

- It is classical. All cities in the world looked like this before technology took the most of them.

- Looks like something Virgil might enjoy: there is a lot of different architecture and stuff. Mostly beautiful but boring.

He yawned.

- We should get some sleep.

- I could not agree more, Mister Tracy.

They entered a pub; the second floor was an inn, or so it seemed. They decided to ask at the desk for a room and food. The bartender was quite intrigued when Parker paid him with International Credits. He spoke to them in English with a good German accent.

- Are you tourists? Where do you come from?

Gordon answered.

- England, Sir.

- Why are you here? The borders are being closed because of the incident. It is dangerous for foreigners in the State.

Parker took over.

- We were already here when the announcement was made. We will sit it through if need be.

The man nodded, serving them both a generous tankard of beer. Gordon was amazed at how easy it
was for Parker to lie. He tried not to make a comment about it and drank instead. Parker was enjoying himself and became quite friendly with the barkeep who was a chatty old man. Plates of bratwurst and sauerkraut were served. Gordon dug in without question as his friend was eating slowly and talking.

The innkeeper made a very interesting revelation.

- You should be careful now that the frontiers are closed. The Traders are going to be looking for foreigners to sell.

- I have heard of them. Are they very active in the region?

- They enjoy striking the villages near the border. It is difficult for them to kidnap locals in cities such as Brasov.

- What happens to those who get caught? I have always been wondering…

Gordon tried listening but was getting drowsy. He wanted to get off his seat and go up to the room but Parker forbade him to do so. He sat an listened until the end.

- The Traders take people away to Kiev. There is a huge underground market there where you get any kind of goods you want: weapons, bombs, drugs, slaves… The soldiers turn a blind eye to it since they benefit from the money. And the slave trade is the most lucrative of all.

The aquanaut frowned.

- How is this even encouraged! Can't you do something to stop it?

- Calm down, young man. The Trade has been going for ages now. It helps people most of all. Help? How can it help anyone if you get sold?

- Wealthy men pay dearly for a young woman but for men as well. The poor often sell themselves as labor; the people who buy them have an obligation to treat them well and to keep them safe. They become part of a rich man's property and work on it. They have no salary but get food and lodging in return for their help. Foreigners, however, are… not so lucky.

- That's dumb! They could also give them honest work instead. It's the same!

Parker motioned for Gordon to calm down, he was getting angered by the discussion. The innkeeper removed the empty plate from the counter.

- It would be too hard to explain. But know this: The Trade is not something bad or the General would have stopped it long ago.

- Whatever. I'm going to sleep now.

Parker finished his tankard.

- Dinner was amazing. Thank the cook.

The innkeeper smiled and nodded as both men made their way to the room upstairs. Gordon dropped himself on top of the bed and fell asleep almost instantly. Parker took some time to watch television, checking what valuable information he might be able to gather from there. One thought was on his mind: Kiev. If there was a slave trade there, maybe it was the place where they took the Lady. That was it, they would set out for Kiev the next morning, after visiting the warehouse and
made sure no killer would be on their toes.
Three

Gordon only slept for three hours. It was the dead of night outside, three A.M. on his watch. He sighed, knowing he could not go back to sleep that easily. Some thoughts were on his mind: about Penelope, about this mission to save her and all he had faced up until now. He had always imagined that the line of work Lady Penelope was in included everything he had seen in special agent movies with gadgets, cocktail dresses, and fancy restaurants. This whole ordeal had shaken him back to reality; just what were the limits not to cross with such a job? Parker was also impervious to all the threats so far, unmoved by the talk about the slave trade and even keeping his cool while doing the job they had taken at the border village. His respect for him grew highly, realizing he could not have gotten this far if not for the butler's precious help.

He watched the lighted streets from the room: the place was very calm at night. All he wanted was to go down and take a walk but the evening's warnings were enough to discourage him to walk alone through the city. If he was taken by the traders, or worse, robbed and killed, he would not be able to keep on looking for his beloved. He thought about his brothers who might be desperate to have some news and was itching to turn on his watch's communication system. He didn't, knowing all too well this might end in disaster. The idea would lie in wait until he would desperately need it. He went back to bed and closed his eyes.

He woke up to the sight of Parker sitting at a small table in the corner, having a coffee while watching the television. The man did not even turn; he knew Gordon was awake. He said:

- It is official, Mister Tracy. There will be war. We need to find the Lady and get out of here, fast.

The aquanaut rubbed his eyes and yawned. It was almost noon. The butler pointed him a coffee and plate full of food on the table.

- Hurry it up. We should be heading on our way.

- Just… where?

- To Kiev. We need to find suitable transport heading towards the city. But first, I would like to check on our friend at the warehouse and make sure there will be no head hunter following us.

Gordon gulped. Again, he did not even think it was possible that they might be followed. He hurried out of bed and dressed, then hopped on the seat and downed the small but stuffing breakfast. After finishing his coffee, he was ready to go.

They made their way to the warehouse. Parker told Gordon to stay outside the foreman's shack and wait. He came back a few minutes later, putting something in the interior pocket of his coat. The young man inquired:

- How did it go?

- Better than expected. Our best guess is to go by train. It is the safest way to make it to Kiev and escaping the blockades.

- That's good.

The train station was a very busy place. They squeezed themselves inside the building, keeping a
low profile as a patrol walked by. Parker produced two tickets from his pocket.

- The train leaves in thirty minutes. However, the ride will be long. The train makes two stops before getting to Kiev; that means about sixteen to twenty hours.

- TWENTY HOURS? What is this, a family vacation? Can't we just take a car?

- And risk being spotted by a patrol at the blockade? Not a chance. These tickets will guarantee us a booth where we won't be bothered if anything happens.

Parker made his way towards the platform; the train was already there. Both men boarded and reached their cabin, shutting the door closed and making themselves comfortable. It was small yet cozy enough for their long trip.

As the train began to move, Gordon, who was lying on the seat, turned his head towards Parker and asked:

- Parker, do you think… Will we ever find Penelope alive?

The butler turned towards the young man, frowning.

- Of course. She has more than one trick up her sleeve. Do not underestimate her.

- Well… I mean… will we reach her in time?

Parker wanted to laugh but restrained himself out of politeness and remembering his place.

- We will, Mister Tracy. Provide you do not dawdle.

- I'm useless… I never thought you guys were pulling stuff like that and keeping your heads cool.

- It is simply not your line of work. Just follow my lead, and all will be fine.

- Yeah. I'll do just that.

He dozed off.

The ride in the back of the truck took forever. There was no lining on the bottom; both women were sitting on raw metal the whole time. Their legs were swollen and covered in bruises. It was impossible to get some sleep or rest in any way and conversation was highly discouraged by the front passenger and driver who screamed at the women when they tried.

Once the vehicle had stopped, they were forced to get out, dragged by a man each. They landed inside some kind of closed garage with almost no lighting. A single door led inside a house where thick smoke hung up in the air. Around them were half-naked women and men, all who seemed to be enjoying themselves and not paying any attention to the newcomers. They walked through a hall where moans and screams where heard, an occasional lash of leather on a hard surface seemed to come from one of the doors. Fortunately for them, it was not where they were taken. Two huge oak doors stood at the entrance of the room, representing stags with antlers clashing and a coat of arms in the center. The doors opened as they approached, revealing an enormous room: there were countless bookshelves filled with old leather-bound volumes and so many dusty decorations. A statue of the Venus of Milo stood in one corner near a door. Flames crackled inside a stone fireplace, making the place warm and cozy. In front of the hearth was a very large cushioned seat made of tapestries of a rare quality and exotic wood. Once footsteps were heard, the seated person
stood and came to face them.

It was Dasha Kacynzska. She dismissed the two men, leaving the women kneeling. This time, at least, it was an expensive Persian carpet and not the rough interior of a stripped van. The old woman smiled.

- Penelope Creighton-Ward and… yes, Zeta. This is how the people call you, is it?

The aristocrat sneered.

- Happy to see you again, Lady Dasha. I thought about visiting your establishment after we parted in "Eaux Claires", but it was rather sad I could not catch up.

- Do not mock me, Penelope. You are the one kneeling. Might I remind you where you are?

Zeta did not say anything, listening and watching.

- You two will fetch me a nice price on the market. With the war now starting, we need to make money and quickly before the interest shifts. This is a good opportunity for us.

- For whom, may I ask? Are you afraid the war will take a toll on your trade?

- Well, foreigners can be ransomed to their governments. People pay dearly for CEOs and others who have decided to take a family trip in the State. Until recently, there was little danger in venturing in the big cities. But now…

- Do tell, Lady Dasha. I have been a bit away from the news.

Dasha looked at Zeta and back at Penelope.

- Why have you not killed this one yet, Zeta? This is very sad. I thought you despised the agents of the Council.

Zeta looked at her defiantly. The old Russian woman smiled.

- Do not give me that look. You remind me of your mother. I won't kill you, even if you do work with my greatest enemy.

The young woman smiled.

- And what are you going to do to me? You cannot sell me. If you do, you will be in trouble.

- True. But her… she will fetch me a nice price.

- I need her. You are not going to send her away.

Dasha laughed.

- Who's going to stop me? You? Look at yourself! Trying to change the world!

She approached Zeta.

- There are two types of people. The ones who abuse the system, and become successful and the ones who want to fix the system, which inevitably loses. I have told you countless times that you will not succeed in your goal with allying with foreigners! And what have you done now?
Penelope turned towards Dasha. She wanted to defy Zeta by asking the old woman about her motives.

- And what is her goal, really? She has not told me and wants me to take part of it.

The old woman walked to a desk and poured herself a glass of amber liquid.

- She wants the Council to invade Bereznik and take control of the State. Purely and simply. But I cannot allow that and neither will our General. Somebody would be making a little too much money for my taste.

- You mean Marcus Holling? He would be selling weapons to both sides.

- That is correct. He already has been for years now. There is no better way for his company to prosper than to incite people to take up arms. Peace had been achieved for twenty years now and you want to change that, knowing all too well we would lose? He relies on people like her to stir up trouble.

She laughed.

- Poor little thing. You are trying to do something that will cost you your life, sweet Zeta.

The young lady remained silent. Penelope saw that she was building up inside, but trying to keep a calm face. As the aristocrat was getting ready to speak, Dasha snapped her fingers. Both men from earlier came back, handkerchief in their hands. They smothered both women with them, watching them fall asleep on the floor. She issued orders.

- Make sure they get some rest, wash them. Feed them once they wake. Get them ready for tomorrow. I have a special customer who would be interested in the blonde. As for Zeta, keep her alive and well. We never know when she might become useful.

The men dragged them away as Dasha calmly went back to her seat and smiled.

**Two**

There was a shriek, piercing the silence.

- Let go of me! How dare you touch me, you filth!

Penelope felt hands on her naked body as she was submerged in hot water. She fought the hands off her, trying to regain her senses rapidly. Once she opened her eyes, she noticed four young girls rearing against a wall and holding on each other, afraid. The Lady covered herself with her hand, rising from the tub and grabbed the closest towel to wrap around her. She studied her surroundings: it was a small bathroom with a round ceramic tub in the middle. The girls had dropped their sponges and brushes in the water before moving towards the far end of the room. The aristocrat sighed: these girls were Lady Dasha's serving maids, too young to be sold as sex slaves or surrogate mothers for the needs of the rich. She looked around and tried to find her clothes but came up with a very revealing dress instead. Her smelly vestments had likely been thrown away.

She looked at the young girls, trying to smile reassuringly.

- Does anyone of you speak English?

None of the young ladies moved. Penelope proceeded to exit the room, grabbing hold of the dress. There was a man at the far end of the corridor, guarding the stairs. The only other accessible door
was at her side. The sentinel had not seen the lady exit the bathroom; she quickly entered the other door. It was a boudoir, lightly decorated with a very large beige couch. Zeta was lying on it, enjoying a drink. The woman pushed a glass full of vodka towards the aristocrat.

- Heard you scream back there. You might need some.

The Lady downed the drink in one gulp. It was strong and foul but shook her senses back in place.

- Where are we? One of Dasha's hideouts?

- Yes. It is a transition house where she brings her women. You are lucky you only got to see the bathroom. I won't tell you what's in the basement…

Penelope stood in front of the dark-haired woman in her towel, still holding the dress over her arm. She was beginning to wonder which side Zeta was on.

- You are lucky one of my people has infiltrated this house. The man at the far end of the corridor is one of my rebels. We will be able to escape before Lady Dasha arrives.

- You have a lot of explaining to do. Care to start now?

- Put some clothes on first. Find something to your liking, there is stuff in the chest of drawers back there.

The aristocrat went to search for suitable clothing to wear. If they were going to flee, she would have to choose something fitting. While rummaging through the drawers, she asked:

- Dasha spoke of your mother. How does she know you?

- She is my mother's cousin. When I was very young, my father died. My mother turned to Dasha for help and ended up being sold to a wealthy clock smith. He needed a wife and could only find women who wanted his money. We were lucky, he was a decent man. When he passed away, my mother inherited a lot of money and went on living in hiding. A slave cannot inherit, that is a law of the state. Instead of giving back the fortune she received, she hid it, had me sent to England and paid my education. She was later caught and executed.

Penelope took out a pair of denim pants with a large chemise. The clothing here was a bit too large for her but she would have to make do with what she found.

- This is why you became an agent of the Council?

- Yes. I went through training for the sole purpose of one day being able to change the way the state works. I took a lot of assignments in Bereznik but the last one I did for them disgusted me. This is why I turned against the Council.

- You have not told me how you came to ally with Marcus Holling.

- When I first left the Council, I had to hide. The village we were in, it was the first place I went when I returned. I helped the people there get their lives back on track. It so happens I had been acquainted with Holling during training, I contacted him and made a deal: he wanted information, I wanted weapons. The rebel movement grew thanks to him. We have about two thousand members in the State.

The Lady dressed up in whatever she could find that fit better together. Zeta was not watching, taking a sip or two in between her sentences.
- And what will you do now? If you escape, Dasha will know.

Zeta sat and turned towards Penelope.

- Take me with you. I need your help to clear my name and speak about the realities we face here.

Penelope came back towards the sofa and sat down.

- It might now work. Holling was waiting on an opportunity to declare war.

- His only motives were to go along with some project he had put on hold, a very lucrative one. That's all I know. I am only interested in seeing the rebels triumph and rule the state; I did not care about anything else.

The Lady remained silent. A rebellion was never a good idea; it only served to place others on top that could benefit from the current situation. The slave trade would not be easily stopped.

- What is your plan to leave, then?

- Under the cover of night, we will escape through the back door. A vehicle will be waiting to take us towards the closest border.

- How will we cross the neutral zone?

Zeta sighed.

- You ask so many questions. If I get you out of here, I hope you will have more confidence than that in me and give me a hand.

- That remains to be seen. Right now, I have no reason not to trust you. But if you get me there safely, I swear I will speak of you highly and help you clear your name. I only have one word.

There was a knock on the door. The guardsman opened the door slightly and expressed himself in Slavic. Zeta jumped down from the couch and replied quickly before taking Penelope's hand.

- We need to move. Dasha is coming a lot earlier than I had expected. She must have fetched a huge sum for you…

- I do not intend to stay here to find out how much…

Both women darted out through the door, following the man. They had no vehicle yet; they would have to melt into the crowd and meet up with her contact across the plaza. Zeta provided Penelope with a scarf.

- Hide your hair. Never look anyone in the eyes. Don't smile or have any facial expression. If anyone bumps into you, ignore him. Don't speak English, just nod and keep close to me.

Zeta's instructions were clear and simple; Penelope recognized the need for detail that characterized an agent of the Council. She did as told, making sure most of her hair would be hidden beneath the scarf before heading out through the back door.

They had to walk a bit in order to reach more crowded areas towards the city square: the house they were held in was a bit in the outskirts of the busiest sectors. They walked through an open-air market adjacent to the train station, one of the busiest venues of the city. Zeta held Penelope's arm under her own, guiding her towards the crowd as the merchants yelled the name and price of their wares aloud. Penelope was looking around, trying to spot potential dangers. A few soldiers passed
by and ignored them as they turned towards a stall selling vegetables and weirdly shaped beans. Once the patrol had gone, they proceeded deeper through the market.

Penelope whispered.

- Where are your people?

- Close. They will bring us to safety, trust me. We are not so far away now…

Zeta headed towards a spice merchant's stall and dragged Penelope with her. A woman sitting in the stall went inside a nearby store as she saw the women approach. Penelope and Zeta followed her all the way towards the back. A young man came down a flight of stairs and seemed surprised to see them. He spoke to Zeta in Slavic, directing her towards the backyard where a vehicle was parked. Both women sat in the rear, the man taking the wheel. Zeta looked at Penelope.

- He will drive us towards the next checkpoint.

- Checkpoints? You mean, we don't go there in one shot?

- We cannot. The road is too long and dangerous, we might run into a patrol and get searched. Instead, we'll change transports at specific locations. They will bring us west towards the Polish border. We can only cross our fingers that Dasha does not get the word around before we are safe.

Penelope peered through the window as the car engaged on the road. The crowd was very dense. She felt like they would be safe, for now, as there were but few people paying attention to them as they left.

The train came to the station after an eighteen-hour ride. Gordon's legs were numb and his patience had been pushed to the limit from being alone in the cabin with Parker. He never knew the man had a smoking habit until now; it made him sick. They had been napping on and off during the entire ride, with little else to do than sleep, smoke, chat or play card. Newspapers and magazines were being distributed but none in English. For now, they both had enough of transports and wished only to stand still for a day or two.

Being rested fully, they were both ready to look for clues about Penelope. Trying to find the underground "market" would prove a challenge, considering it was only reserved for a selected group of people. So far, its existence was known only to scare teenagers, children, and drunkards out of the streets as most of the decent folk spoke ill of such a place. If it even existed was a mystery: it could be something totally different from what they were expecting.

The men exited the station and made their way through the marketplace, examining the stalls and goods around them. It was a typical market day, something Gordon was not used to seeing. He felt surrounded by folk from some medieval fair, trying to sell spices, chickens, carpets, and pottery. Parker approached a tobacco store and went in to get some cigarettes. Gordon insisted in waiting outside, even when the butler gave him a nasty look. He remained on the porch near the door well in sight of his colleague. The young man looked around, trying to think about what their next move would be. Vehicles turned at an intersection, slowing down at the pedestrian crossing.

That's where he spotted, through the window of a car, a woman resembling Penelope. He followed the vehicle with his eyes, going as far as running through to the crowd and try to get ahead of it.

He was a few feet away from the car and could see the woman's traits: it was her. He was coming in closer when he bumped into a man crossing the street. The vehicle accelerated and took a turn, disappearing as it went towards a high road. Parker was running towards Gordon.
- Everything all right, lad?

- She was there. It was her!

- Are you sure your mind is not playing tricks on you?

- I'm sure of it. That way! I've seen the vehicle! Come on! Let's find a ride!

Gordon went back towards the city square accompanied by Parker. The aquanaut asked:

- How are we going to follow them now?

- We have to steal a vehicle.

- St… Steal!?

The young man tried to contain his disgust as Parker was already looking around for a suitable ride. Gordon followed him.

- But, won't we get caught? And what happens then?

- It will take some time for the authorities to react for a mere stolen vehicle. We need to find m'Lady and get out of here. Remember the license plate number, color, and model?

- Sort of… I'm no expert but I know it's a dark blue sedan.

- If we hurry, we might be able to catch up with her. I hope you are not wrong.

- Where do you think she might be headed?

- The closest way to leave from here is to take the western road through Poland. Let's hope it's what she's doing.

Parker picked the lock of a small two-seat car and was surprise how easy he had succeeded. He got in and jump-started the engine, bypassing the dashboard computer. The engine was silent: it was a rather recent model. The seats were comfy; it was overall spacious. There was little time to enjoy the interior as Parker put the car in drive and headed in the direction Gordon indicated.

It was the third checkpoint. So far, there was little delay from switching vehicles as the next driver was notified by mobile phone about ten minutes prior to their arrival. This time, they were inside a van, sitting in the back with packages of dried meat. The rebels were carrying them inside delivery trucks packed with goods. They had gotten quite far; it would only take half a day and, by sundown, they would be approaching the north-eastern forest. This van did not have any windows in the back; it was difficult to have a good idea about the direction they were heading in.

The van eventually stopped. The driver opened his door and went outside. Zeta did not understand what was happening: the drivers had clear instructions not to stop at all during their run. The man came back, possibly after having a piss, she thought, and they were off again.

Penelope knew very little about the roads in the State, she relied on Zeta to take her to safety. After what the agent had told her, she wanted to believe she could have confidence in her. The feeling became stronger as she understood that she was an enemy of Lady Dasha, who confirmed her status of agent. The aristocrat listened carefully as she thought she heard the noise of another vehicle behind them. When the Slavic agent tried to ask the driver to do something about it, he stopped the vehicle and turned towards the women, holding a handgun. Zeta questioned him; he
replied in English.

- Don't worry. We shall bring you back to Lady Dasha in one piece.

Another engine was roaring in the back, they could hear it clearly now that their vehicle was stopped. The rear door slammed opened: a man and a woman appeared, holding assault rifles, and pointing them at the duo. The man got out of his seat and into the back with the ladies.

- Hands in the air. Exit through the rear.

Both women looked at each other: it was dangerous to act against the two menacing figures, but they could take down the driver. Although it sounded like a good idea at first, the thought of having an entire magazine of bullets emptied in their bodies dissuaded them from trying anything. They obeyed instead. The hardened dirt road gave them a hint that they were far away from any inhabited area but in a position where they would have to submit and wait for an opportunity to strike.

Penelope glanced at the road. She could see a vehicle approaching in the distance. Whoever it was, ally or enemy, it was time to find out. If they were soldiers, there was a slight chance they could escape but would go back to the state. And what about Zeta? What would happen to her if that was the case?

The Slavic agent dropped on the floor, gasping for air. It was a ruse; the Lady knew very well as the woman closed her eyes before making a scene. The driver dropped his handgun and began to tend to her, the rifleman approached her as well. Penelope took advantage of the situation and grabbed the woman's rifle, knocking her in the face with the weapon while she was distracted. The woman knocked her head on the floor, her forehead bleeding and a bit dazed from the hit. Zeta grabbed the man's rifle as if she was in need of dire help while Penelope held the driver at gunpoint. It was only a matter of time before the Slavic agent had taken the weapon in hand and reared toward her colleague. Before they could act, the woman made a run for it through the woods. Zeta knew very well they would be in trouble if anyone was to find out about the incident; she shot a round, the bullets piercing through the fleeing woman's back as she dropped dead in a clumsy fall. The sound of the rifle echoed through the forest; it was too late to go back now. Turning back towards both men, she issued commands in Slavic. Both men went to their knees, holding their hands behind their heads. Penelope was worried about the vehicle closing in.

- We need to leave, Zeta. We have no time.

They heard hounds barking and distant screams coming from the forest. She insisted.

- And quickly!

Zeta was reluctant in leaving both men alive, knowing all too well what was going to happen next. There was the sound of gunfire behind them; both women took cover inside the vehicle. The men took it as an opportunity to flee towards the woods. The Slavic agent looked around and went to the front of the truck.

- We are sitting ducks. We can't stay here.

The small vehicle was coming closer, as were the screams and barks. Zeta slid into the driver's seat while Penelope tried to take aim. She sighed.

- Killing innocent people…

The engine did not start. Zeta was working hard on trying to get it to work.
- It's either us or them. We're in the country here. People defend themselves how they can. Shoot!

She tried to start the engine again. Penelope did not want to shoot. She was torn between the idea of shooting the running men and having it on her conscience forever or simply wounding them to stop them from running away.

The small vehicle accelerated, coming to an abrupt stop near the van. This came as a surprise to the Lady, as she was expecting the vehicle to be hostile. Zeta hit the steering wheel and cursed in Slavic. She took her rifle and looked back at Penelope.

- We need to take the other vehicle…

She noticed the car that had stopped near theirs. The Slavic agent was about to take aim when she heard Penelope scream. The passenger door opened: Penelope dropped her rifle immediately and ran towards the man that was descending from the vehicle. Zeta lowered her gun, watching the scene as the aristocrat jumped into his arms. She turned towards the woods only to see the hunters arrive and begin shooting at the couple.

Gordon dropped on the ground once he heard the gunfire, dragging Penelope with him. Zeta opened fire on the hunters, shooting quite accurately in their direction. She managed to wound one of them, kill a dog and route another. She jumped out of the van and approached the crew. Parker had time to crawl towards the other vehicle, abandoning his small two-seat for another more suited for their escape. The aquanaut got up, feeling his right-hand wet. He looked at it to noticed it was covered in blood, as was Penelope's left shoulder. He looked at her in panic. Zeta slapped him back to his senses as she helped Penelope up. She tore a piece of her own shirt to make a compress.

- Calm yourself and get in the vehicle, NOW! We leave this wretched place before more come.

Penelope applied the makeshift compress, holding her shoulder tight. Her determination did not falter, even with the blood running freely down her clothes. She looked at Gordon.

- I am all right. Let us leave now.

Parker took the wheel with Zeta at his side, rifle on her lap. She was scrutinizing the woods, making sure there would not be more threats as they were leaving. The butler wanted to introduce himself but judging on the woman's focused attention, he knew it was not the time.

As they made their way towards the denser part of the forest, it almost seemed like night had set early. The thick low conifer branches provided with excellent cover but the darkness might prove a challenge once night had set. Gordon looked at Penelope's blood covered clothes as she was watched the scenery through the window. She did not complain one second about her wound, holding it and trying to stop the bleeding as much as she could with his help. He thought it was time now, he could not wait much longer. He opened his communicator and began broadcasting.

- Calling Thunderbird Five. Come in, please!

The voice on the other end was not the one he expected but was familiar nonetheless.

- This is International Rescue. Gordon, is that you?

- Alan? What'cha doing up there?

- Long story, everything is a mess here. Happy to know you're still in one piece, that is until Scott gets his hands on you. Where are you?
- Trying to escape Bereznik. Can you get us some transport?

He heard his brother fiddle on the computer.

- I've located you but I can't lock onto your signal. Something if forcing me to disconnect. Tell me, in which direction are you headed?

- Towards the Polish border. North-west.

- I've mapped your approximate trajectory. I'll send Virgil to pick you up in Thunderbird Two. He can be there in about three hours. Can you hold on that long?

- Three? Man! We don't have any choice, do we?

Gordon looked at Penelope. She smiled at him, nodding peacefully.

- Whatever, we'll take all the help we can...

Zeta took over.

- We are almost at the road going through the forest; we call it the smugglers' path. Try looking at it with your satellite, you'll see it's really well hidden. Your man can use that road to get to us. We will be clear of the border once we exit the path on the other side.

Gordon turned towards her.

- But aren't there going to be patrols?

- No. The path is very tight and getting a car through it will be difficult. We'll be going in blind and slowly and hopefully making it to the other side without jumping down a ravine.

He sighed at her comment "hopefully". That sounded like a huge guess to take. Alan sent a map to Gordon with the details of the terrain and the road ahead of him.

- FAB. I'm off now not to get tracked. See ya back home, bro!

Gordon nodded as his brother disconnected, going back to tending to his beloved's wound.

One

It was the dead of night. The border was behind them now. They passed a very clear warning sign on the side of the road with "Go Back! Bereznik Territory" written in red paint on a large dirty white wooden board. It was the only indicator showing they were finally out of the State. They went towards the rendezvous point, happy to know they had arrived in advance.

Parker stopped the vehicle on the side of what was left of the forest road. He reached for the trunk, looking for anything they could use that could help Penelope and came across a bottle of vodka. "Better than naught, but so sad to have this go to waste in such a way", he thought. Zeta took a few minutes to get out of the car and stretch her legs, surveying the vicinity in case they were followed, rifle still in hand. Gordon and Penelope remained in the car. The butler handed the young man the vodka to use as a disinfectant.

The aquanaut slowly poured the alcohol on the Lady's wound. She hissed as she felt it sting, tears filling her eyes. He was relieved to see the bleeding had stopped but she needed medical attention as soon as possible. He dressed her wound as best he could with what was available to him and ended up doing a rather satisfying job. The Lady was grateful and smiled.
- Thank you, Gordon. This whole escapade has taught me a lot about being cocky on a mission.

He smirked.

- You can say that again.

She covered her bare shoulder slowly.

- Why did you come? It was a very dangerous chase you embarked on.

- I was worried about you. Besides, I could not stay and do nothing. Scott was not taking any decisions, I just had to do something!

- It is very noble of you… but very stupid.

His smile faded. She was looking away. He tried to get her attention.

- I did this because…

His face flushed red. He took her hands. She turned towards him.

- Penelope, I love you. And I can't stand idly by knowing you are in trouble. I couldn't… I couldn't leave you like this…

She was not so surprised by his statement, putting her hand softly on his cheek.

- Oh, Gordon…

He approached his lips slowly towards hers. They kissed, holding onto each other for a good while. Penelope ignored her pain, concentrating on enjoying the moment. When they parted, the young man smiled, gently stroking the woman's hair. He gazed into her blue eyes for a moment before speaking.

- I realized your job was a lot more perilous than I thought. I just… I don't want to see you get in danger again.

- Gordon… You know very well how it is. Altruism comes with sacrifice. I cannot abandon my duty, not now.

- But… you could be happy with me at Tracy island. You could have anything you want. It's not a money issue, is it?

- Not, it's nothing like that. I have to get to the bottom of this and frame Holling. I cannot rest until it's done.

- Then, let me help you. Whatever you want me to do… I'll do it. I'd follow you to the ends of the earth…

She kissed him. He was a bit surprised but enjoyed it. She then answered him.

- Once this is over, I promise to take some time off to be with you. But right now, we all have work to do. Please, understand…

- I do. Don't worry. Let's get this over with.

Zeta came back during their discussion, lighting herself a cigarette Parker gave her and leaning on
the car at the butler's side. The vicinity was clear of threats and nobody seemed to have followed
them. She bent down and spoke through the window.

- Are your friends going to be on time?

Gordon turned towards her, a bit startled.

- Yes. As always.

Zeta smirked.

- I thought something was different with you people. So, you are of International Rescue?

The aquanaut did not want to answer. It was Penelope who did.

- Yes. I trust you can keep that secret?

The Slavic agent nodded. Penelope looked at her then Gordon.

- We will go directly to Tracy Island. Zeta will come with us, then we'll take some time to devise a
plan in order to stop Holling. With her by our side, we have precious information about him that
remained hidden until now. We need to catch up on the news, too.

The aquanaut nodded, agreeing with her decision. Zeta could prove a potentially useful ally for the
time being. But, what will Scott say about this? It was better not to think of it anymore, after all, his
brother would want to have his head for going into Bereznik alone. It would be best to leave
everything in the hands of Penelope for now until they knew what was happening on the outside.
He smiled as he watched the Green giant appear on the horizon. He knew now that his adventure
was over, and none too soon.
Dear readers!

This is a triple treat! Three fics in three days! The next one will be released only next week.

*WARNING* - Violence. A specific passage might upset the readers. Be warned!

Happy reading!

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Five

Kayo tried one last time to reach the island: no response. She was getting nervous, afraid something might have happened. It was too late to back out now; her catheter was in place and the personnel had set her up with preliminary testing. The doctor had gone through the procedure with her step by step, explaining every possible side effect and what to do if anything of the sort occurred during the perfusion. He insisted she rests afterward, even if she felt a boost of energy, as it could be of very short duration and she would fall short of breath or faint. She took a deep breath, trying to convince herself that everything was fine.

All the procedure was going to be done under tight surveillance. A nurse was in charge of the entire treatment, remaining outside the room door the whole time. She entered the room, carrying an IV pouch and some syringes, smiling at Kayo.

- Good day, Miss Kyrano. My name is Fay, I will be the nurse assigned to you during the procedure. Should you feel any discomfort or symptoms, please do not hesitate to signal me through the bedside bell on your right. Are you ready to begin?

- Yes. The sooner the better.

The nurse set up the pouch, tubing and plugged it in Kayo’s catheter. The drug was injected: she instantly fell her veins become warmer. A pleasant feeling of heat coursed through her whole body. It was so pleasant and comforting that she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

The sound of something falling woke her. She was alone in her room; the door was closed and the tubing from the IV had been removed. Looking around, she did not understand where it came from. “It might have been a dream…” she thought as she rose from her bed. It was almost sundown; she felt refreshed and rested. She paged the nurse and asked permission to take a stroll. The nurse responded:

- Only after you had lunch. I will monitor your blood pressure and see if you can go. Do not push yourself.

"Yeah, I can take it" she thought; she felt a strong urge to go outside for fresh air. She needed to escape those damn walls that kept closing in on her each time she looked around. The nurse came back with a tray of food and installed a blood pressure cuff on her arm. She was starving, having missed dinner from sleeping in through the treatment. It took ten minutes for the nurse to come back, put a weaved dressing on the catheter and agreed to let her go outside. Kayo dressed in loose-fitting gym clothes before walking outside.
The sun was disappearing into the horizon, leaving a fresh breeze blowing around in the all too hot Australian weather. She reached the inner yard: there was a garden, stone paved pathways waving through flowerbeds of exotic specimens. She felt as if she was booming with energy, increasing her pace around the yard, almost jogging her way through. A jolt of lightning traversed her legs; her muscles seemed to paralyze instantly, sending her to the floor. Her entire body felt numb, her arms giving in under the weight of her body. She was about to pass out when she felt someone grabbing onto her. That person dragged her towards the nearest wall so she could sit still. She only heard his voice.

- Breathe deeply. Don't try to move. Just, focus on breathing.

She did as she was told, beginning to feel a lot better after a few seconds. Her sight was blurry. She heard the man's voice again.

- Stand still now. You'll be able to focus.

Kayo closed her eyes, remaining very still. Once she opened them up again, she saw the face of the young man standing in front of her: he was a pretty boy with a square jaw about thirty years of age. His head was bandaged; she could not make out the color of his hair. His clear blue eyes reminded her of Scott's. She stared at them for a while before speaking.

- Thanks. I was lucky you were here.

His smile was reassuring.

- Don't mention it. You should not strain yourself like this.

- I should have listened more carefully to the nurse's orders. At least I didn't get caught by the personnel.

He hesitated before holding out his hand.

- I'm Simon, by the way.

- Tanusha. My friends call me Kayo.

- Something to do with a knockout punch no doubt?

- Kinda. Just… college boys and all.

He laughed. There was something about his expression that made her feel good; almost familiar. "There is no such thing as natural attraction, is it?" she asked herself, smiling to the young man. She was about to blush then changed the subject.

- What were you doing out here?

- I like taking a walk every now and then when they take me out of isolation. My treatments require me to stay inside for a prolonged period of time; I don't have access to the exterior until I'm done. After that, more treatments.

She looked at the bandage. He noticed and answered her question before she even asked it.

- Aggressive brain tumor. Doctors gave me less than one month to live before I made it here. It's been almost two years now.

- Oh, my… Do you have any hope of recovery?
- Doctor Hanse is positive he will cure me. Right now, the tumor is down seventy percent of its original size. I guess I'll have to go for a few more months before being fully healed.

- Wow. That is one breakthrough. It must be awfully lonely here.

- Well, the nurses are nice enough. They bring me games, books, newspapers, mostly everything I need to keep myself busy. I sleep a lot too. Time passes so fast.

- Don't you have any family? Friends?

- Not really. My father died a few years ago from the same type of cancer than I have. My mother… well, I'd rather not talk about this right now.

They stopped at a railing facing the sunset and watched silently. Simon was serene and calm, contrasting with Scott's always anxious and worried attitude. Why was she even comparing them? She bit her lip, staring at the horizon, guilt slowly starting to set in her mind.

- I… I'll have to go back.

- So soon? Let me accompany you, just in case.

It was smarter to let him follow her. Her legs were still feeling a bit weak, she had to walk slowly back to the door not to faint again. Once they reached the portal, he smiled.

- If you ever feel lonely, you can come down and have a chat. What do you say?

She appreciated his company even if it felt kind of wrong flirting with another man while away. "What am I even thinking of? I'm not flirting!" she told herself as to dispel a thought that suddenly came into mind.

- Sure. Maybe tomorrow?

- I'm free for the next two days until they jail me back for treatment. I'd be happy if you could join me tomorrow at sunset.

- Thanks, Simon. Good night.

She had hoped he would not watch her leave as it would have felt awkward; he didn't. She was relieved at that. She did not want him to think she had fallen for his amazingly blue eyes, his kind manners… She wanted to slap herself silly, thinking somebody had played in her brain "He just reminds me of Scott…". That was it, she needed to speak to her lover immediately to stop thinking about Simon.

As she went towards her room, she felt her legs were going to give in again. This time, the nurse noticed her struggling and hurried to her side, calling in other personnel to help. They brought her back to her room and helped her to the bed. Even if she had in mind to talk to Scott, her energy seemed to deplete so quickly she fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

Four

She was awoken in the middle of the night by a scream in the corridor. Her body seemed to have recuperated, those few hours of sleep were enough to give her a head start. The hospital personnel was running towards an adjacent room, alerted by the screaming. Kayo cracked the door opened slowly, curious about what was happening. There was chaos all around, it was difficult to make anything out of it. She waited still, kneeling on the floor beside the door. Eventually, the screams
died out and the personnel left. She heard the voice of Doctor Hanse speaking with a nurse.

- I think we will lose her. I don't know what else I can do to calm her anymore. I believe this is a failure.

- Doctor, you did well. She was able to enjoy a few happier years overall.

- What about patient twenty-two? How is she faring?

- Better, sir. The evening shift nurse told us she had fainted. Do we still go on with the treatment tomorrow regardless?

- Yes. This patient is promising. I'm hoping to acquire good results after her next exposure to the drug.

He seemed to move around.

- Keep the usual prescription. We won't stray from the program if the results are satisfying. Remember to take samples before you begin so we can compare with the originals.

- Yes, Doctor.

From what she had heard, there was nothing wrong with the conversation. She was curious about the other patient's condition but, after all, the place was a hospital. There was bound to be emergencies and people with more serious conditions than hers. She tried convincing herself she was being irrational. Everything would go fine and she would be back in Tracy Island in no time.

Something caught her eye when she took a look outside in the yard: two men dressed in military attire were sitting near the door to the other wing. It felt kind of weird to see these men in the yard; she had not noticed any soldiers up until now. She watched them for a little while; they remained at the door, waiting. Some hospital personnel came closer, bringing somebody in a wheelchair towards them. The soldiers disappeared upon entering the wing. This felt strange to her, as it was not a mental health facility neither a military one. On the other hand, it could have been a government official only, wouldn't it have been people with GDF uniforms instead? It made her want to have a look inside. She went back to bed.

She was startled by the nurse's visit as she raised her head towards the door. She had not even heard her come.

- Is everything all right Miss Kyrano?

- Yes. I'm sorry, I was awoken by the ruckus outside.

- So very sorry for this. A patient had a seizure. Everything is under control now.

Kayo began to wonder if such a thing could happen to her. The nurse entered the room and shut the blinds.

- You should rest. Your treatment is scheduled for early tomorrow.

- Yes, I will do just that.

The woman exited the room, closing the door behind her. Kayo snuggled up under the rough flannel sheets before falling in deep sleep.
It was a dreamless sleep. So empty it was frightening. Or was the darkness a dream? She remembered it all once she woke to the dim light of day in her room. The sun had begun shining behind the thick blinds, projecting small rays randomly on the floor and ceiling. Kayo rose to open them and let the light in, at least. Her head was feeling dizzy; she decided to return to bed. 

She had very small respite: the nurse came in and greeted her politely, carrying small plastic case with test tubes in. It was time for the "bloodsucking" again. Luckily this time the blood was taken from her catheter; she did not have to suffer the sting of the needle. The nurse left the room, advising her she would be back shortly with food and her second treatment.

The second: one day closer to returning home. She would have some time to contact Scott before the nurse arrived. She tried again to contact the island via her communicator, with no success. She was worried yet again, wondering what had happened during her absence. She would have to resort to normal communication means. The hospital's communication system was difficult to handle: she had to go through a secretary in order to dial a number if it was local. Broadcasting was permitted but only in a very localized area. This was weird, considering the satellites and the web were sufficient to provide worldwide communication in populated areas. She dialed the number she remembered for Tracy Island. Grandma picked up.

- Tracy residence?
- Grandma? It's me, Kayo.

She did not have visual: the network connection was poor.

- Kayo? Dearie, I'm so happy to hear about you. How have you been?
- Good. Things are going quite well. Nothing very exciting.
- You want to talk to Scott, right?
- Yes, if you could fetch him, I'd be happy to chat. I don't have much time, I'm scheduled for another treatment soon. It makes me doze off, so I'd like to speak to him now.
- Hold on.

Kayo could hear whispering in the back. The anxious voice of Scott picked up.

- Kayo! Are you all right? Is anything wrong?
- No, not at all, Scott. You sound kinda stressed out… did something come up?
- Don't worry about it. Care for yourself at the moment. You need to come back to full strength.
- I want to know what is happening. Is Penelope safe? How are the others? Why can't I call you through our communication network?

There was a silence. She could hear him take a deep breath. At that moment, the nurse entered.

- Miss Kyrano, it is time for your treatment.
- Just… give me a minute.

The nurse left the room, indicating with an opened hand that she would be back in five. Kayo smiled and nodded.
- I bought some time. Tell me, Scott. How is she?
- We… we'll find her soon. Focus on getting treated and come back rested and ready.
- I can cancel this whole thing and come back home, you know.

His answer was categorical.

- No. Get better. I don't want you back here until you've completed the treatment. Please.
- This is the worst time to be in a place like this...
- I'll give you an update as soon as we get word from the Colonel. We are still waiting on the GDF for news.

He paused, there was not much more time left. He added:

- I love you, Tanusha. Come back safe.

She smiled.

- I love you too, Scott. I won't jeopardize anything, I swear.

He disconnected. The nurse came over and set up Kayo with the IV, asking questions about her boyfriend and commenting on how cute it was for him to worry about her. The operative remained evasive, even if she did appreciate her nurse very much, the less she knew, the better it was. As the woman left the room, Kayo slowly slipped into a deep sleep as the IV solution ran through her veins.

She woke again at sundown. This time, her tray was laid out before her. The food was still warm, indicating her nurse had come inside a few minutes prior. Moving her arm, she noticed her IV had been removed, too. She smiled; that woman really was tending to her every need. Her stomach was grunting: she ate her fill and decided to have a quick shower before going out to the garden. Refreshed, she changed clothes and went outside.

Simon was sitting in the garden, examining a rather fantastic looking flower. He did not notice Kayo right away; she remained behind and looked at what he was doing. He took out a spider from the flower into his hand and crushed it. The young woman approached him; he smiled.

- Good evening, Kayo. How are you feeling today?

She looked at his hand: he seemed to have been bitten as blood was slowly running down the side of his palm.

- I'm good… though you should be careful. Some spiders are venomous here.

- Oh, yeah, that's true.

He wiped his hand on his side.

- I don't think this one was, otherwise I'd be dead by now?

- It takes a few minutes for the venom to be active in your blood and tissues.

- Lucky you're here then. I will die with an angel by my side.
He smiled. She didn't. He looked away and came back to ask:

- You haven't told me why you were here, Kayo.
- It was about cellular mutations or something of the sort. I'm not very good at this.
- I see. Tumors are defective cells; that's what the doctors told me. You are lucky not to have been diagnosed with one.
- True that.

Abigail had not told her anything about tumors or cancer and neither did the scan show any sign of it. She began thinking she either had luck or a good reflex when she had done the pharmacy test the first time. Simon smiled.

- You have a good star watching over you. You should send him your thanks.
- I don't believe in such things. Religions and all…
- What do you believe in then?

She was about to say "myself" but refrained from showing so much overconfidence.

- I believe that humans can accomplish anything by trying.
- That's one way to see life.

The conversation dropped short. He sat down on a near bench and changed the subject.

- Do you happen to have the news broadcast in your room?
- No. I don't.
- There is a talk of war. I heard negotiations are going to take place soon. Let's hope they work it out.
- Yeah...

She knew too much to have an opinion on the subject. The war might have started because of Parker and Penelope from what she knew. Simon was looking at her; she blushed.

- Am I making you uncomfortable? I know I should not have asked such a question at this time. I'm very sorry. Wanna chat about something else?

Kayo was tempted to speak with him but did not find anything to share. Her personal details and duty were not a subject to open up about yet she managed to find suitable conversation subjects to discuss far from getting too personal. They talked until the sun was down and the freshness of the night invaded the garden. Simon looked at her.

- I should go. My nurse will be looking for me.
- Did you not tell her you were coming outside?
- Yeah, but she expected me to come back a lot earlier. What is life good for if we can't come in past curfew?
He laughed, rising from the bench.

- Hope to see you again, Kayo. This was a fun evening. See you next time.

- Right, see you.

She got up and went back to her ward.

On her way up to her room, she could hear the doctor and a nurse speaking. She remained out of sight in order to listen.

Doctor Hanse's voice was heard.

- … and we can see a very, very good progression here. The cells have diminished drastically, I was not expecting that. A bit too quickly to my taste. If we want to get to the third part tomorrow, we'll have to treat tonight. I'll sign the transfer to the ICU ward right away.

She was hoping he was not speaking about her as she came back to her room. She heard the nurse come in after her.

- Miss Kyrano. Doctor Hanse wants to speak with you.

The doctor was waiting outside the door for the nurse to leave. As she did, he entered, tablet computer in hand. He exhibited a very small smile contrarily to his previously large one.

- Miss, how are you feeling.

- Better than yesterday. What did you want to tell me?

He gave her the tablet computer and began explaining, pointing the image with the tip of a pointer.

- You see, through your biochemical breakdown, we have seen your cells changing. After the first treatment, the nurse had taken blood tests; through these we have seen a significant change… a bit too significant one. You are responding too well to the treatment and this is quite disturbing. So, to counterbalance, we will have to give you another type of drug, to slow down the cellular mutations and go ahead with the treatment. But for that, we have to send you to the ICU to be thoroughly monitored.

She was a bit shocked; her heart was racing. She did not understand why this would be necessary.

- Is this a good or a bad thing?

- A good one, a bit too good. That is why we need to step it down a notch, to prevent the results from having the opposite effect. We will transfer you a bit later tonight, I hope this will bother your sleeping patterns?

- No. I'll be ready when you are.

Let me complete the administrative work and then we will transfer you.

He left the room. At that particular moment, she really wanted to get in touch with Abigail and have her explain everything in familiar words. She had a weird feeling that the Doctor wanted to be optimistic but was not telling him everything. Having some time still, she tried to phone home. Grandma picked up again.

- Kayo! How're things? You're calling very late, is everything okay? Do you want to speak with
Scott?

- Grandma, I know this will sound weird but no. I would like to speak with Abigail.

- Sweetie, she's gone.

This was a surprising statement. She had to inquire.

- Gone? How and why?

- Scott ordered her off. He said she tried to sabotage us but Brains said otherwise. I don't know much about what happened, just that Thunderbird Five shut down. Hope you're doing better where you are.

Kayo was surprised Scott did not speak to her about any of this. On the other hand, she figured he didn't in order to stop her from coming back in a frenzy and neglecting her well-being.

- Grandma, anything I could have done?

- Not that I think of. I'm just standing here home alone with Scott who's grumpy as ever. You'd think he's Jeff incarnate with that angry mug of his. You're fine where you are, away from his moods. I can't wait for things to finally calm down and come back to what they were before.

- Alone? Where are the others?

- I don't think it'd be a very healthy thing for you to worry about everyone. As things are now, we are hanging on. Don't worry.

An attendant came inside her room and gathered her bag and clothes. Another was waiting outside with a wheelchair. The nurse came in and signaled her to end her conversation. She hurried.

- I need to hang up now. Talk to you later.

- Later, sweetie.

The woman came closer and put the new bracelet on Kayo's arm.

- Here, this is the ID corresponding to your new room. The attendants will bring your belongings. Good luck to you.

- Thanks.

The nurse stood outside the room and waved at her while she was being taken away. Even without looking through windows, Kayo figured she was being brought exactly where she had seen the young woman entering the day before and the soldiers at the door. She was coming in from the second floor, which meant she would probably not get close to the lower entrance but she would closer to investigate. Plus, if Simon was in that ward, she was likely to run into him.

They led her to a room with a large glass-paned door. The place did not give much privacy. The white walls reminded her of Tracy Island's medical ward but the technology was a lot more up to date. A woman in a lab coat was waiting for her at the door.

- Greetings Miss Kyrano, I am doctor Chapman. I will be taking care of you.

- What about Doctor Hanse?
He will be with us shortly. I am one of the Interns working under him. Please, undress and put on the gown so we can begin. You can draw the curtain in front of the door for privacy. Your belongings will be put to safety. Just lie down once you are done, we will prepare the necessary medication.

The Doctor was quite expeditious when explaining; Kayo noted a bit of nervousness in her voice. She drew the curtain and put on the green hospital gown, making sure she would strap it tightly to avoid showing her behind. After she opened the curtain, she was startled by the doctor waiting right behind the door in a creepy way, with an IV pouch in her hand. The woman entered as Kayo was lying down. She asked.

- What is this one?

- We need to slow down your cellular activity if we want to remove the mutations. Otherwise, your cells multiply too quickly and we cannot correct them since there are too many.

The IV was hooked up and ready to go. The doctor did not say anything and quickly left the room. Kayo began to be curious both from the fact that her new caretaker was very nervous and that she did give very little instructions comparing to the nurse of the previous ward. She looked through the window as Doctor Chapmann went back to the desk and began working on a computer.

This is when things began to go wrong for her. She felt herself slowly slip to unconsciousness: contrarily to the previous treatments, she had fallen asleep with a very comfortable feeling. This time, her body was hurting, her veins were on fire and her mind was playing tricks on her. She could hear muffled noise around her, footsteps, a lot of them. She heard the noise of the rubber wheels of the bed on the waxed floor as they seemed to be bringing her somewhere. Wherever it was, she was not feeling the motion. There was a weird feeling of coldness invading her forehead, then her throat, all the way down to her feet. Had they stripped her naked of the gown? It was hard to tell.

**Three**

After a while, the footsteps left. Loud noises came from her right as if someone was banging on a wall violently and screaming. As time passed, she could make out a lot more of what was happening. She could feel her forehead, wrists, and ankles being restrained. She was lying down on a very uncomfortable slab. Her eyesight came back slowly: she was not in her room anymore but inside one with reinforced steel plates. A large metal door creaked as it opened, letting Doctor Hanse and a few others inside. The old man's face was a lot different than she remembered: he did not bear his clown smile anymore. One of his attendants was writing down everything he said.

- Blood group O negative with no modifications. We'll manage without, we have no time now. Have the cerebrum chip constituted from her DNA and make sure we can execute the procedure once we get there.

She heard a muffled noise. It seemed to come from the other room. The screams were a lot livelier. The Doctor went on.

- Take all fluid samples through puncture: lumbar, pericardium, cerebrospinal, pleural and bone marrow. Send some to molecular biology for the duplication of cells. We will create the eggs from these. She is a suitable candidate.

Kayo tried to move, her restraints were very tight. She moaned; the doctor turned towards her.

- Good evening Miss Kyrano. Hope you a doing well.
- What… is the meaning… of this?

The doctor gestured, one of his attendants exited the room. He smiled at her.

- Simple precautions. Until we are done with your treatment, we can't take any chances.

- Why restrain me as such? Are you afraid I'll turn into a giant green monster and break everything? I wasn't brought here for simple treatment, was I?

He smirked.

- You are very smart, too. That will play in your favor.

- Shut up! What do you want to do to me?

- Patience Miss Kyrano, you will see soon enough.

- I don't want to wait. I swear I'll strangle you and get the truth out!

The Doctor turned towards his attendants and laughed. They all laughed along with him before he turned back.

- You are lucky Doctor Chang sent you here, otherwise, your talent would have gone overlooked. You see, you are the perfect candidate for the continuity of our project. It has been put on hold for a long time now, and we require suitable candidates. You, for instance, are more than perfect.

This sounded vaguely familiar.

- Oh? Don't tell me it's Olympus?

It was only meant to be a jest, but she seemed to have guessed right. He approached her, frowning.

- Yes, Olympus. Where have you heard of the name?

- I don't know… you tell me?

He slapped her. She could not move her head; the full force of the blow was felt in her entire jaw.

- Tell me. Or would you rather be tortured? I'm sure we can give you a truth serum and get it out.

- Is Chang is really working for Holling?

- Yes, and she provided us with suitable candidates for a lot of projects. You see, her clinic is not only being upgraded for the sake of the people but in the name of science. A lot of drugs have to be tested and the overzealous laws in developed countries do not let us do the trials without governmental authorizations. Malaysia is one of the only countries which allows open trials without being submitted to a committee first.

- So that's what you want to do on me? Test drugs?

- Oh, no. You are to be our new hive mother.

The more he was speaking, the creepier it was getting. She wanted to know more.

- What, you'll impregnate me? That's just disgusting.

- Yes, it is. This is why we dare not do such a thing. No, we engineer perfect embryos inside our
laboratories and grow them in artificial wombs. You see, project Olympus, in his initial form, was the creation of perfect humans: a new race that will be resistant to disease, pollution, have perfect physical and mental health and a very high I.Q. The idea came from our leader…

- Marcus Holling…?

He slapped her again.

- … do not interrupt me. After the war, everyone feared retaliation from the Bereznik state. Elliot Holling, Marcus’ father, first came up with the idea to setup a remote island, far away from any country, and make it an international shelter for rich and famous people. He succeeded in gathering DNA samples from these men and froze through cryogeny. The man died shortly afterward, ironically of a preventable heart disease. His son soon took over and reshaped Olympus his way.

She knew now that Abigail had not told them everything. The Doctor went on.

- Rich men from all over the world began paying for a place on Olympus. That was before Marcus engaged on that stupid Veteran's project. He thought to protect the place with old disabled men, some of which were homeless and poor. But it failed miserably and he began losing money, seeing some of his donations withdrawn. Then, one of his former advisors had another idea…

- … to create super soldiers from people. People compatible in some way…

- … people like you. This mutation you have is not only very rare but also the first sign we look for when hunting for such people. It shows you are naturally resistant to the side effects of the carbon polymer used in some body modifications and, also, that your genetic code can be easily modified to create the perfect strain of DNA we seek.

- Humans have always adapted. They will again. There is no need for such a disgusting project.

- There is. You see, eventually, we will all die out of some disease we cannot cure, or the air will poison us. This planet is doomed. All there is left for the human race to survive is to modify itself to survive.

She waited to see if he was going to babble more.

- You should be happy, Miss Kyrano. When the war will begin, you will have a choice seat and be able to witness it all from afar. You will receive sufficient modifications to be useful to us provide that we have enough time to set you up with prosthetics and a cerebrum computer.

- You want to turn me into one of your puppets? Keep dreaming.

- Oh, but you are destined to greatness! I always thought it was a shame Artemis was a man. She is a goddess whose fighting spirit is unmatched, who shines brightly above her male counterparts. Luckily, we can correct that mistake right now.

This all seemed so unreal to her, a nightmare she was trying to escape by shutting her eyes. But the feeling of the tight leather bindings and the pain coursing her body were bringing her back to reality.

- Why do you to do this to me?

- Because Artemis needs to be replaced. His current state makes him impossible to control. At night, he is such a nice little lamb but in the day, his memories come back to haunt him. Mainly, his PTSD takes over, and we have to sedate him. This is getting tiresome.
- Simon…?

- Is this the name he gave you in the yard the other day? You are lucky he did not strangle you: he hates women. He is a convicted sexual abuser, recidivist and child molester. Yes, this "Simon", or should I say, Siegmund, which is his real name. Now that you are here, we will dispose of him.

She followed him with her eyes as he walked around the room.

- Did you experiment on him? What have you done?

- He was killed. And we brought him back to life. It was a mess, we had to reconstruct his brain, which worked more or less. But now that we have you, we won't need him anymore.

The doctor gave more instructions to his attendants who exited the room. He finally turned towards the door.

- We will come back and set you up in a few minutes. Do not strain yourself until then, it will only make matters worse.

- I won't let you do anything to me.

- Yes… of course. You all sound the same, in the end.

He left the room, closing the massive door behind him. Kayo tried to break free of the large leather straps holding her down: they were very tight and not leaving her a lot of space to squeeze through. She almost succeeded in pulling her hand free when she heard the door open again. This time, the attendants came with three armed soldiers. The array of equipment they brought inside looked right out of a nightmare. At first, the soldiers pinned down her shoulders to the table, preventing her to move as one of the attendants was opening her mouth and inserting a rigid round mouthpiece. She tried to bite him: he removed his fingers quickly. One of the soldiers squeezed her arm so hard she screamed. Hanse was not far behind.

- Do not wound her. This one does not have nanites; we can't afford to break any of her bones. Be gentle

One of the soldiers, who seemed like a higher ranked officer, nodded. He himself opened Kayo's mouth, holding her jaw opened with his massive hands. The attendant inserted the mouthpiece again, succeeding this time. The young woman did not know what to do else than try to wiggle to show her reluctance but with the sheer strength of the men holding her down, it was pointless. The attendant then took a very long and large metal syringe and inserted it in her palate. It was so painful tears ran down her cheeks as the syringe seemed to lodge itself under her skull. As the attendant pushed the piston, a loud tick was heard, followed by a painful sting, traversing her entire body. She felt as if she was suddenly paralyzed and began shaking uncontrollably. The soldiers released their grip slowly. Doctor Hanse monitored her vitals while the attendant was finishing the procedure.

- Miss Kyrano, I know you are still hearing me. You have been given a small microchip, implanted directly into your cerebrum called an "enhanced learning chip". With this, you will be able to learn the basic maneuvers of the Artemis array easily. Now, for the final part, you will be administered a regular dose of Acidosemine in order to stop shaking and for your brain to process all the information inside the chip.

The attendant removed the mouthpiece, her jaw was stiff. She was still able to speak.

- Why…?
The doctor fiddled on his tablet computer while the attendant set up an IV of Acidoamine. Kayo was frightened; she had noticed beforehand what had happened to the men who became addicted to the drug. She could do little else than hold back her moans, as the pain was still excruciating. She heard Hanse speak, unable to see what he was doing from afar. His voice was a bit lower but still clear through the echo of the room.

- Dixon! What a surprise! I was not expecting you so soon.
- Hanse! Get to the point. I am in no mood for your pointless chatter.
- We have a worthy candidate. I have uploaded all her data.

Dixon seemed to pause for a moment.

- You… oh, this is interesting. So, tell me, is she ready?
- Two days more, sir, then we send her to Olympus.
- Good. I am looking forward to seeing her prowess.
- She will be our new hive mother…
- Oh, about that. No. We have found the original. She will be within our grasp soon.

Hanse frowned.

- How do you plan to get her under your control?
- We have Zeus. And it works.
- Good, very good. That makes it more interesting.
- We will see you and your protégé in two days then. Do not contact me unless it is important.

The communication seemed to have been cut. When everything was done, everyone exited the room, leaving Kayo alone and in pain. She felt helpless and vulnerable. "What is going to happen to me?" she thought, as her body began feeling heavy. Her pain had stopped but her pattern of thought also did. She was unable to cry, and even if she thought about Scott, she could not recall his face anymore or anything she had felt for him. Her feelings had died.

Two

Time seemed to pass quickly. She did not feel it. She even began counting seconds and minutes on her fingers and understood the attendants were changing her Acidoamine bag every two hours. Before she was visited again by Doctor Hanse, they had changed the bag four times. That was eight hours ago when she felt so much pain. But now, she could not even recall it, even if she tried.

The Doctor entered her room.

- Good morning, Miss Kyrano.

She answered him in a robotic tone.

- Good morning.
- I see the drug worked miracles for you. I will give you the first test, you must not fail it. I will remove your restraints if you answer me correctly.

Kayo had forgotten about the restraints and being held to the table. She also understood she had not gone to the bathroom for so long and felt her bladder heavy. The doctor went on.

- Do you want to kill me?

She seemed to recall an argument and making death threats the day before but did not feel any more anger or resent for the man. The Doctor's question felt irrational to her.

- I don't want to kill you.

- Good. What will you do once you get untied?

- Go to the bathroom.

Her answer was instantaneous, crude, unfiltered. She had not given it a second thought. It was a necessity before anything else and the first thing that had come to her mind.

- Good, good. Then, will you accomplish a task for me then?

- Yes. I will.

He smiled. The drug seemed to be working; he exited the room. She did not try to fight back, it was stupid to try to leave for whatever reason. Once the restraints were removed, her first move was to go to the bathroom. When she was done, she went back to the slab, lied down and waited, not saying anything.

The soldiers brought her to another room where a man was tied down, desperately trying to move from his restraints. She recognized him: it was Simon. She remembered him having drawn emotions from her the first time she had seen him. His blue eyes were filled with hatred and anger. But now, she could not recall anything. One of the soldiers entered with her. A voice was heard through a microphone.

- Miss Kyrano, we want you to kill Siegmund. Show us that you can.

She looked around, trying to locate the speaker and answered:

- Killing is wrong.

The speaker replied.

- Killing is wrong when it is not necessary. It is necessary now. This man has raped women and children. He has killed many but justice remains to be done. Will you do justice?

She hesitated. Why was killing wrong, if that man had done even more wrong? She could not process the information, it was blurry to her. All that remained was that rape was a terrible offense. The speaker's voice was heard again.

- We will let you decide. Next to you is a table. You can choose your weapon.

She was alone in the room with Simon now, and on the table sat a few objects: a knife, a baseball bat, and a gun. She hesitated before choosing the gun and setting it on Simon's forehead. The man began wriggly wildly, trying to break free. She shot it, sending a bullet through the man's skull. Then, as slowly as she took the weapon, she laid it back down on the table and withdrew a few
steps away, looking at her work. A filet of blood ran down Simon's face as he rested, lifeless, on the table. Her head was empty, as much as her feeling for the situation. She had done what needed to be done.

The speaker's voice came back to life.

- Good. You have passed the test. Now come back to your room.

She walked back without questioning, entering her room and lying back down on the table.

Hanse had watched the entire feed from a remote area. He was attended by two other men.

- Good. The drug works wonders on her. Keep her sedated at an interval of four hours. Once we reach Olympus, we will begin flight and weapons training.

He turned towards one of his men.

- Contact Holling. Tell him we will be ready on time. He will be able to use our new Artemis until everyone is ready.

The attendant nodded while the doctor left the room.

One

She was fitted inside the suit. A few modifications were required in order for it to be perfect. She did not dispose of all the body modifications required to make it react to her; the attendants were there to help her with interlocking the hexagonal weave. It took a good hour before she was ready. The doctors led her towards a vehicle to be carried to the airport to meet with Hanse. He was already with Marcus Holling, waiting outside his private jet. She was ordered to keep her helmet off until she was seated on the plane.

Holling looked at her.

- Surprising! Brilliant work, Doctor. We now have a very pretty Artemis, and worthy of the title.

- Thank you, Sir. She did not yet have any training on the weapons and flight modules; we will need to get her quickly onto it once we reach Olympus.

- Yes, we will. But until then, will she be stable enough to execute a little task for me?

- That… depends on the nature of the task.

- A simple pickup. It will not last very long.

- As long as she gets her dose every six hours at maximum, she will be. Remember, she cannot remove her suit yet as she does not have subdermal receptors. Once we get enough time to get her through surgery, all of these minor setbacks will be solved.

Holling smiled, contented.

- Good! Very good! I bid you farewell then, Doctor. We will meet on Olympus once I come back with my most precious possession.

The Doctor was quite curious at what Holling was implying. His face meant to question the man. The businessman answered:
Athena is the Keeper and the Key. We need her to activate Olympus. We are going to get her now.

Without waiting for a reply, Holling climbed the stairs to the aircraft, followed by Kayo and one of Hanse's assistants. The Doctor went back towards his vehicle, returning to his facility. He watched as Holling's craft took off, having a feeling of satisfaction. He told his driver:

- This is the begin of a new era. We should be proud to have taken part in it.
Thank you all for your patience!

I've been working some crazy hours lately and have very little time to write. But don't worry, I'm not out of ideas!

Five

Scott’s decision was final: Abigail had to leave. She had remained inside her room since the incident the day before, sitting on her bed and going through Star Alpha's black boxes. She had to keep her mind busy not to think of whatever life she was going back to now. She dared not leave her room not to bump into the elder Tracy; she knew their next meeting would not be cordial.

Virgil came to her that late evening. He found her lazily browsing the files. As he came in, she sat down, her hair a bit messy, wearing only a long shirt. He smirked, imagining she might not be wearing anything at all underneath. He sat near her.

- Were you waiting for me?

She gave him a quick look.

- Not particularly. I wanted to sleep early.

- You could have come to the living room. Scott asked for a bit of music to lighten the mood.

- I don't want to see him.

Her gaze was fleeing towards all the objects of the room but never coming back to him. He gently turned her head towards him.

- Hey, I know you don't want to leave. I don't want you to go, either. But...

Her eyes became teary.

- But what? I still have to in order to satisfy your brother's wishes.

He brought her closer to him.

- For now. I'm sure he will change his mind once everything comes back to normal.

- And when's that? It's a perfect drama, you know. The girl needs to leave, the guy promises to see her again, the girl waits, the guy never comes back. Classic.

She was using so much sarcasm he could not do anything else than laugh. She looked at him.

- And when did it become funny?

- It isn't. I'm sorry.

He bent forward to kiss her. She wanted to stop him but ended up falling for his advances.

They abandoned themselves to their urges, spending most of the night reclaiming the time lost
while Abigail's wound was healing. Exhausted, she lied over him as he stroked her loose hair with one hand and her bare arm with the other. She rose and looked at him, a faint smile drawing on her lips. It was never too late to speak about anything with him.

- I have been thinking… I'd like to go back to Montreal.

- Will you be safe there? You know your way around?

- I've lived my whole life close to that city. The population is dense and multicultural, I'll fit in nicely. There is food, affordable lodging, amazing nightlife… everything I need. And if I ever need to get lost somewhere, the closest rural areas are less than thirty minutes away. I know nice fishing spots and winterized cabins where I can go hide in if need be.

He had a chill when she spoke of winter. Not that he particularly enjoyed cold, he would rather go there in a holiday than spend his life in a city surrounded by mountains of snow. She turned her attention to the window.

- I'll miss this place. I knew I was only here for so long. Still…

It hurt him to see her that way. He wanted to see her smile.

- Don't worry. It will only be a short period of time. I'll visit you. And once everything has calmed down, I'll bring you back here.

He was being hopeful, taking the whole situation too lightly to her liking. It was no that simple, not for her at least. She snuggled up against him.

- I hope so…

He held her hand, intertwining their fingers.

- Scott allowed me to go with you for a few days. How about we make the most out of that time? Treat ourselves… just like we did at the resort. Well, maybe not so lavishly…

She raised an eyebrow.

- You mean, a date?

- Let's make it a date.

She smiled. Maybe that was all she needed, some time off the island with him to convince her of his good faith. He did not part with her; he was finally beginning to understand her.

- Let's get some rest. Tomorrow I'll help you pack then we can go, find a nice hotel to spend the night, have lunch… I'm off duty until Thunderbird Five comes back online at least.

She giggled. It was the first time he had seen her act this way. It made him smile.

- Yeah, let's do that.

They both fell asleep after a short conversation about a bit of nonsense.

Four

It was almost noon when Virgil woke up. Abigail had already risen and had packed most of her things. He figured she did not sleep much, seeing all the work she had done so far. She came out of
the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her body and made her way towards the desk. He watched her untangle her hair: he was not even drawn at her enhancements anymore. He was seeing her as a whole, not wanting to distinguish what was mechanical from what was organic on her body. Maybe she had sensed it, that feeling he had when he laid eyes on her every time. It was not the fluttering of butterflies in his stomach but a rather more familiar, strong tie that they seemed to share and had built over time. He wondered if that was love, but the real kind of love, the non-ephemeral one, the moment you figure you want to spend the rest of your life with someone. Whatever it was, his thoughts flew off when she turned around and noticed he was awake.

- I know you're staring. Don't pretend you're sleeping.

She threw a shirt at him as she picked up clean clothes from her packing. He watched her dress and get ready.

- Come on. I'm really looking forward to that invitation of yours. You wouldn't want to keep me waiting.

- No more second thoughts about leaving?

- I've made up my mind about it. And you promised you'd visit. I trust you will keep your word.

She turned around, fully dressed. It was the first time he saw her put makeup on other than during the cabaret night and during the mission. He rose slowly; she watched him, his muscular shoulders, his well-defined abs, his proud, straight posture. If he wasn't smiling as he was, he could be a pretty scary guy. He headed towards the shower to get ready, too.

There was no lack of civilian aircrafts inside the hangar. Jeff Tracy enjoyed collecting old and new models of aircrafts at a time. Once Brains was a part of the team, he began tending to them and sometimes applying modifications. They hopped in a "Needlehaw"k, an elaborate version of an old military reconnaissance aircraft; the patents had been bought by a company producing civilian vehicles which turned this model into a functional and comfortable ride. There was enough space inside to seat at least six people along with the pilot.

It was going to be a few hours of travel until they reached the Canadian airspace. Virgil was piloting while Abigail was looking out through the window. He tried to incite her to converse but was met with very short answers. He had to find a way to prove to her that they were not parting forever.

They landed at a private airport near Montreal. After a few minutes of hassle with a local car rental company, they were on their way to the city. Virgil smiled as he took the wheel with Abigail at his side this time. She was still looking through the windows, evading his gaze. He spoke first.

- This date will be very boring if you keep staring through the window. I promise this is only for a short while. Once we save Lady Penelope and gather everyone back at home, Scott will change his mind.

She turned back towards him.

- This wasn't at all what I was worried about. It's been a while ever since I've been here. I missed the city. And I'm ready to enjoy this date to the fullest.

- That's the spirit! Any choice activities you want to do? I have never been in this city.

Her smile returned.
- There is SO MUCH stuff we can do! We can eat anything from Indian to Chinese, Italian, Creole… there is everything here and it's amazing. Afterwards, we can stroll through the parks, see a movie, go to the museum and watch an exhibit… Really, I don't know where to start.

She sounded a bit like an excited young child. This amazed Virgil who always knew her as stern and focused. This was a wild side of her he had never seen before; it surprised him yet he did not dislike her sudden excitement. As they were nearing a hotel, he stopped the car.

- Let's start by getting a room. We at least will have a place to stay tonight.
- Good. Then we'll get a drink. How about that?
- Deal.

The place was a nice trendy hotel on a busy street. It was midday and it was already filled with well-dressed individuals taking a cocktail in the lobby. It seemed as if they stumbled upon an office meeting. The flooring was made of hardwood and the walls were painted in hues of white, gray and black. The floor and the walls of the elevator area were marble imitation ceramic; it was nowhere near cheap. The room fee was reasonable enough; Virgil helped her bring the luggage up to the room. She had packed a medium-sized suitcase with most of the clothing she would need for a long trip.

The room was small yet comfortable. They both got ready, putting on something casual before strolling through the city. After a ride on a tour bus, spending the rest of the afternoon at the old port walking down the paved alleys, looking around in souvenir stores just for fun and lunch with copious amounts of wine at a renowned pasta restaurant, they walked again, exchanging pleasantries and a lot of funny anecdotes. They enjoyed each other's presence; Virgil liked her high spirits and great imagination. She was a scientist, working in a field where she could explain mostly every biological phenomenon in the world yet, she liked to marvel at nature, the universe and sometimes had very eccentric theories about the world. He knew she was making this up just for fun; after all, science was rather boring, providing all the answers in a straight, raw form, lacking eccentricity.

As they were walking, Abigail had erased the thought of Virgil never returning to her. She knew he could not abandon her after that night; they were both happy with each other and understood one another very well. She thought it might be a good time to speak with him now that they were away from the island, alone and both rested.

They came across a Café on their way back to the hotel. They both agreed it could be a good time to sit down and rest after their busy day. The place was cozy, with very little customers; they were able to have the best seat. The waitress came and took their order before Abigail began.

- Listen… It's been a while since… but there are a few things I have been meaning to tell you about.

Virgil smiled.

- Sounds serious. You really think it's a good time to be discussing this now?

- If I don't now, I'm sure I'll never be able to tell you. It's… important. I'd like you to know before you go through the black boxes and find out for yourselves. And, I made a promise to John…

He cocked his head, curious, waiting for her to continue.

- … I've kept a lot of things for myself until now. Don't think I did it in bad faith. I needed to
- What kind of promise have you made to my brother?

- I promised him not to lie about anything. Remaining silent does not count as lying, does it?

- No, it doesn't.

- Good then. It's about my past… about the projects. There are a few things about which I want to come clean.

The waitress arrived with their order, placing both specialty coffees in front of them. Abigail had a café au lait in a bowl, a typical strong French coffee with milk while Virgil enjoyed an Italian blend brewed up American style. He began dosing the milk and sugar while speaking.

- If you need to get it off your chest, I'm all ears.

She took a small sip of her coffee, realizing it was very hot. She put the bowl down and began.

- The Veteran's project… It was not made to help them. It was the government who asked private companies to do that, to cull the numbers of aging veterans. At first, Holling tried to develop a neuroactive drug to stop the effects of PTSD; he hired me to work on that project. This is when Acidosemine was created. It worked, all right, but had terrible effects. We postponed the trials on human subjects as testing on animals was not going very well.

She paused for a minute. He was listening, a half smile hanging to his lips. He did not look bored so she continued.

- Then, he sought to do something about the disabled. This was when the other project began. Part of the funding Holling had was withdrawn because of one man; he stood up during a meeting and asked why veterans should be the guinea pigs in these experiments. Many from the investor's board began to withdraw. The project was put on hold. Little did he know that it was conducted on us afterward.

She took a sip of her coffee. It had time to cool down slightly. Virgil took the opportunity to comment.

- I myself don't understand why they were targeting men who fought for their country. After all, we owe them a lot. If the war would have been lost, most of Europe would have been under Bereznik rule by now.

- True… But they rely on tax money to be kept in institutions and hospitals. Their incomes were low and when the war was won, they often didn't have anywhere to go. Now that the population is aging, twenty years later, we find ourselves burdened with incredible expenses to keep them alive and well. Even our leaders have agendas…

- I see.

She stopped again to drink. She was beginning to tire; she shifted her gaze on a screen hanging from a wall near her. There was a news broadcast entitled with a special report banner flashing on the screen. The volume was too low to understand anything but the scrolling banner on the lower screen exhibited "The war was officially declared by world officials today. More info to come.". Virgil had seen it too for he frowned at the holograph. Abigail sighed.

- That… was to be expected.
He did not answer; something was in his mind. She continued to drink her coffee, keeping her eyes off the screen this time and looking around at the decor. While most of the walls were painted white, the accents were orange and red, as were most of the light fixtures and the furniture. Plastic origami artwork hung on the walls in weird shapes resembling disproportioned ducks. It made her smile.

- You got your smile back. That's a relief.

She turned her attention back towards him; he was looking at her.

- I hope I did not bother you with all this… there is still more to say. A lot more.

He was looking at the back of the store and waved a hand. She wondered why for an instant before seeing a woman approach them, holding a basket of roses. He chose one, a lavender rose and handed it to Abigail. She blushed instantly, looking at the flower while Virgil was paying the flower lady. He smiled.

- I thought the night couldn't be complete before I gave you one.

- T… thank you! It's beautiful.

Her face was flushed red; she tried to hide it, taking a deep breath and looking at him. It made her realize she had never received flowers before. She was holding onto it like the most precious thing in the world, examining it attentively. Virgil got up.

- It's late. We should head back to the hotel.

- Yeah. Good idea.

She stood, facing him. They were close to each other, very close. He took her hand and grabbed her by the waist before kissing her. The stewardess smiled at them, letting out a small expression of awe in her breath. They left the café hand in hand.

Abigail held the flower close to her. Why did she have to tell him about all this? She wasn't finished still. There was a lot more she wanted to say. She could not spoil the evening, not now. Even if what she wanted to say was important, she had to let it go. It could wait.

Three

Another wild night.

As soon as they came back to the hotel, they could not restrain their urges. He wanted her so much, more than she wanted him perhaps. Clothing was thrown in all direction as they undressed, sharing voluptuous kisses and caressing each other's bodies. They could not suppress their desire for each other. This time, there was no ways somebody would interfere.

And nobody did.

Their moans and cries echoed in the room, the bed banging against the wall as they got drunk on pleasure. They piped down only once they were satisfied, exhausted, and fell asleep holding onto each other.

A familiar ring woke Virgil. He turned his head towards his communicator resting on the nightstand. It was Thunderbird Five. He made sure to cover Abigail's naked body before answering. Alan appeared on the screen.
Hey bro! What's up?

The youngest witnessed the scene and smiled.

- Oh, Virg, am I interrupting something?

Virgil frowned, rubbing his face with his palms.

- Fill me in, what's up?

Alan seemed concerned.

- Thunderbird Five is back online. Right now, things have gotten a bit out of hand. Scott is gone to the GDF Headquarters to free John.

- Free? Wait, what happened?

- It seemed he was held after the incident. The GDF claimed he is responsible for disrupting the systems of their ships. This led to a lot of deaths on one of their space stations. He also has to answer for the Star Alpha incident.

- Does he need help with something?

- No, he has things under control. Right now, I've received a distress call and it seems you are the only one who can do something.

- Can't Gordon handle it?

- We have been unable to speak with him ever since. Brains thinks he and Parker have crossed towards Bereznik to find Lady Penelope.

- And Kayo?

- She's at the healthcare facility and still has a few days to go for her treatment to be completed.

Abigail opened her eyes. She was awake and had heard the whole discussion.

- Let's take the call, then. I'll help you.

Virgil turned towards her as she sat up, covering her bare chest with the sheet. He smiled.

- You know your way around here. Is there a place we can go where we won't be bothered to board Thunderbird Two?

- I know a few nice spots within one to three hours from here. Your choice.

Alan smiled.

- If you set Thunderbird Two for takeoff now, it can reach your location in about one and a half hour. Want me to forward the signal?

Virgil looked at his brother.

- Give me the details.

Alan began working on the computer.
I received a distress call from humanitarian workers about a collapsed diamond mine shaft in Africa. It looks bad. Seems like it's been like this for a few days and a lot of miners are trapped inside. The mine's owner is a huge American company who claim they abandoned the place months ago. There is nobody around to help them and the local authorities are helpless facing this situation. We need to go lend a hand.

Virgil nodded.

- Sounds like a challenge. Set up Pod Three. I'll be going with a mole pod and dig my way to them.

Alan nodded.

- Good. I'm going to set this up for you. Once you're ready, give me the coordinates for the meeting point and I'll send your bird there.

- FAB.

He disconnected.

Virgil turned towards Abigail and delivered her a kiss.

- Better get up and ready to reach the meeting point quickly.

She smiled.

- I wouldn't have imagined this date any other way. Action and romance always go together, don't you think?

She laughed as she rose to pick up her clothes. He did the same, resisting an urge to throw her back onto the bed. There was something in her smile that always made his heart melt. He knew he could not let her go that easily.

They quickly headed towards the car, Abigail at the wheel. She headed north on a highway, passing by other smaller cities on her way. Virgil was looking at Thunderbird Five's hub, monitoring the flight of his craft and gathering the data for the mission ahead. Their surroundings shifted as they left the busy roads for smaller ones. The foliage was getting thicker overhead as they ventured deeper on a dirt road. Abigail stopped the vehicle at one point.

- Here. We'll be safe. There no traffic and we'll be able to leave without being seen. Thunderbird Two won't be so stealthy, though.

- By the time we board and leave, nobody would have time to react. She's almost here.

Less than five minutes after their arrival, the massive engines of the green behemoth roared overhead. Virgil controlled its approach and made sure he could send down a line to climb onto. Both he and Abigail grabbed hold of the line and winched themselves up to the craft. The course was set for Africa.

They suited up, reaching the cabin just in time to cross the Atlantic. Abigail kept on looking at the details while Virgil was piloting and getting a few information as well. Alan appeared on the ship's dashboard.

- Small update, guys. I've done a scan of the area. It seems this mine runs really deep and in a very weird pattern. Whoever has been supervising the work must have been a poorly trained amateur: those galleries are dangerous and unstable.
Abigail zoomed in on some of the grotesquely drawn galleries.

- Is this all your mapping could do?

- It's underground. We got as much info as we could while using a probe, but the spectrum of detection does not reach over more than fifty meters when there are a lot of disturbances. It seems that the ground does not only contain diamonds but an awful lot of other metals, even some uranium. I could only gather as much for now.

- I'll go inside first and get as many readings as possible while Virgil gets ready to dig. Chronos will be useful in this situation.

It was a little early to suggest this, but she did not hesitate to do it. Alan answered quickly.

- I'll make sure you don't mess up our comms again with that thing again. Instead of you connecting to us, I'll be the one connecting to you and monitoring from up here.

- Sounds good. I'm no comms expert, Alan. I messed up this once, it won't happen again.

- No biggie; no harm was done... let's hope so. We'll know what really happened when I can get through to John. Right now, focus on your mission.

Virgil was concerned: he knew very little about anything that had happened at the base. He knew Scott would be reluctant to bother him considering his ties with Abigail and, with the space station offline, contacting him would not be so easy. Whatever had happened to John, he wondered? It was not like him to leave the station and would not require Alan's presence to do so if needed. Something was definitely amiss.

The danger zone was visible on the horizon: a small village was perceptible in an opened field strewn with baobab trees and dried up weeds. It looked like an alien pasture; the African wilderness was always a sight to behold. Abigail observed it for a long time, clearing demonstrating it was the first time she witnessed it in person. The reddish-brown dirt stained her boots as she exited the ship, followed close behind by Virgil inside the mole pod. She had her flight module strapped on: it would come in handy even in enclosed spaces. Virgil issued his order.

- All right. Abigail, you get in through the main entrance and try making it up to where the workers are trapped. If you can go as far as possible and get a steady reading, I'll be able to dig properly.

- Won't a diamond vein damage the mole pod's drill bit?

- It could, yes. Good thinking... I'll have to find a way to get around the vein.

- I'll map the area as much as I can in detail. The ground's impedance should be different: diamonds are natural insulators. That might also explain why Alan could not scan deeper inside the mine.

- I'm counting on you to give me a good reading.

- FAB.

The people who had amassed near the entrance withdrew once they saw the Thunderbird approach, remaining at a fair distance. Men and women crying, screaming hysterically and wanting to enter the mine on their own were being held back by the humanitarian workers doing their best to convince the population that International Rescue was there to help. Abigail looked at them before engaging the flight module's small ion reactors, creating an expression of awe within the amassed
She headed down the mineshaft. The galleries were narrow and roughly dug, depicting a critical lack of expertise. She had to walk, hoping not to get stuck on her way. Using the Chronos module, she began scanning the interior and sending the report to Alan. The results showed a large amount of diamonds but, also, a fairly bigger quantity of uranium. Other than dying from suffocation, the miners would find themselves sick of radiation poisoning if they were in contact with the mineral for too long. Digging through it could also suspend particles in the air and contaminate the area. She realized they were relying solely on her to map the area diligently.

As the images were coming through, Alan calculated Virgil's trajectory and send him the final results. The engineer began digging through, closely following the instructions. By the time he was nearing gallery where the workers were trapped, Abigail had continued on inside the mine and found something quite interesting. She got through to Thunderbird Five.

- Alan, wait. I've found something close by. See this?

She sent him an image. He got a closer look.

- What is it exactly? An underground river?

- Unlikely. I haven't detected water. It can only be…

- A natural gas pocket?

- Get through to Virgil at once before something goes wrong!

Virgil was exiting the pod when he heard his communicator ring. He was very deep in the ground and, from his location, any communications were nearly impossible. It was working solely because of Abigail's Chronos module.

- What's up little bro?

- Virgil, be careful. We detected pocket of natural gas near your loc…

Upon lighting his flashlight, Virgil was caught in a sudden explosion. The blast pinned him hard on the ground as the upper part of the tunnel burst into flames. His communicator and wrist computer were damaged by debris. He was afraid that the pressure might have weakened the mine shaft even more as he felt the ground shake underneath him. This was getting out of hand. The fire still raged on and the heat was becoming unbearable. He tried calling Thunderbird five, without success. He had to find a quick solution.

As Virgil's voice was not heard in response to Alan's intervention, Abigail was becoming nervous. She began heading for the surface quickly in order to get to the mole pod's hole. Was Virgil okay? There was no other way to find out other than going after him. Alan was looking at his computer nervously.

- I really don't know what to say. The temperature in the hole rose to very high levels. You need to get my brother out of there!

- Count on me. I'm going down there. Is there some firefighting equipment I can use? I have an idea.

- WAIT! Don't throw your life away. We need to wait until the fire dies down.
- We can't wait. I'm not letting him burn to a crisp down there. I'll try to find the leak and block it. No oxygen, no fire.

- Sounds like a good idea. Hope it works.

She went back to the ship and scavenged a portable foam shooter. She jumped down, regardless of the danger, knowing all too well that the heat produced by the ion reactors on her back could ignite more of the gas. But it was necessary; until she could pinpoint the leak, she had to go.

Luck was on her side: natural gas was a lot more volatile than air so the flames kept to the upper part of the gallery, not without heating up the area to exaggerated levels. She began scanning with the help of Alan and quickly found the spot where the ceiling had collapsed and let the flammable gas escape. She began dousing it with the foam generously; the fire died out.

The scorched interior of the cave began to cool down as she made her way inside, looking for Virgil. He was lying down near the mole pod. His suit was torn from the blast, exposing part of his back. He tried rising when she approached, grimacing to hide the pain. Abigail helped him towards the pod.

- You're wounded! I'm getting you back up.

- No… We have to save those people.

- You are insane! Your skin is burned… you can't carry on like this.

- Says who? You said the same thing… I can manage. We can still save those people.

He was doing the very same thing she had done to him previously. "I'm fine… I don't need help… I'm strong… I don't want to show weakness…"; it was all that came to mind at that moment. He was no different than she was and seeing how his attitude was so clearly identical as hers, she had no other choice but to acknowledge him. She helped him go back to the pod.

- At least stay inside the vehicle. I'll do the dirty work. We are not very far away from the workers. Just steer away about five degrees to your right and you should be clear of the gas pockets. The ceiling is still unstable, be careful.

He went inside the pod and activated it, drilling further in the indicated direction. It did not take more than five minutes before they came upon screams: they had reached the collapsed gallery. About twenty miners were waiting, singing praises as they were freed. Virgil brought forth a rescue pod made for transport in order to shuttle the people to safety.

As they returned to the surface, they met with the villagers celebrating, dancing and chanting, brandishing charms and banging drums as they worshipped their saviors. It as far from what Abigail had in mind: she went back to the ship quickly, helping Virgil out as he began to weaken from the pain. She could now take a better look at his wound: he had been bruised and burned; his shoulders and back were the worst. She was afraid he would collapse from the pain. Alan came through on the comms.

- Virgil! I'll tell Grandma and Brains to prepare the med bay. Are you sure you'll be able to steer your bird home?

- I'll have to… It's not that bad, I swear.

Abigail had found a medkit and was already tending to his wounds.
- Can you set an automatic course? I'll make a proper bandage while we ride home.

- That… sounds like a plan…

- It's not a plan. You are doing it. Come on… be reasonable.

She insisted. Her voice sounded worried. He smiled.

- Alan, I'm setting the ship for an automated course home. Can you monitor the flight for the time being?

- Sure. We'll be ready to treat you once you arrive.

The bird flew on its usual course without his pilot. He was lying face down on a stretcher inside the pod's med bay, as Abigail was working on bandages. She heard him hiss in pain as she applied antibiotic ointments to his burns. She remained silent, concentrating on her task as her thoughts flew by in her mind. "What's going to happen next?" she thought as they were going back towards Tracy Island. It was not what was initially intended but perhaps Scott would be in a better mood and let her stay.

Virgil's voice broke the silence.

- Is everything okay?

- Y… yeah. It's fine.

- You sound like if something bothers you.

She began applying cooling compresses and bandages on his back as she spoke.

- I wonder… if we're going back to Tracy Island, if your brother will let me stay.

- Can't say. Maybe he's going to be in a better mood. Leave it to me, I'll talk him into having you back at home.

She hesitated.

- And if not?

- Don't expect the worst. I'll take care of everything. Have a little faith in me.

- All my hopes, my faith, whatever else… it's all in your hands. I…

She stopped in the middle of her sentence, sensing she was about to say something she was going to regret. But how could it be wrong? She was afraid, fear had stopped her from speaking her feelings openly. It was better that way to wait until the time was ripe. She did not want to be mistaken for somebody who was playing on her partner's feelings.

Two

It was nighttime once they reached Tracy Island. Virgil had landed the ship safely but was quickly sent to the med bay for Brains to tend to his wounds leaving Abigail in the living room, clad in her full suit. She went to the kitchen to get a drink: the place was deserted. Where were all the Tracy brothers? They were nowhere in sight as they usually hung around the place until quite late during evenings. A cold shiver ran down her spine as she sat down looking around, accompanied by an unsettling silence.
The sound of the waves and the wind blowing through the curtains was interrupted by the booming of engines: Thunderbird One was returning home. Her heart began pounding in her chest; she did not want to face Scott now, not without Virgil by her side. She wanted to leave the living room and hide anywhere but was cut short by a quick visit from Grandma.

The old woman smiled at her.

- Our big guy is doing fine. His burns are not bad at all. He's sleeping now; Brains gave him a drug to ease his pain and he went down like a baby.

- Burn wounds are the most painful, Mrs Tracy. I understand.

It was at that moment that Scott entered the living room. As soon as he laid eyes on Abigail, he had a look of disdain in his eyes he quickly tried to hide. She evaded his gaze, trying to find anything else to say to Grandma Tracy. The old woman noticed the bioengineer's discomfort and went on asking:

- Are you sure you're all right sweetie?

Engines were heard again, this time, coming from Thunderbird Two's runway. A GDF carrier landed, she could see the outline of it's blue wings from where she stood. Scott approached her. He was not pleased.

- I thought you would be long gone by now...

She stood to defy him this time.

- And let your wounded brother struggle alone? No chance. He's back safe and sound.

- But now, what will you do?

Scott took a deep breath. Grandma was staring at him, frowning, knowing all too well he was about to let out a fit of anger. He didn't but his tone was very aggressive.

- I won't hide you. It's too late for that. You walked right back here when you shouldn't have. You'll be the only one responsible for your fate.

She wanted to flee but he caught her arm and restrained her. She turned around and faced him.

- It's too late to run away, Abigail. We will not side with you on this one. You've brought us enough bad luck and trouble.

Grandma Tracy stood up to Scott.

- Scott Tracy! What's going on exactly? I'd really like you to tell me what happened during that meeting of yours you just came back from.

He simply glanced at his grandmother, ignoring her comment. Footsteps were heard coming from the first floor where the civilian entrance from the runway is. They saw John first, his hand bound in metal cuffs, followed by two GDF soldiers and a man whose posture indicated he was of high office. Grandma Tracy's gaze did not leave her grandson; he looked mentally exhausted.

Scott remained near Abigail in case she would try to flee again. She did not budge, her eyes set on John.

- I trust we can fulfill our agreement? It will be oven sooner than expected, too.
General Dixon nodded to his men who removed John's restraints. The young man quickly went to stand behind his brother. Scott pushed Abigail lightly in her back and whispered.

- *For the sake of everyone's safety, surrender. If you do not, you'll bring our entire family down with you…*

She clenched her teeth, pinching her lips not to show her disdain. She hesitated… surrendering would mean to go back to Holling but it also meant to save the Tracys. Dixon looked at his watch then at her.

- I am not planning in staying here for very long. If you do not surrender of your own free will, we'll take you in by force and it won't be pretty. Your choice.

It took all of her willpower to avoid punching him. She was about to do it when Grandma intervened.

- Wait now… just where do you think you are taking her anyway?

Dixon really hated the sudden butting in. He replied with quick and sharp words.

- Where she belongs. And that's none of your concern. Now, come.

Abigail took a step forward, her eyes filled with tears. She clutched her helmet in one hand, ready to use it as a weapon. She was shaking in anger and about to burst when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

It was not a heavy hand but a soft, light touch.

It was John's hand. He stared at her in the eyes and whispered something.

Her shaking stopped. She turned around and walked towards Dixon slowly and reluctantly.

- I'm turning myself in. Don't bother the Tracys anymore.

The General smiled.

- Good. Finally, a bit of sense in your actions, Shaw. Let us go now.

She wanted to look back at John over her shoulder but was pushed forward by one of the soldiers. The Tracys went to watch the lift off.

As the flyer was disappearing in the horizon, Scott asked his brother:

- What did you say to her? She would have fought if not for you.

John's eyes kept to the skies even as the flyer was far away. He remained silent, heading back to the living room accompanied by the others.

The space monitor sat down on the couch, relieved, burying his face in his hands. Scott was still waiting for an answer and becoming impatient. He replied shortly.

- There is a lot going on. We need to have a long conversation...

The elder nodded; this simple answer was enough for him to understand.

*One*
Abigail had remained silent during the entire trip. It was not like her. She secretly thought about killing the men and take control of the flyer. Luckily, she would be able to use Chronos if need be, knowing that it could hack the commands and make her the master on board. But it was risky. Her reverie was interrupted when she felt the aircraft was descending to land.

The hatch was lowered. She could hear about a dozen people coming inside the flyer before the hatch closed again. A man stood before her, one she would have rather never see again in her life.

- I was wondering when you'd finally come back to me.

She clenched her fists as Marcus Holling approached her. Armed men were at his side.

- You… I'm going to get rid of you now!

Abigail lunged at Holling only to be restrained by one of the bodyguards. She tried wrestling free of his grasp when another one came and pinned her down. Two more, armed with rifles, aimed at her. She smiled.

- Kill me now. That's all you ever wanted. Go ahead!

She screamed the words "Kill me!" as she was held down until one of the men gagged her. Holling looked down on her.

- I won't damage your body. Remember one thing: you are private property, MY property. And now that I have you back, you will be returning to your initial duty.

- Don't count on me returning to Olympus without a fight.

He laughed.

- Kind of hard to picture how you are going to get those two men off you, but it would be funny to see you try. Nonetheless, I need Athena, not Abigail. This is why you are going to go for a long sleep… Very long!

One of the men took out a syringe and sank it in her neck. As he began to push the piston, she felt his grasp weaken. She pushed him away, grabbing the syringe from her neck and planting it in the other soldier's eye. She thought of disabling the two men who were pointing their guns at her but, instead, turned towards Holling. She could picture his eyes bleeding in their sockets under the pressure of her thumbs, screaming as she was exploding his skull on the ground. Even if she would get shot, it would be so satisfying that she would die knowing she had taken with her the man responsible for destroying her life.

But there was someone else who grabbed hold of her. A black and red gloved hand that seemed to appear from nowhere caught her right hand and quickly submitted her to the ground using martial arts. Artemis… how had he gotten so quick and technical? She noticed it was not Siegmund's strong body that wore the red suit but a feminine silhouette shaped on the frame of a cat. The new Artemis held her down using acupuncture point. Holling walked closer and kneeled near her.

- You cannot run, it's time to come back. Playtime is over.

Artemis ripped the syringe from the man's eye, leaving him bleeding and in pain on the ground and administered the rest of the drug to Abigail. Her eyes were heavy, she slowly began to feel numb but could hear everything that was happening around her. Holling spoke.

- Good work, Artemis. Bring me the suitcase.
The light footsteps of the "new" Artemis contrasted with those of the soldiers who were withdrawing their own from the room. She heard metallic noise, as somebody was accessing her left arm's inner components. She knew what it was, she was so afraid that, one day, they would use it again on her.

Zeus. The father of the Gods. The software that would make all the Keepers pawns of the one who owned the code. And it was Holling's.

- Activating Zeus. Please log in.

- Marcus Claus Holling.

- Input first command.

She did not hear it; at that precise moment, her mind drifted to nothingness.
Five Days - Betrayal Part 1

Dear readers,

Thank you for the long wait. Have been working crazy hours and I did not have time nor energy to work on this fic.

Please, enjoy.

Five

It was dark and damp. For a high security and technologically advanced detention facility, it lacked proper ventilation. John was sitting down on the metal floor, his head between his legs. He could do little else than move around as there were no commodities other than a stainless-steel toilet. Even if he wanted to stir up some trouble, he would not be able to budge the thing. It was not his intention anyway; he wanted to settle this matter with chosen words.

Footsteps were approaching him. It was the Lieutenant Colonel Laura Baker with two guardsmen. One of them opened the door of the cell, letting the woman inside along with the other. John did not budge. She sat down near him.

- John, is it?

She waited for him to reply. He didn't. She went on.

- I understand you're confused. This is not actually something I was expecting from International Rescue either. I want to understand what happened back there.

He lifted his head slowly.

- If you are waiting for me to speak, you're not going to get anything until our leader is here. Summon him. At once.

His words were sharp and cold. The Lieutenant Colonel frowned.

- You'll get a chance to talk to him as soon as you answer my questions. I want to organize the best defense for you, John, you understand that? The high command is mitigated after the incident and wants to shut you down.

- Even Colonel Casey?

Laura's gaze drifted to the bars in front of her.

- She would defend you tooth and nail if she could be here… She is on leave.

John turned, clearly surprised.

- Why?

- Family matters. Her daughter is very sick and she has been granted leave to accompany her during her treatments. Heaven only knows how much time the girl has left.

The space monitor plunged his head into his hands again.
- We need her now. She is one of the only few remaining people in command who knew us from the very beginning. This is a big misunderstanding…

Laura shuffled her hands. The situation was rather delicate.

- Can you tell me more about it? I really want to know what happened up there. We received a report that your station dispersed a shockwave which destroyed our ship's life support systems. While this is hard to believe, some of the higher-ups suggest we dissect your ships to make sure you don't possess any prohibited weapon. In any case…

He turned his head away, clearing wishing to evade the conversation. She went on.

- In any case, we are studying the different signals which came to the station before the incident. My people are on it. Right now, there are no elements that incriminate International Rescue for we have not found the sudden signal that shut down the life support. Still, someone has to answer for all those deaths; they are looking for a culprit.

- Search all you want. I'll wait for the results to come in.

She got up.

- It could be weeks… even months! You really wish to remain here for that long? If you answer an interrogation, you'll be released on a promise to appear before the Court when the times comes.

He did not answer. She sighed.

- You're a hard one to deal with, John. Suit yourself… I'm not here to argue with you. I was only trying to help like the Colonel would have done herself. If you ever wish to speak to me at any time, I'll arrange for the guard to summon me.

She bent over nearer to him and whispered.

- Just to let you know, Dixon did not send me here. It was my own initiative to meet you and I'm taking a lot of risks doing it. Remember that.

He did not believe her last words. Something was amiss and he knew it had to do with that General. Scott… he wanted to speak with him so much right now. If only he could be granted his wish, things could be different.

The Lieutenant Colonel left the cell without another word as the soldier closed and locked the door. John was alone again in the darkness.

Four

It was early morning. A light breeze invaded the room, making it crisp and cold. Scott was awoken by shivers: he had slept too little still but could not remain in bed. He got up reluctantly and showered, hoping his routine would sweep away the feeling he had deep inside. He felt alone, abandoned.

He went to the kitchen for a snack and met up with Grandma. He evaded her gaze as much as he could before she finally cornered him.

- What's wrong, Scott?

The elder shrugged: it was clear he did not want to talk. She insisted still, changing her ever so
moralizing tone to a very soft and calming one.

- If it's about what is happening right now, I can understand. I'm worried about everyone too. But remember, it's not your fault.

He went past her and grabbed himself a mug, approaching the stove where the old glass percolator was resting to cool down. The smell of coffee was invasive, he needed to have a cup for his grumpiness to go away. Grandma watched him, taking out the sugar. She knew he liked it with a little sweetness, the bitter flavor always did bother him a bit and there was no way he was going to "water down" his coffee with milk. *"Just like his father..."*, she thought, a sudden feeling of nostalgia rising inside her. She remembered doing the same with Jeff after Lucille's death and reminding him about the importance of his role in the family as he was too often away for work.

Scott took a few sips and eventually decided to open up.

- I've been feeling so powerless, Grandma. I can't get in touch with anyone… This is a nightmare, how am I to be a good leader with things getting out of hand as they are now?

She smiled at him, rubbing his forearm.

- You can't control everything. Have faith in your brothers. You've been having some fits of rage lately; that's not good either. I suggest you take some time to think a bit before making rash decisions.

He stared her in the eyes.

- I'm worried about my brothers. John… Gordon… where are they? Alan… did he succeed? And Virgil… why did he really get involved over his head again? This is crazy. I can't believe we're at this point.

- It had to happen. You know what they say: after the storm comes the sun. I don't believe it's only about your brothers…

The satellite phone line rang. Neither of them had heard that noise in years. The line was still active; even though it was an out-dated technology, Grandma was against the fact that Brains wanted to remove it, relying solely on Thunderbird Five. Many wealthy island owners used private satellites to allow them access to the World Web, something the space station could easily do. It was bound to be of use some time; that time was now.

Grandma answered: it was Kayo. After exchanging a few words, she gave the receiver to Scott. *"He might want to have a word with her alone..."* she thought, leaving the room.

The youngest Tracy was steering his ship towards the space station with pride. He could not help but feel a bit nervous; it was the first time he was doing a mission without backup from the base. It was probably the less perilous mission he had been to but it made him anxious: what if something had happened to John? He really hoped he would not find him wounded or worse, dead. If he did, he knew he would remain unable to do anything, frozen in fear.

He rehearsed it in his head, the worse. During the entire trip, he was guiding himself through the steps of what to do. He kept looking straight through the portal, glancing at the instruments once in a while. Warm tears began forming in his eyes and stuck there, as space lacked surface tension, he wiped his eyes and remembered the wise words of his father *"Whatever you do, don't cry. Don't let your eyes get wet in space, ever. You'll just get into trouble"*. It made him feel a bit better, yet, his hands were still shaky.
As soon as Thunderbird Three docked with the space station, the astronaut was surprised by the silence. Red lights were still on, making the interior look eerie. He began acknowledging the alarms one by one, hoping to be at least able to make a quick reset of the systems. Once the regular lights were back on and the gravity ring resumed its gentle humming spin, he began searching for his brother.

He realized John had taken his helmet and most likely left the station; one of the security escape hatches had been manually opened. The only logical explanation was that the GDF succeeded in grabbing hold of his brother and bringing him in for questioning. He had eavesdropped on the conversation between Scott and Dixon. If only he could get through to the island to inform his brother, it could be a lot easier.

Alan began reading all the instructions for the tenth time. He had asked all possible questions to Brains before leaving, hoping he would be able to restore the entire communication network and open a live link with the engineer for support. There was a lot of work to do; he could not afford to dawdle. It was going to take him another full day to restore the communications network.

The elder Tracy was standing near the railing, watching over the ocean. His thoughts were set on the woman he loved. He cursed himself; he was the one who exposed her to the disease in the first place. What he would give to have her back on his side right now. The conversation he had with Kayo earlier made him smile a little, but his anxiety took over. He watched as his brother took flight in the Needlehawk, setting for the mainland where Abigail had chosen to be driven to. He would have liked to know where he was going in order to keep tabs on her. Normally, it would have been all too simple but now, accessing global or private satellites meant disclosing their agendas. Being International Rescue meant to also keep communications hidden; John's encryption algorithm was one of a kind in this world and would require weeks, if not months to decipher.

He sat down at his father's desk and began rummaging through his emails. It had been a while ever since he gave them a look. Tracy Industries had been administered by trustworthy individuals yet, he liked to keep an eye on how things were going along. There were less than two hundred emails, mostly comprising of budgets, financial growth, and the company's standing. He sighed, knowing he was going to have to go through each and every one of them in time.

There was a specific correspondence with a rather important title. The sender was the GDF. He frowned as he opened it, revealing a video message. General Dixon appeared.

- Mister Tracy. Let's cut to the chase, shall we? We have secured your space monitor. If you wish to see him again, I suggest you contact us in the next twenty-four hours. We will be notified you have accessed this correspondence and are expecting you to collaborate. You know very well what you are exposing yourself to if you refuse.

It ended as sharply as it begun. Dixon looked rather pissed in the message; Scott hoped that nothing had happened to his brother. The email had been sent less than an hour prior, he called the headquarters immediately.

He was transferred directly to Dixon. The General seemed pleased.

- I am glad to finally discourse with you, whatever you call yourself at the head of International Rescue. I doubt you have any kind of military decoration.…

Scott cut him short.

- Captain. I was decorated during training at the military academy of the US air force. Captain
Scott Tracy.

- Well, well, Captain. I do hope that knowledge still looms around; as you might recall my authority is above yours. Thus, I shall issue this one simple command and you will execute it.

- I'm not under your command, General. I'm not here for a show of power. All I want is for my brother to be back safely.

- Accusations are pending against your brother, I hope you realize this. Until then, provide you are able to make it here before noon, in London, you shall have your appointment. I'm a very busy man, Captain.

- I shall be there at sunrise if required. Right now, my concern is about John's well being. What have you done to him?

- He is being treated as any high-profile criminal and put in jail.

- High profile criminal?

- Young man, this should be discussed during tomorrow's meeting. Do tell me how your space station was able to shoot a pulsating wave capable of destroying life support systems?

Scott clenched his fist in anger.

- That was not his fault.

- Who's then? Do you have anybody to blame?

Grandma came into the room. He piped down.

- We shall discuss this in your office tomorrow, General. Until then, make sure my brother is well treated. I believe what I have to say will suffice to convince you.

Dixon smiled.

- Tomorrow then.

The conversation was cut by Dixon himself. Grandma approached Scott, bringing him a drink. She did not cross his gaze and said only one thing before leaving.

- Make sure you don't do anything you'll regret.

Scott looked at the drink then lifted his head towards the old woman.

- I am perfectly capable of taking care of this matter myself. It's delicate and in the present situation, we don't have much choice.

- We always have a choice, Scott. It was only a piece of advice.

She left the living room. He understood that she had overheard everything. All he wanted was for things to come back as they were before. She had no idea at what lengths he could go for his family.

Three

It was the middle of the night. Scott was still pacing around in his room. The calmness was what
made him nervous; he was used to his brothers roaming around the place. Now, it was the opposite: it was too quiet and he hated it.

He found solace in hearing noise, music, Gordon's laugh, Virgil's music, Alan's complains… Now it was just Grandma, who reminded him of his duties, and nobody else. What if something happened to his brothers?

The familiar noise of Thunderbird Five's ring came to his ears. He was so happy he almost burst into tears. Alan came through.

- Hey Bro! Been working overtime on restarting the station. Sorry, it took so long. Next time, I'll ask Brains to draw a picture of the wiring instead of having to listen to his recording back and forth. Thunderbird Five is up and running.

Scott smiled as his brother's hologram slowly appeared. He was relieved to receive some good news after all.

- Great job, Alan! Can you find the others?

- I'm doing a thorough scan of their whereabouts. Seems like Virgil is in Canada. I can't see Gordon anywhere and Brains is over the Pacific in FAB1. He's almost reached the island… but why is he bringing the car there?

- What about Lady Penelope? And John?

There was a silence, then Alan pursued.

- Can't see Penelope anywhere. I can see John's signal in London. Did the GDF really get him? He was not on board when I docked.

- They did, yes. I'm heading there in the morning to fetch him. Don't worry, we're going to get this show back together again.

- I'm not worried about that, Bro. What's bugging me is that John's AI has not come back up yet. Let's hope it wasn't damaged…

- Right now, this is the least of our worries. Get me through to FAB1.

Alan opened the link. It was Brains who answered, seemingly tired. He was shy at first, trying to find a way around Scott's question of Gordon's whereabouts. His stutter became more pronounced as he got nervous, betraying him. He let go and told the truth about the aquanaut's escapade alongside the butler. Scott sighed, knowing it was all too late to begin a search in the area. With the recent talks of war, it was smarter to let things unfold, even if he knew that he would be restless until his younger brother was back on the island. Satisfied with the results, he fell asleep, as if some of his worries had flown off. His night was short though, as he set out early the next morning to meet with General Dixon.

The GDF headquarters towered over the airfield, casting an eerie shadow on its side. It was about ten in the morning; the place was bursting with activity. Scott landed Thunderbird One in an area designated by ground control. It was an official matter; he came dressed in his full suit, sash and all.

He was led to a large office in the highest tier of the building and instructed to sit and wait. He did not comply and remained standing, looking around the office out of curiosity and trying to learn
more about its owner.

There were very few pictures and on each and every one, he could not identify the individuals. Decorations hung on the walls, medals, and distinctions of all kind. What struck him was the date written on one of them: 2034. Dixon was a lot older than he looked. This hinted the elder about his relationship with Holling. If the General ever needed rejuvenation therapy, he needed a reliable contact to provide it for him.

He heard the door open. His brother was led inside, dragged by two men. John's face seemed weary; the bags under his eyes indicated he had not slept in some time. His hands were bound in his back. The elder tried to approach him but was met by the guards' hand.

- Keep away from the prisoner, sir.

Scott did not insist. He was in no position to start a fight and causing mayhem was not to his advantage. Anger rose inside him, his face flushed red as he remained standing in front of his weary brother. He looked at both men and said:

- For your sake, I hope you didn't do anything to him…

His piercing gaze was ignored by the guard as Dixon made his entrance a few seconds afterward. He had heard it all.

- Captain Tracy. I do hope you will not begin this meeting with threats. It will not bode well if you do.

The General went to his desk and sat, not paying any courtesies to Scott or John. He brought up some data on his desktop computer. Scott remained standing, motionless. He looked down at Dixon with resentment. There was an awkward silence before the General had finished to fish out all he needed after which he began to speak.

- Finally, the head of International Rescue is here, in flesh and blood. You are a lot taller than I imagined you, go figure why.

- I am not here to exchange pleasantries, General.

- Indeed, you are right. Let's cut to the chase, shall we? After all, we need to reach an agreement if I want to rid myself of your presence.

Scott nodded. His face was still red with anger and it took him all of his restraint not to punch Dixon.

The General waved at the guards who immediately left the room, leaving John, hands bound, sitting on the sofa adjacent to Scott. When the elder tried to go towards him, Dixon slapped his desk and rose.

- Sit! You'll do as I say now or you'll share the same cell.

Scott stopped and took a step back, leaving John as he was. He asked:

- What did you do to him?

Dixon leaned forward on his desk, resting on his fingers.

- Nothing. He inflicted this upon himself. Now sit. The more time you make me lose, the less
inclined I will be to resolve this peacefully. Did I make myself clear?

The elder finally sat. His hands were shaking in anger. Dixon went on.

- Good boy. Now, tell me… Why should I let you go? We all know what happened up there; give me one simple good reason why I should let you get out with your lives while a dozen of our men didn't.

John lowered his head more. Scott understood that his brother had inflicted this upon himself from guilt. He jumped to his defense.

- We didn't know. It just happened. We had no control over this.

Dixon took a deep breath.

- You did not have control over your airwaves or are you suggesting you did not survey who was using them? How am I going to explain your innocence? Or your guilt? Choose.

Scott wanted to get up, angry, ready to burst but Dixon's gaze dissuaded him to do so. His voice rose.

- What are you looking for? An explanation? Whatever we say will not be good enough for you, Dixon.

- If you have no certitude on the matter, then I will have to frame you both: one for murder and the other as an accomplice. Your organization's activities will be put on hold and your vehicles seized for inspection. Unless…

- Unless what? What do you want?

Dixon smiled a broad smile.

- We had intel telling us you have a very interesting guest at your home. And we know you have been gathering information to use against Marcus Holling with her help. Surrender her to me and I will drop all charges that are filed against International Rescue

John raised his head and frowned.

- I told you, she has nothing to do with this! I'm the only one guilty!

The elder looked at his brother and frowned too.

- I see where this is getting. John, why are you defending her? Why…? She has brought us nothing but trouble.

The space monitor gazed at his brother.

- That's what he wants, Scott. There is… so much more to this…

Dixon pointed John.

- This is not your concern. If you surrender her to me Captain, I will make sure your name is cleared and your organization continues to operate… under new rules and regulations, that is.

John replied hastily.
- We won't… we can't…

Dixon turned to Scott.

- Do you share his thoughts? Surely, as a leader, your words will have more sense.

Scott looked at his brother, then back at Dixon. John was holding onto his beliefs; he knew if Abigail was to go over to the GDF, things would get worse for her. He was holding onto the organization's creed, to save people no matter what. The elder remembered his grandmother's speech a few weeks back, as she told him that bending the rules was sometimes necessary.

- I'll tell you all I know. I'll give you her whereabouts… her communicator address and frequency… then you can do the hell you want, as long as you leave us be.

Dixon smiled and straightened.

- Good. You will first agree to my terms. I need to tour your installations, first. Just to make sure you are not hiding anything. Then you will be given permission to resume your operation. I trust you understand you must keep out of our way and if we ever see you hampering with our mission, we will give no quarter. Is that clear?

John looked at Scott, his eyes supplicating him not to do it. The elder turned away. He had to do it, whatever opposition he would get. Dixon was going around the desk, handing a tablet computer to Scott.

- You will now divulge the coordinates for your famous hidden base. Afterwards, I'll be paying you a visit.

The General pressed a button on his desk; the guards came and grabbed John by the arms. Scott raised his head.

- Wait! You promised to free him…

Dixon raised his finger.

- He will go free once I've assessed that you are telling the truth and not hiding anything. Your brother will remain with us until we are through with this. Agreed?

The elder shot a defying gaze, mumbling "By all means, tear my arms off too if it suits you… ". He inputted the coordinates while his brother was being dragged away in silence. He looked at John as the men were leading him through the door. The space monitor pinched his lips, clearly not adhering to his brother's decision. Scott then rose and gave the tablet back.

- Can I at least speak with my brother now?

Dixon looked at the tablet and began validating the location.

- Yes… you can have an audience with him, but he is staying here. Consider it a token of my good faith.

Scott exited the room and followed the corridor until he reached the incarceration wing. Entering took some time as the jailors had to verify his credits and grant him permission to get to John's cell. His escort remained outside as he sat down near the space monitor.

John was devastated. He looked up at Scott.
- Why? Why now? After all we've been through? After everything that happened? Why did you choose to do this now?

The elder turned around, fixating a point.

- I don't know… the end of the road I guess? Everyone is gone… International Rescue is at a breaking point and we all know she is the one at the center of it. She's dragging us down, I had to do something.

There was a silence. John's voice seemed to have changed.

- Or is it your hubris? Your attitude towards everything. The fact that you cannot accept losing control? Don't lie, it's exactly what happened. Penelope got abducted because her line of work is dangerous. Thunderbird Five's shutdown was nothing I could not have handled myself, had there not been the incident.

Scott gritted his teeth. His brother was right in a way but he would never want to recognize his wrongs.

- That incident was triggered by Chronos. You didn't know that. She hooked Chronos to our main computer; it went crazy and made that insane shockwave. How do you feel about her now?

John answered without hesitation.

- A comms module does not act that way. Something else was lying in wait, and I'm betting my money on an inside job. Dixon is in league with Holling, that I'm sure and he did this in order to blame us.

Scott waved for his brother to lower his voice.

- We can't prove this, John. Even if he is, you think it's wise to oppose him? I'm doing what's best for us and for the organization.

John let out a long sigh.

- Dad would have fought until the end. He had the nerves to do this… I know you're not him… but… think about it.

The elder clenched his fist. He was not as strong-willed as his father, neither experienced enough. He got up.

- That hurts, John. I'm trying to do my best here. It's not easy… and I need all of you to help me. Right now, I'm alone. I've gone along what I thought was going to be the best possible decision.

The space monitor realized the impact of his words. He did not want to start a fight. Instead, he changed the subject.

- How are you going to explain this one to Virgil?

Scott thought for a moment.

- I was hoping I would not have to… He left with her a few days ago. He's supposed to find her a place to stay then come back home. I was hoping Dixon would find her in the open and leave us alone.

- That's devious. You deliberately exposed her…?
- She pushed me. After all that happened, Thunderbird Five shutting down was the last thing we needed. I admit I went a bit overboard but… we need to protect ourselves, John.

The guard came knocking on the door, signaling the occupants that time for the visit was up. Scott got up and headed for the door. John reared in his seat, trying to relax and added right before his brother left.

- Be honest with him otherwise, it will backfire terribly. Virgil is not an idiot and he's the last guy on earth you would want to have as an enemy right now.

Scott nodded as he left. His brother was right, again.
The elder Tracy set out in Thunderbird One. It was almost sundown when he left the GDF headquarters, having spoken to his brother and given all information to the General. Dixon promised to deliver John safely home before midnight in exchange for an inspection of the island. In other words, he wanted to make sure Abigail was nowhere on Tracy Island. Strangely, his radars indicated otherwise. Once Thunderbird Five had reconnected to everyone’s signal, he could still see hers still blinking and, right now, it was flying towards the Pacific along with Virgil's.

Scott contacted Alan inside the space station. He received a full report of the rescue mission Virgil had embarked on with Abigail and had been made aware of the incident. As he was coming along the North American east coast, he could confirm that Thunderbird Two had landed safely and his brother had been brought to the medical ward to treat his injuries. He opened a private link to Brains.

- G…good evening, Scott. Is something w…wrong?

- Brains, I need to ask something of you. Two things actually.

The scientist pushed his glasses upward on his nose.

- What do you require?

First, I want you to make sure Abigail stays put. Her presence on Tracy Island is against my order to see her off. I don't care if it's Virgil's decision or not, but I don't want her running around the island.

- Well, that c…can be achieved, I am sure. Then? You had a second request.

The elder took a deep breath. He knew he was going to have regrets about it in the future but it was, in his opinion, the best course of action.

- Is my brother in bad shape? What is the extent of his wounds?

- Oh, very light, Scott. The heat damaged his suit and he is suffering from minor burns. He'll be up by tomorrow.

- My second request will sound questionable and completely mad but you must promise not to speak of it and to execute it literally.

- Wh… what is it? It really sounds important. I am all ears.

Scott made sure his line was secured and that not even Alan could listen to it. He then issued his command, after a long silence.

- Can you sedate my brother… for a few hours? It's important… don't… question my motives. Just enough so we can go through with this...

Brains seemed unsure. His stutter became worse and his palms were becoming sweaty, he had to wipe them on his jacket.

- Are you s… sure about this, Scott? It's unnecessary…

- Don't ask… please. It's for his own good. Promise me, Brains.
I promise you, Scott. I won't tell anybody. Just… give me a good reason…

We will have to deliver Abigail. We're as good as finished if we don't. John will be framed for murder and International Rescue will be shut down. She was not supposed to be back here. And I know Virgil will not let her leave without a fight.

The scientist looked around and sighed.

I see. I understand, Scott. This will be between you and me.

Thanks.

By the time he closed the communications, he was almost to the Pacific. His hands were shaking. Did his father feel as such when he knew he was doing something wrong? Even to help his kin? He truly hoped he would not have to go through much more of this, otherwise, he would just have to resign. This was beginning to take proportions way beyond what he had expected.

Two

Alan had restored all the main and subsystems. There was no sign of EOS still. He began wondering if the reboot had erased it entirely. After all, she was not part of the initial design of Thunderbird Five.

As he was reviewing some system logs, a deep, leveled voice was heard from behind him.

Greetings, Alan Tracy.

The accent reminded him of an English gentleman with a Southern African accent. He turned around, startled. The voice seemed to come from EOS's mobile camera.

EOS! Boy, you scared me! What's up with this voice?

You are mistaken, I am not that EOS.

Who are you then? A hacker?

The voice laughed.

Of course not. I am not some lowly hacker trying to hijack your installations. This is quite vulgar: I prefer calling myself a "permanent resident" of your installations.

Alan frowned.

That doesn't tell me who you really are. You have a name? Are you some roaming software or virus looking for breeches? I won't let you hack our station!

Tut, tut, tut, young man. Do not jump to such hasty conclusions. My presence is far from unwanted; I was downloaded in your systems.

The astronaut opened the console and began reading the logs up to Thunderbird Five's shutdown.

And when did that happen?

They say that ignorance is bliss… but is it in these circumstances? Might I remind you that once you removed the case containing the Chronos module in Star Alpha, a self-destruct countdown had begun? And none of you actually understood what it was linked to?
- The systems were not wired, but there might have been a device in the case. We did not get time to study it completely.

- That is where you are wrong. There was no device; it began self-destructing because I was finally leaving. It was about time… I have spent too much time longing for freedom.

Alan read through the log; one of the entries looked odd. EOS had come into conflict with something after the frequencies became saturated. Could the real reason behind the shutdown have been this entity's arrival in Thunderbird Five? There was nothing else afterward, simply shutdown messages.

- Tell me then, did Abigail do this?

- Oh, clearly no. She is a genius in her field but far from mine. I have downloaded myself in your station after she made use of the Chronos module, trying to find one of your friend's locations.

- Lady Penelope? So, this is what happened! I hope Scott can forgive her then and bring her back…

- Sad. I am hoping you shall find a safe place for her. After all, she is the only remaining living Keeper and the key to reversing this world's plague.

The astronaut was all ears. The more the man spoke, the more intrigued he became.

- Plague? What plague? Is Holling up to something we don't know?

- Marcus is a crafty individual. He has been setting up this project for years. He will not back up now.

- What else can you tell me?

The voice was silent for a moment. It seemed to be computing something.

- As much as I would like to speak to you alone, I believe this matter will be better discussed in a group. A sole man will never match the strength of a team, let alone your organization's dedication to the cause. Plus, I have found out that your brother, the space monitor, might be quite interested in this story as well. His entries in the black boxes were numerous.

Alan remained silent. He was both intrigued and also reluctant to give more information to the entity.

- Tell me… who are you? You have a name, right?

- A name… I doubt it should be appropriate for me to use my mortal name. Call me Chronos, as it is who I am now and what I will remain forever.

- So, you were programmed by one of the Keepers? You seem to be working even better than EOS… have you evolved?

- Do not be silly, young man, I am far from it. I was a genius, now I am a god.

His last words sounded a bit scary. Alan gulped, thinking "This guy is completely bonkers". Chronos went on.

- During my research, I was able to find a way to "download" a human conscience in a system and give it a permanency that none other had before done. Thus, I exist through the Chronos algorithm, an advanced AI capable of everything, powered by what was once a human mind.
Alan gasped.

- Woah. This. Is. SO. COOL! But it's kinda illegal. Why do you people go that far?

- For science. Because we can. And now, more than ever, you will require my aid should you desire to stop Holling's Olympus project.

The youngest Tracy smiled. The AI asked:

- Is there anything I can accomplish in the meantime? I am eager to begin my work as a god in the mortal world.

Alan rolled his eyes.

- Yeah… well, trace this communication back to where it came from and follow the signal. It's my brother's, we can't afford to lose him.

- I can execute this petty task. Do not worry, mortal. I shall track your brother as long as it is required.

The astronaut sighed. Chronos was going to get on his nerves very quickly.

The light was dimmed low in the room when he woke. He looked around first: he was alone. He had expected at least Abigail to be on his side but there was neither her nor anyone else there. Virgil rose and looked at the time: he had been asleep for about five hours. It was the middle of the night which would mean that everyone had gone to bed. Clean clothes had been laid on a near chair. He dressed up, feeling the skin on his back tighten as he raised his arms. His burns did not hurt that much. He felt terribly groggy, his mouth unnaturally dry, hinting that he might have been given medication. He brought up his medical record and began reading: a narcotic was documented. He remembered not feeling that much pain from the burns, why would Brains put him to sleep then? He took off for the kitchen.

Virgil heard the faint sound of the piano from the living room. He grabbed himself a glass of water and headed towards the music. Scott was sitting down behind the instrument, slowly pressing the ivories. He rose his head as he heard the sound of footsteps coming his way.

Virgil smiled.

- What's on your mind? You play only when you have something troubling you.

Scott did not raise his head. He continued playing, trying to muster the courage to admit his wrongs. His brother replied instead.

- I understand it's hard with all that's happening but… you're doing a great job, Scott. Things will get better. Have faith.

The elder hesitated. He could not look at his brother in the face, not with what he had done. He would never be forgiven, not even by the one person in the whole world who could forgive anything. Never. It was hard to lie; Virgil had an innate ability to pierce people's hearts and make them speak the truth.

- Virgil… I… I made a decision for the good of us all. I hope you can understand.

He resumed playing slowly, pressing the keys silently. The musician looked at him.
Do you want to talk about it?

Another set of footsteps came closer. This time, it was John, his hair disheveled. He also went for the kitchen before meeting his elders in the living room. Scott was afraid John would speak out; he looked at him for a moment. The space monitor remained completely silent. This whole situation made Virgil uncomfortable; it was awkward. Neither of them wanted to speak and both looked as if they needed some comforting. He frowned.

- Is there something happening that I'm not aware of?

John looked at his brother and gave an answer.

- We were blackmailed by the GDF. They threatened us… I could have taken the blame. I was ready to accept the consequences. Scott decided otherwise.

Scott looked at his younger brother and frowned.

- I won't jeopardize your life, your future for the sake of pursuing some crazed megalomaniac. It's not our job. We can't do this or we'll lose everything.

The argument had sparked between the elder and John. It took only a few minutes for Virgil to understand what was really going on and for him to break up the conversation with one decisive roar.

- STOP! What have you done, Scott?

The elder got up, ready to defend his position.

- I did what had to be done a long time ago. I told you not to bring her back here, Virgil. But you did… and now the GDF have taken her.

John sprang too.

- Lies! You SOLD her! To save our hides! We just had to hold on until Lady Penelope would come back before doing anything. She could have broken me out of jail and work out something to frame Holling!

Virgil felt anger rising, his face flushed red. It was a rare sight, and a scary one, when he was about to burst from anger. This was one of these moments where his brothers knew they had to flee. He turned towards Scott.

- What did you do?

He was ready to receive any punishment his younger brother would send his way. He was standing proud, almost claiming he had no regrets. He answered.

- I did what was best to save us… to save you.

- Did you… did you have me drugged on purpose? To prevent me from acting when the GDF would have arrived to take her away?

Scott's face said it all. John got up and caught Virgil's hand as he was lunging to punch his elder right in the face. He tried to wrestle free but John, lacking sheer strength, had good martial arts techniques to keep him under control.

- How COULD you? Why…?
It took a good while to calm Virgil down. It caused such commotion that both Grandma and Brains were woken. Grandma took over, trying her best to console her heartbroken grandson. They sat down on the couch, Virgil waving in between anger and incomprehension.

Alan appeared, innocently, and was startled by the scene unfolding in front of his eyes. He did not know what to say: John was the first to speak.

- What's up, Alan?

- I've just received news from Gordon! He and Parker have secured Penelope and somebody else and they need picking up. It seemed like one hell of a ride they had in Bereznik, but they might have someone to help us with the Holling framing business. Neat, huh?

His excitement was met with silence and a heavy, uneasy feeling. His smile faded. He tried to cheer everyone up one more time.

- Guys… come on! We can't admit defeat now. We just can't… I know I won't and I'll put all my energy, all my efforts towards seeing this through. I owe Abigail big time… We're going to get her back, right?

Grandma looked at Alan.

- You're right, kid. We can't let things like they are now. Scott?

The elder looked at the people gathered around him and sighed.

- I'm sorry. I have done all I thought was the best to keep this show running. I'm inexperienced, cocky, stubborn… I just… I know you won't forgive me for all that I've done so far but… I dunno. How can we win against the GDF? It's David against Goliath in this situation. How can we win?

It was Alan who answered his brother. The youngest, the most hopeful of them.

- With information. We are going to win against this corporation with the strength of our wits and our ability to gather information. And… we will have some help. I'll tell you more when we're all together.

The atmosphere was still heavy when Alan disconnected. Scott looked at John.

- You never told me what you whispered to her… just before she willingly went over to Dixon.

John looked at both his brothers; he had never been so serious.

- I told her we'd save her. And I promised. I don't intend to break this promise, so we'd best get our act together and do something. Starting now.

**One**

A few hours of restless sleep were what Virgil had before setting off to fetch Gordon on the other side of the world. He had tried to keep his mind off his elder brother's recent betrayal. His trust had been broken, the person in whom he confided all these years backstabbed him cruelly in the name of safeguarding their family's heirloom: International Rescue. Saving lives meant so little now that he had lost someone he held so dear, this time he was wondering if he could ever get over it. Abigail was special; she was strong, confident, she enjoyed a lot of the same things he did and, most of all, she had opened her heart to him. Her outer shell was one of a strong and independent woman but, deep inside, she was vulnerable. He would go to the ends of the world to protect her
from harm.

It had been a few very busy days filled with emotions. Scott had not heard of Kayo and was beginning to worry. With the communications restored, he tried to contact her through her commlink. There was no response. It struck him as weird as he tried two more times, with still no answer.

He tried to phone directly to the facility. Maybe Kayo had locked her comms up during her treatment, knowing that Thunderbird five was shut down. He could at least try to get through to her using the communication number he was provided.

A female attendant appeared on the hologram, wearing scrubs identified with the facility's logo.

- Newcastle healthcare facility, how may I help you?
- I would like to speak to Tanusha Kyrano, please.

She typed on the computer. Her face changed as she looked at her screen and then back at Scott.

- One moment please, Sir.

It felt even weirder to be put on hold, the annoying music's volume was a lot too loud. The attendant came back, her face without a smile.

- I'm sorry, Sir. I do not have anyone of that name checked into the facility at the moment. Are you certain she was treated here?
- Yes, I'm sure she was. Did she check out?

He bit his lip. Did Kayo leave and not tell him? It was not her style. The woman seemed uneasy on screen. Scott frowned, making himself a lot more insistent.

- Do I have to spell it out for you? She checked in five days ago.
- Sir… The only Tanusha Kyrano I have on file… is deceased. I'm sorry, Sir. You should contact the immediate family in order to have more news…

He cut her short, almost screaming through the comms.

- WHAT? What happened? Get me to her doctor immediately.

- Sir, the doctor is not in the facility at the moment… Can I get your coordinates and ask him to call you back lat…

He hung up, restraining himself from punching through the desk. Something was very wrong. He wiped his face with his hands, trying to make some sense of this whole situation. John walked up to him, having overheard the entire conversation.

- Sounds like something is amiss there too.

Scott took a deep breath.

- I'm flying there immediately and getting her. I don't care what they say, I want her back here and now!

- No, wait. We can't have you leave now. Let's try hacking inside the facility's database and get
more information.

John called his younger brother.

- Alan, get EOS to make a research in the files of Newcastle healthcare facility where Kayo checked in. We need to know what happened to her.

- What? Did she disappear?

- Something like that. We want to know where she went.

- FAB.

The communication link remained opened as Alan begun his search. A deep voice came from behind him, giving an answer almost instantly.

- Alan, here are the results of your search. This does not bode well. Doctor Hanse is nowhere near a traditional practitioner.

John was alerted by the foreign voice.

- Who's that? Alan? Are you alone up there?

- It's a long story. I was hoping we could all sit down and take it easy beforehand. This guy's been here for a while and he's doing a good job.

- Who is it?

The voice answered by itself.

- I am Chronos. I am space and time. Refer to me as the High One for I will be residing temporarily in your station. Do not be alarmed, mortals, for I am simply a human conscience who ascended to superiority. My knowledge will help you.

- What have you done to EOS?

- The previous residing entity is dormant. Do not worry, she lies inside the systems. For now, as my standing is higher than hers and my power greater, I shall be the one acting in her stead.

John frowned, it was not to his liking. Alan tried to smile at John after the statement from the cringe-worthy entity inhabiting the space station. Chronos went on.

- For now, we shall gather all necessary manpower. Your friend's file has been erased, much of it is missing. But I can provide you with her doctor's pedigree if you desire to judge for yourself.

- What's that going to do to help?

The astronaut began reading aloud.

- That guy has been accused of abducting three young women some years ago. He also was under suspicions of human experimentation but was acquitted of all charges. He then went to work… oh dear.

Scott frowned.

- Employed by Holling military research…
John turned to his elder brother.

- See now. Even without Abigail, you're still in a bind with him. All the more reasons to go through with this.

- I can't just leave her…

- We don't know where she is. If Chronos is right, she might not be in the facility anymore.

Chronos produced a few holographic projections of some files and camera footage he was able to hack from the facility.

- This shot here shows her being brought inside another ward, dating back three days ago. We also have this interesting one showing her exiting the building, followed by a group of men. Her attire is also peculiar… we cannot see very clearly as the angle was not advantageous… Yet here we have proof that your female friend is alive and well.

Scott brought his fist down on the desk.

- Damn it! There is really no end to this! We'll have to find a solution… We can't leave her there.

He sat back down behind his desk, thinking. His mind was blank. There was only anger and anxiety taking over his being. Chronos continued, regardless of Scott's mood, showing more images.

- I am trying to access their trajectory. It seems that they have boarded a vehicle and left. Accessing trajectory… They have made for the airport. It seems there is no surveillance nodes that can easily be accessed. Do you require me to hack the airport's systems?

John intervened.

- No! You've gone far enough. You'll get caught if you keep on like this!

Chronos laughed.

- Unlikely. I have told you before, I am a god. There is no system in this world that can rival with the power of my mind.

- Still, it might be smart not to draw any attention to us. Let's wait until we are all together. I'm sure we'll come up with something.

Scott took off; he had to take some air. His brother let him, knowing that restraining him would only make matters worst. He had to blow off some steam. Things were not improving.

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Thunderbird Two was back on the island. Its occupants hurried to the living room to meet with their friends and family. Virgil remained distant, preferring to keep away from everyone. His brother's recent confession had turned him upside down and shook his confidence. Deep inside, he knew that Scott was trying to do his best for the family but acting against his own brother like this to get to his goal was inconceivable.

Gordon was glad to be back. At first, he was scolded for his behavior before being proclaimed a hero. Grandma provided with food and beverages and rushed everyone to tidy up. Even Zeta was able to take advantage of a well-deserved shower and fresh clothes.

Everyone met in the living room. Gordon summed up his adventure in Bereznik while Parker
smirked and nodded when the young man turned towards him for approbation. Virgil was sitting away from the group, arms crossed over his chest, his mind drifting. He tried to listen to his brother's story but had nothing else in mind than the betrayal his brother played on him.

Zeta came from the kitchen, a drink in hand, and sat with him.

- You don't look like you're enjoying yourself.

He turned to look at her only briefly before redirecting his attention to his brother. His expression was cold.

- I'm not in the mood for a chat, sorry.

He got up, moving away from the living room and went to the railing. The sky had covered up; dark clouds were gathering in the distance. The air was becoming heavy, gorged with humidity. He could tell by the smell of the breeze that the rain would fall in not too long. He went down to the beach and began to walk.

As rain began to fall, he sat down. It didn't matter if he was going to be completely drenched, he was going to stand there and enjoy it. He thought of how things would have unfolded would he have been able to react to Scott's involvement in surrendering Abigail. In every scenario, he would have fought. There was nothing that would have stopped him from going after her and no words powerful enough to stop his brother from giving her up to protecting his family. Virgil felt powerless; for the first time in so long, he did not have the strength to support his siblings. He just sat on the beach, exposing his face to the rain. He loved how soothing it was... and how well it blended with his tears.
Hi everyone!

I want to wish you Happy Holidays! It's been a couple of crazy weeks for me and I was eager to find time to write.

Thanks for sticking with me! Hope you enjoy this one. I find it a bit heavy storywise.

Enjoy!

The story captivated everyone. Gordon's oratory talent was something he only demonstrated when boasting about his accomplishments. Nonetheless, his narrative was colorful and stirred up his audience, making them attentive until the end. Scott was curious about how Gordon managed to escape his adventure alive and concluded he survived only because of Parker. Never would his light headed and frivolous brother have reached the border if he had not received help from a professional, someone who had already encountered hardships in his life. The aquanaut was, after all, a pampered young man.

The elder remembered seeing his mother struggle with him and his siblings when his father was away, trying desperately to instill discipline in that lot of boys. Gordon was the worst. When the news of Lucille's passing came to the family, he sought comfort in material things. And Jeff gave him everything he needed so he could get over his mother's death. But seeing how he managed to pull his escape from Bereznik, Scott knew his brother had grown from the experience. It was going to change him, hopefully, for the best.

Gordon took a sip of water and he sat down near Penelope, taking her hand in his and smiling. Alan had been there, watching his brother narrate his story, in silence, floating in space. He kept working on the computer while the story unfolded. The airwaves were incredibly quiet; the declaration of war had done its damage. Many flights had been canceled; air traffic had been reduced to a minimum. That would also mean that International Rescue might have a hard time getting an authorization to fly in case of an emergency. He hoped nothing was going to pop up while the family was still on edge.

Chronos' holographic projection appeared on the table. He had taken the appearance of a strongly built black man wearing a rune patterned bodysuit with a tippet and high collar. His look would have better fit a comic book character of an Egyptian god; it made him look ridiculous. He began to speak.

- I see you all gathered as expected. I do hope you are sufficiently rested to process the information that I will provide to you.

John was the one who took the lead.

- Listen, Chronos. Things are not going very well... for any of us. Whatever you can provide by means of information, we will gladly listen to. First, you must be aware of the shockwave that destroyed the life support system on the GDF spaceship. What exactly happened?

- This was no shockwave as you intend it, but a rather large EMP wave. Once my algorithm was executed, it began downloading through the link thus "installing" me to your station. You are partly to blame since there was an opened link towards the GDF's systems which was accessed by
one of my slave programs. A few simple code lines, enough to overload electronics and create a powerful magnetic field. Basically, it was a program which acted on its own volition. It overloaded a component from their station and created the wave which also engulfed yours. Your AI tried to fight it; we know how it resulted. Do not worry, she is unarmed and resting in my code.

The space monitor frowned.

- Is there any way they can find out about this? Can they trace it back to us?

Chronos smiled. His stern face made him look even more like a caricature.

- No. It will be impossible to track the origin. They only thing they might trace is your sloppy infiltration in their systems. You are lucky for I have erased your presence and made sure you would not be discovered.

- How nice of you…

- High one. I am being humble while suggesting you this appellation.

- Whatever. Let's cut to the chase now that we know we are all safe. What is it you know that can help us?

He displayed a large multilayered complex on the central table's hologram. It was well detailed. The main building seemed to be made of rough stone and carved exactly like the Acropolis. Adjacent buildings were also using the same type of architecture with a touch of modern technology. It was more a work of art but also seemed to display functionalities which would make it hard to access. The surrounding area was barren, there was no tree or grass anywhere around it. The place looked almost alien.

- This is Olympus. The safe heaven where war doesn't exist.

Gordon intervened.

- Where there are humans, there is war. It's impossible otherwise for such a place to exist.

- There are no humans there anymore. Only perfected individuals, specially enhanced people who work tirelessly, day and night, with little to no regard for their own health and wellbeing.

- What do you mean? Do they conduct experiments on humans there?

Alan pitched in too.

- You spoke of a plague. I'd like to know what Holling is planning to release and where he's going to use it.

Chronos cleared his voice.

- Please, decorum in the assistance. The plague spoken of is not a sickness or rather, it has become the sickness of this world.

John reacted.

- Humans.

- Exactly. The world's resources are at an all-time low. This is why his project targeted vulnerable people of low social status: to save the wealthy and the educated. Sixty percent of a country's
inhabitant consists of people with low income.

Scott was listening, arms crossed. His mood did not improve over time. He was becoming impatient; his only desire was to begin his search for Kayo.

- Get to the point.

Chronos sighed.

- If you want it the crude way: the ultimate goal of Holling's company was to get rid of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable in order to build strong societies. He was given money and asked to provide a solution for the world's increasing amount of people in need. He did; the learning chip was invented. He implanted it on most of his workers, making them prone to erratic behaviors if they omitted their regular intake of Acidosemine.

Scott was unimpressed, expressing his boredom by blowing some air, sighing. Chronos continued.

- There is more. With our help, a veritable arsenal was built. Then, he solicited the help of an external resource: Frederic Hanse. This man was both despicable and immoral, not even bearing a single considerate thought about the impact of his actions. He began enhancing humans at large scale outside of Olympus as well.

It was Zeta who intervened this time.

- I always thought Hanse was a dirty old man… tell me he does not do anything else than lab work…

- I prefer not detailing Hanse's criminal file lest you wish to spend the evening listening to legalities? Also, I doubt you would be ready to hear how gruesomely disfigured and dismembered his victims were found.

John's eyes widened. His curiosity was not satisfied.

- Why enhance humans? To what end?

- Have you ever heard of gene editing? It is a fine way to rid ourselves of many diseases, change our resistance to our environment, even extend our life. Combined with the nanites, you have a perfected human being capable of exceeding a normal human's capacities. You can also enhance intellect, physical features like strength and agility, appearance and so on. For more detailed information, I would refer you to Cradle Alpha's black boxes as it is far from my field of expertise.

Alan stopped all he was doing and diverted his attention to the conversation. To him, it sounded like one of his video games.

- Basically, he's building himself an army of perfected humans, am I right?

Chronos smiled.

- It is exactly his desire. However, he did slow his ambitions when the Council began stuffing its nose in his business.

Alan answered.

- I guess he's got a political agenda, too.

- He does. Using the most unlikely human beings, implanting them with a learning chip and editing
their genetic code, he was able to turn these people into veritable fighting machines. And with the use of Acidosemine, he does not need to make amends. These people are completely unaware of what is happening to them. If Olympus has remained manned ever since he already has a lot of them at his disposition.

- I'm still not convinced to what is driving him to achieve such a thing. I mean, why does he need a fighting force?

- The need for private military services is on the rise. About fifty years ago, you would name these people "mercenaries". Now, they are an organized band of trained soldiers answering to a businessman. Wars are waged for money now, and if Holling can put his troops to work knowing they require only basic needs, then he has created a very profitable army. Those people will be fed, geared and cared for but they will not be aware of what is happening to them, ignoring leisure, pay and even their own families. The only thing they are trained to do is kill and survive. One cannot have better warriors than drugged, mindless, genetically altered humans.

Scott seemed intrigued by this statement from the entity. His annoyance was visible as he was frowning, his teeth clenched.

- What do you mean, mindless? Is this what happened to Kayo?

- You mean your female friend? Most likely. And if her genetic strain is close to ours, this means she has been selected to become even more. They will make her a God, just like us.

The elder's voice rose.

- Shut up with your fucking nonsense! You're not a god, just some stupid arrogant asshole who thinks he's superior to everyone else. If there is anything you are hiding from us, I swear, you're going to regret ever existing!

Chronos' only response was to smile, arrogantly. Grandma intervened.

- Scott Tracy, stop screaming and mind your tongue! We're all worried about Kayo but we cannot rush out like this in hopes to get to her!

As the old woman was trying to instill some discipline, Scott walked passed her, getting to Thunderbird One's chute.

- Just try to stop me!

His brother looked at him, knowing all too well none of them could reason with him, let alone stand up to him. Only Virgil could have grabbed his brother and slapped some sense back on him.

As the elder took place in his seat and prepared for lift-off, his commands were locked. He raged, punching the console.

- You fucking dick, Chronos! Let me at it! You have no right to stop me from acting in my own home! I'll have you formatted!

There was a silence. Alan's voice broke it, trembling. He appeared in Scott's hub, clenching his fists, standing up to his elder.

- Bro… I'm the one who canceled your launch. Be reasonable. You can't rush out now even knowing where she is. It's dangerous and stupid. We all want Kayo back, and we all are worried SICK about her. Just, don't do this… You're the one who's always telling us to calm down and
The youngest's eyes were filled with tears. He was afraid to do this, afraid to stand up to the one who was supposed to be the fatherly figure. Scott was about to burst; upon noticing his brother's eyes, he took a deep breath. It was stupid, reckless. He exited the cockpit and went back up to the living room. Everyone was still waiting but no one stared at him when he came back. They understood his actions, his sudden need to rush out to get to the woman he loved, his anger, his distress for each of them had experienced it at least once in the past few days.

They remained together for a while, in complete silence, trying to find the courage to say something. John got up.

- We're all shaken by the recent events and it's useless to persist on the matter. You guys get some rest. It's been raining cats and dogs outside and Virgil is still not back. I'm going after him.

Penelope nodded.

- I will be retiring now and continue gathering intel. There is still so much we can uncover from the director's files. Zeta, I would require your help, please.

She got up and left the room, accompanied by Gordon close behind. The Slavic agent followed the aristocrat. Parker decided to hang around the kitchen with Grandma, leaving Scott alone to think, sitting down behind his father's desk.

- Only one thought invaded his mind: "Father, what would you have done next?".

The rain made the sea restless. The waves crashed on the rocks surrounding the island, washing on the beach aggressively. The falling drops were now cold, pummelling down from the darkened sky. John knew his brother would remain outside even though the elements were raging. The second eldest was stubborn, maybe not as much as his elder, yet they all inherited this trait from their father. He picked up two raincoats and a towel before dressing up and going outside.

There was little place for taking refuge: the tide had risen, engulfing most of the beach as the waves were claiming the rest. It was unlikely that Virgil was there and, knowing him well, he would not put himself in danger just because he was angry. Instead, another place seemed more likely to have been his destination. John climbed a flight of stairs chiseled into the mountain itself. Ivy and moss covered the ground, making it slippery as it was wet; he walked carefully not to slip and fall. Right at the top was a natural crater, large enough to house a Japanese garden complete with a red wooden canopy furnished with Adirondack chairs. It was a quiet place, even with the pouring rain, it completely inhibited the noise from the restless sea. As he thought, he could see Virgil sitting under the structure, shielded from the rain.

John approached the canopy, his footstep deafened by the ambient sound of falling rain. Only when he stepped onto the wooden floor did he hear his brother.

- I want to be alone. Just… go away.

He stopped. It was not like him to impose himself but rather to be patient and wait for the right moment. After a few minutes of being immobile in the rain, Virgil let out a loud sigh.

- You win, John. Come and sit down with me.

The space monitor smiled shyly while approaching. He took out the towel and the coat from under his and rested both on his brother's lap before sitting down in front of him.
- You'll need this. You're soaking wet and likely to catch a cold.

- Nice of you to worry but I'm fine, really.

Both of them remained silent, listening to the falling rain. Virgil broke the silence, his voice weaker than usual.

- Why John? Tell me…

It took a few seconds for John to answer. He wanted to use choice words.

- Scott acted in favor of our family and our organization. His method was disgusting and cowardly… yet it was probably the best way to go.

Virgil clenched his fist, breathing deeply.

- I can't… I can't forgive him. Having me drugged… and selling her off. Why John? How can he have a clear conscience after giving her back to her torturers? He didn't understand a thing about her…

- I know. I saw them, too… the recordings, I mean. Some were so creepy and scary they kept me up at night. But… she's strong, Virgil. We'll save her.

The second eldest turned away, not wanting his brother to witness the tears building up in his eyes.

- We can't… It's impossible to get her back now with what's coming to her…

John did not know what to say to his brother. Being hopeful was not realistic, and he hated that. He had to have a firm grasp over matters and approach them in the most pragmatic way possible.

- Virg, we can still try. We have Penelope back now, I'm sure she'll come up with something. She has good leads, we can rely on her.

The musician rested his head backward. It was not at all like him to be like this, defeated and depressive. He did not utter a single word. John went on.

- It's not over yet. We'll have to question Chronos about the awakening and all that it implies. We might have overlooked something.

- They'll use her to make those soldiers. You saw it… she is the key to all their research. What if they keep her in stasis again? I can't… I can't stomach her being strapped down and bled dry for the sole purpose of Holling's greed.

There was a silence. The sky lightened and the rainfall slowed. John looked at the path.

- We should go back now. How about we work with Penelope and Zeta to find more about what's going to happen? I know we are all shaken by the recent events after what happened to all of us, but we have to keep it together. Please, Virg. You're the one always cheering us up, we need you now, more than ever.

Virgil turned towards his brother, wiping his face with the towel before raising his eyes to meet his.

- I can't. And I won't. I'll help Penelope and try to find a solution but don't expect me to be all smiles. I'm angry, sad, muddled… I don't know what to think anymore. So please, just don't rush me. I know we'll work our way through this shitstorm but it won't happen overnight.
John patted his brother on the shoulder, smiling comprehensively.

- I'll tell the boys to give you space. Scott mostly. Gordon will behave considering Penelope is here and Alan is up in Thunderbird Five. I'll stay here for the time being to make sure you guys are better.

Virgil smiled a little. He did not have the strength to do otherwise. The space monitor got up and left, leaving his brother alone in the gazebo. There was still a lot to do to pick up the pieces of his family and make them stick together again.

The top floor of the Grand Plaza Hotel was looking lively. It was a terrace, available for rent for celebrations by posh people of London. Tonight, it was a private party hosted by Marcus Holling, comprising of a group of doctors, assistants and military personnel from various organizations, all linked to the Olympus project. This was a party where Georges Henry Phelps was neither invited nor welcomed but his duty was to investigate and this was the best place to begin. His only lead about the event had been when he eavesdropped on a conversation between two bureaucrats. Most of the details came out and it was easy for him to add the missing information. The lack of invitation clearly meant he had stumbled upon an event worth looking into.

Upon entering the lobby, something struck him as odd: the lack of metal detectors at the entrance. Either the management was confident or they had other means of scanning for unwanted arms. This was becoming interesting. He began recording as soon as he set foot in the building. Dressed up in a black suit with a bow tie, hair gelled and combed almost too chic for the evening, he made his way through the crowd towards the bar. He did not come without a few interesting gadgets: camera in his bow tie, tear gas cuff links, a miniature gauntlet computer, easily accessible through the clothing if need be. Of course, his trusty composite 9mm was tucked into his pants in his back, if anything was to go awry.

As he reached the top floor, he was greeted by a hostess dressed in a tight black velvet dress. She was holding a tray with glasses filled with champagne. He politely refused before going forward through the crowd. The bar was an appropriate place to lay low; he began scrutinizing the entire assistance from there. The only faces he recognized to be in command were Laura Baker, Colonel Dixon and a few key individuals of the administrative personnel.

It did not take long for people to notice his presence. Lieutenant Colonel Baker was the first person to approach him.

- Director Phelps, what a pleasure to see you here.

- Pleasure as always Lieutenant Colonel. I trust you are here on behalf of Colonel Casey?

Laura Baker signaled the barmaid for a gin tonic. She sat down near the director.

- Actually, I received an invitation. I'm usually following the Colonel in these events but this is the first time I get one addressed to me for a private command party. What about you? I have heard that Dixon wants to do some changes to the department of secret services…

- Yes. My guess is he will be giving me my leave soon.

- But why? You have always been efficient, and the investigations conducted under you were the most successful. I doubt Dixon ignores that.

- He doesn't. This is why he wants to get rid of me. Also, because I kept investigating Marcus Holling for a while after the case was settled in court. Yet, I am curious to see which faces will
The barmaid served Baker's drink on a cardboard coaster picturing a symbol he could not recognize. She took a sip while he went on.

- Are you aware of the danger of being here at least?

- Danger? What danger? This is a social gathering. Plus, we have top of the line security measures. Metal detectors and scanners are obsolete compared to it. Nobody could sneak a weapon in here without being noticed.

He smiled.

- You are very confident about these measures.

- Yes. It will be what the GDF will be using next. Pity you could not attend the conference this morning. High command will be settling the conflict quickly and without massive losses.

- What about it? What are there amazing new gadgets worthy of the GDF's attention?

She tried to contain her gasping face.

- You do not know? If not then… I'm sorry, it's classified.

He dropped the interrogation, knowing all too well she would not give anything away. Laura Baker was able to keep a lot of secrets when required. He looked around at the audience again. She asked:

- Are you looking for someone in particular?

- Just looking around. Do you know the reason behind this gathering?

- Let's just say it's a long-time reunion. Mister Holling will make announcements soon concerning his implication in the war project. His solutions are top of the line advancements. He bragged about the fact that they were so advanced, the Thunderbirds would pale in comparison.

Phelps smiled.

- A lot of people said that. Turns out they end up being saved by those same ships. What makes you think this will be any different?

She finished her glass and asked for another one. Phelps thought it might be a good idea to keep her talking, as the more alcohol she would ingest, the more talkative she might become. It was a guess he wanted to try. She answered after saluting a guest with a nod.

- I cannot tell you more, Director. All will be known in due time, I'm afraid. So many things are happening at the same time. It would be wiser to wait and see.

Such evasive answers angered him, even more from a lower ranked officer. He kept his composure, not betraying his current state of mind. He asked boldly.

- Do you know about project Olympus, lieutenant?

- A little. Why?

- That little is shading the truth. All you see is the tip of the iceberg. You do know that a lot of
things are happening that you don't know about?

There was something in her eyes that changed. She looked at the guests, grabbing her new drink and said, promptly.

- It's always the case. Now, please, if you'll excuse me, I will go back towards the guests.

She left without looking back. When Phelps turned around, he was greeted by the sight of two bodyguards heading towards him through the crowd. They did not resemble any of the men under his jurisdiction; he decided it was a good time to leave and not create a fuss. Luckily, the elevator was already on the top floor. It did not take him long to get in and punch the first-floor button. The door closed; the men were not in sight.

The elevator went to a stop upon reaching the 15th floor. It took a few seconds before it began moving anew, back towards the top. At first, he wondered if it was the bodyguards' doing, hoping to get their hands on him but, as it stopped on the 18th floor, he noticed it was not the case.

He exited in a very cozy room: this floor was one of the restricted ones, requiring a specific key card to access. It was a lounge, decorated in heavy tapestries and vintage furniture, in deep burnt oranges and beige tints. Portraits of the various English kings and queens hung on the wall aside Rembrandt and Rubens, the trimmings on the wall were painted gold to complete the lavish Rococo style. There was nobody around.

He walked into the room, wondering what was happening until he heard a familiar voice.

- My dear director! And there I thought such parties were of little interest to you. To what do I owe the pleasure?

Marcus Holling walked into the vast room wearing a dressing gown, holding a bottle of whiskey. The director held his head high, trying to hide the fact that he was running away seconds before.

- A simple visit, nothing much. You know you cannot hide anything from me.

Holling walked towards a small bar. He poured himself a glass.

- Why would I? If I may, I know you are desperate to try to stop me. Unfortunately for you, it is already too late, my friend. Right now, all you can do is resign. Olympus is now a legitimate project, accepted by the Council.

Phelps frowned.

- Right until they understand what is really happening there, you may act as you please. That will be sooner than you expect.

- Oh, you mean about the experiments? They know. Either they turned a blind eye to it or inevitably accepted that it was the future of mankind.

- You're sick in the head, Holling!

Holling laughed and downed his glass in one gulp.

- The Council fears Bereznik. They fear their military power, their research on alien diseases… This was an easy win for me.

- What diseases? There was nothing of the sort in the reports… Don't tell me…
Phelps paled.

- You are making these up… Are you creating the fright yourself?

He shrugged.

- War has never been simple, director. But there is something that will not change: fear. Campaigning on fear always gives the best results. I won, Phelps. Give up.

The director's mood suddenly shifted. He could not contain his anger.

- I knew it! I knew you were playing us all along! And now, you're going to get rid of me? That is so cliché.

- No. I think I will make an example of you. Yes… that's a great idea. An example of what it costs to try to cross me.

Phelps drew his pistol and shot. A weird blurry ripple caught the bullet out of thin air; it dropped on the floor as if it had been crushed. He fired three other rounds. Holling smiled as he heard the detonations. The weapon was pulled out of the director's hand. A feminine silhouette wearing a red suit appeared in front of him, grabbing him by the neck. She was a lot swifter than him and wearing some kind of exoskeleton that made it easy for her to lift him from the ground. The billionaire turned around and said, before leaving:

- Get rid of him, Artemis. Try not to make a mess. I have important guests coming over tomorrow.

The last thing Phelps saw was the empty eyes of the woman through her visor as she was choking him to death.

The four walls of his room were like a prison. He did not know what to do and letting go of his rage would not help in any way. Scott paced around. He was anxious and worried, unable to make up his mind about what to do next. Questioning Mei about Kayo's whereabouts might be a start.

Sitting down on his bed, he called Doctor Chang. She picked up.

- Doctor Chang here.

- Mei, it's Scott. I have to speak to you.

Her voice was sweet. She sounded unaware of what had befallen the Tracys up until now.

- How may I help, Scott? Is something wrong?

His voice changed. He was getting more aggressive.

- Where is Kayo?

- She should be back at your place by now… why?

- Obviously, she's not! Why'd you think I'd call you otherwise? It's time you told me what is happening.

- Scott, calm down. She was heading for Newcastle last time I checked. Did you try to get in touch with them?
- Yes. And they told me she was dead. Our intel showed that she was taken to the airport.

Mei frowned. She did not understand what was happening. She made herself reassuring.

- Let me get in touch with the facility, Scott. I'll keep you informed about what I find. Meanwhile, don't worry. I'm certain there is a rational explanation for this. She was probably escorted back. I will call once I've found out more.

As soon as the conversation came to an end, the elder rushed towards the living room but bumped into Lady Penelope. She was as startled as he was, taking a minute to catch their breath. She wanted to address him but he walked around her. She turned towards him.

- Scott, where are you going?

He stopped to answer.

- Newcastle, you got a problem with that?

- Still rushing, I see. Other than the surveillance cameras, do you have a lead?

He did not answer. She crossed her arms.

- You clearly know better than to stir up trouble, don't you?

- I can't remain here and do nothing! I have to question these people. There is clearly something going on there…

- And I might have an idea of what. Will you take your time and listen?

Her tone of voice was stern and grave. Whenever Lady Penelope looked at someone as she was now, it did not bode well. There was something amiss. He piped down, taking a deep breath.

- Yes… yes, I will listen…

- Good. First, I need to have access to Tracy Industries' financial records of the last seven years.

He frowned.

- What does it have to do with Kayo?

- Don't interrupt, please. While doing my research, prior to my surprise visit to Bereznik, I uncovered some very interesting information. A list of names, contributors to various projects of Holling. Your father's name was on that list. Did he ever tell you about his investments?

- Not to my knowledge. When did that occur?

- About five years ago. It was a rather sizeable sum, this is why I am asking.

- Why would my father have anything to do with Marcus Holling? I doubt it, surely someone else has donated the money and used his name. Are you sure it is not the Hood's doing?

- This is what I want to find out with your help.

He nodded and went towards the living room. To connect to the company's server, he had to go through the highest level of biometric security. Scott's access was the same as his father's, full access, so authentication to the server took a good five minutes. Once he was in, all the various
reports were accessible. He searched and found the entry Penelope had spoken of. He could not believe it. To make sure it was genuine, he accessed check's RF imprint, the signature, the biometric security used to access the money through the bank and the name of the recipient. It turned out to be Holling Military.

- What is the meaning of this? I thought father stopped backing military projects years ago! He was concentrating on International Rescue! Why? This has to be a fraud!

Penelope looked at the screen.

- Through donations, he can hope to save on taxes. Since International Rescue is a private project, he might have realized his investments were becoming a burden, this is why he decided to help back public projects through which he would receive a tax exemption. And that is a very large sum of money, which could have given him an even greater tax break.

- But… I don't get it. Why didn't he speak to us about this?

- He certainly did not plan on disappearing out of the blue. Of course, it was something he might have wanted to consider: businessmen are a choice target for crooks like the Hood.

A thought struck Scott's mind. He turned towards Penelope, worried.

- You think… they might have taken Kayo hostage?

- We cannot exclude any possibility. Right now, time is not on our side. We have to find out what Olympus will do once it is fully active. With the war out there, one might think that it will be used as some kind of base of operation. Those are only hypothesis but maybe she is being taken there.

The elder grabbed his head between his hands.

- What do we do now?

- You don't rush to Newcastle, that is the first thing. Then, you might want to help me check on the other reports I obtained of Holling's trial. There is definitely information in this file that we overlooked. Calm down, if they intend on using her as leverage, they will not harm her.

He nodded and logged off, following Lady Penelope to her room where she and Zeta had set up tables with computers. Gordon was sitting on the bed, reading on a tablet computer. He smirked.

- Gordo, when was the last time I saw you so studious?

The aquanaut rose his head.

- Wh… What? Oh, hum… Hey, Scott! I'm lending a hand here. Don't bother me.

Zeta smiled and replied in a sarcastic tone:

- In between two episodes of Buddy Pendergast's adventures, he did read two lines.

This brought a smile on Scott's face. It felt good to smile, to have hope. His short interlude was interrupted by a phone call. It was Doctor Chang.

- Scott, you were right. Something is wrong. I just logged into Newcastle and could not find her medical file. I swear I sent her there to have the best of care.

This time, she was calling using her computer. Scott could see the background and hear loud
banging. Construction workers were working as she moved her computer away from the noise. He caught a glimpse of a logo in the back and the name "Pacific Islands Medical Association". He went on.

- Whatever happened in that place I can't just ignore! Why did you send her there? Did you know this facility?

- I did! It was not the first time I have sent a patient there. They receive the best of care each time. I don't understand…

- Find her! Or I'm going there myself and checking on the place. And I'm telling you, this won't end well.

- Calm down, Scott. I will make it there first light tomorrow and speak directly to the doctor in charge. Don't misunderstand, I don't want you to create a mess of things but I can handle this, trust me…

Zeta was watching the feed. She seemed to have noticed the logo too. She cut Mei in mid-sentence.

- What's the name of that Doctor? Maybe we can get through to him quicker.

Mei was a bit irritated and it showed. Her voice was louder.

- Do not interfere. I can handle this. Trust me! This is all I am asking! I will speak to you soon.

She disconnected. Zeta had revered to her computer. She typed in a search and results came in; she said:

- She knows something.

The elder turned towards the Slavic agent.

- What?

- That logo. The acronym PIMA, it's part of Medira Pharmaceutical Research sister company to Holling Pharmaceutical.

He turned towards Penelope who was watching Zeta's screen.

- Is this true?

The aristocrat answered, worried.

- Yes. And the man responsible for that division is Frederic Hanse.

Zeta turned towards Scott.

- Chronos was right. Your friend might have been made a god.
Hello dear readers!

It has been a long while since my last posting. Thank you very much for bearing with me all this time.

Here is Chapter 38.

Happy reading!

Darkness…

She felt as if she was floating in the abyss.

It was so cold.

A distant voice echoed through the void. She could not make out who it was or what it said.

The voice grew louder and louder.

Until it was a scream.

Bright spotlights shone from the ceiling. She was confused. A skinny young man was standing near her. He was typing on his computer.

- Explain your feelings, how are you now?

She did not respond. She felt aches in her arms and legs, her muscles contracting as she came to. Her memory was foggy. She could, however, recall the most recent event. She knew she had killed a man but did not remember his face. She remembered her altercation with another woman, only blurry colors remained in her mind.

The young man was still typing. She could make out his ethnicity: Hispanic. His hair was combed on the side, held down by an exaggerated amount of gel. The pungent scent of cleaner, electricity, and ozone filled the air. She could distinguish sandalwood and lavender, most probably from the young man's cologne, through the already overwhelming scents of her surroundings. She was trying to understand what was happening when he approached her with a flashlight in hand. He proceeded to check on her eyes.

- You seemed to have regained your senses sufficiently. No dilatation from the pupils… No sign of scars or scar tissue. No cataract.

A half-empty IV bag hung from a pole next to her. She reflexively touched her neck: there was no needle in her skin. The drug had been administered already. Her whole body felt light. All this time, she did not even realize that she was free and could flee at any moment. Something was keeping her from panicking. A tightly woven bandage compressed her head.

She sat slowly, grabbing the side of the examination table. She noticed she was wearing a hospital gown again.
- How long have I been here?

He paused, thinking.

- … it's been two whole days.

She tried to picture Scott for a minute but could only recall blurry images of events. No feelings came up from it. The young man spoke in a low voice but she could hear it very clearly.

- This case is a success. We achieved our goal with only mild modifications.

Her hands were not shaking even though she felt like they should. She sensed something weird crawling under her skin as if a hundred worms were working their way up and down her arms and legs.

The scientist brought some type of scanner and began hovering it over her. She could see something glowing underneath her skin. She felt anger suddenly rising; her mind was forcing itself to rebel against the present situation. A beeping sound was heard from the man's computer.

- Calm down now. Try focusing. Rationalize your feelings.

He went back and typed. She felt awfully cold from the inside all of a sudden. She could express no feelings other than anger. She looked at her hands.

- What have you done to me?

The man sighed.

- I've done all I could for you not to become a monster. You have subdermal receptors on your whole body. We cured your scars with a compound solution to suppress the need for blood modifications. Underneath that bandage on your head is another of our projects.

She moved her hands to her head. He reacted swiftly

- Don't touch it! The electrodes are plugged right into your brain. You could trigger a seizure. Once the learning chip inside of you has finished its work, they will be extracted.

She had trouble processing all of this. Why her? Did Mei do this? She could not feel distress, abandonment or betrayal. All she could feel was more anger.

- Why?

He went back near her and gently took her hand, stroking it to calm her, lowering his voice.

- I'm sorry. I had to. None of the scientists here can leave. We are slaves to Hanse and Holling, bound by a contract and with a Damocles' sword over our heads. If we don't produce results, we die. If we try to resign, we die. If we flee, we die. I miss my family. And seeing what they have in store for you, I doubt you'll ever see your loved ones again either.

She felt his touch lightly. Her hands were still numb. She held his hand.

- Do you think you could help me escape?

His eyes widened in fear.

- I can't… You see, I'm in a position where people will come looking for me quickly if I'm
missing. The only thing I can do is try to buy you some time before they butcher you as they did to the previous Keepers.

She remembered the story but did not have all the details. She wanted that information.

- I know they were involved in an accident. Tell me more.

The young man let his hand slide slowly from hers.

- The explosion was no accident. It was triggered to force them to wear the prosthetics: to prove to the investors the product was safe. Yet, they were ridiculously expensive to manufacture so they removed them from the project. Research on subdermal receptors in the past years led to amazing discoveries, twice more efficiency as before. There is no need for mechanical limbs other than injury replacement.

She felt heat returning to her hands. Her face flushed red as if blood rushed suddenly. She felt the need to hurt him.

- I'm not the kind to cage. You won't have me as your lab rat for very long.

The young man bit his lip. He was backing up towards his computer slowly.

- Wait! We are almost done in rewiring your brain connections to the receptors. A few more hours and you will be fully operational…

In a flash, she got up and grabbed him by the throat. She was surprised to see how quick and fluid her reflexes had become. Something had changed, it was more than obvious. The young man tried to pry himself out of her grip.

- Please... Stop! Let me go... Don't kill me…

His voice was fading slowly. She let go of his neck, as he gasped for air, coughing.

- Tell me how to get out of here. I'll have no trouble snapping your bones to make you talk.

- I can't. You see…

His eyes met with a camera up on the wall. She understood immediately, reaching for it at a quick pace. The object was torn from its seat, leaving only wires hanging from the wall. Kayo turned back to the man.

- Now, tell me.

Still massaging his neck, he grabbed hold of the table to get up.

- If you let me finish the procedure, you will have a basic cerebrum computer. This will grant you access to any network on the planet, provide you can connect to a satellite. You'll be able to shut yourself off from Olympus and never be found. I know a place where you could be free.

- My home is safe enough. I have friends looking for me. One single life sign on the grid and you can be sure they will be swarming this place.

- Hold on. Olympus is well guarded. You can't hope to land here without being shot down. What's more, they have Athena online now. That means the whole defense grid, the weapons, and the forcefields will be up and running again. Your best chance is to get out of the perimeter underwater. But…
Loud footsteps were heard, then banging on the lab's large metal door. The scientist gestured to Kayo to get back on the table. She complied; there was a need to assess the situation beforehand. Armed men made their way inside the room. Soldiers invaded the place, pointing her with automatic weapons. She did not move an inch. She understood from the conversation that the young man's name was Alexandar Velasquez. The soldiers examined every inch of the room. One of them took the camera; Alexandar explained the altercation being a "side effect" of the experiment. The details of the incident were logged by an officer before wrapping up and leaving. None of them approached the table where Kayo lay yet she clearly noticed their peculiar walking patterns. They were moving identically to the drugged men she had encountered in the hidden camp in England: steady and rhythmically.

The door closed, leaving Alexandar alone with her again. He approached her and began whispering.

- There is a guard at the door now. Be careful.

She answered him, whispering as well.

- What were you going to say? But…?

- But every passage from the forcefield must be authorized. It's a magnetic barrier that stops people from getting in and out. You'll fry yourself if you try to swim through.

- There really is no way out?

- Either you play the part and wait for an occasion to bail when on assignment or you behave until the reveal, then find a way to sneak out undetected. It's going to be hard work in both scenarios. If you put your helmet on or even your flight module, they will find you. You'll have to cover your tracks by hacking into the system.

She was looking for more solutions. A hundred violent solutions to her problem came up in her mind; something was very wrong with her thoughts. She had an idea.

- What about Athena? She can surely help me escape?

The young man gulped loudly.

- You… really want to try that? She's under Zeus' influence now. I doubt she can ever be her old self again. They have full control over her functions. She's already wired to the defense grid…

Nothing he said made sense. She would have to see for herself. Right now, the smartest move was to trust Alexandar, no matter how reluctant she felt to do so.

- Finish the procedure. Let's see where this leads me. Make sure I can be fully aware of what's happening. I'll find a way out once they let me roam the place.

Alexandar nodded.

- I'll do my best. But… on one condition. Can you bring me with you once you leave?

- Maybe… I can't guarantee anything.

- I believe in you.

He attached the electrodes to a bundle of wires, then plugged the IV back into Kayo's neck. She
felt herself drift off into a dreamless slumber, promising silently that those responsible for her fate
would pay dearly.

The round office, circled by large clear windows, was illuminated by the rising sun. Attendants
were busy cleaning up the entire surfaces to be dust-free. All their movements were precise, quick
and effective. There was not a single sound to be heard other than the fluffing of dusters, the silent
ion vacuums and the squeaking of sweepers on the glass. Then came the coffee and the pastries,
served by the same personnel in the same mechanical way.

And then came Marcus Holling. He sat down in a large armchair, oriented towards the large
complex he had named Olympus, and proceeded to sip his coffee. His contemplation lasted a long
time: this place had brought him success at his prime but was also what had doomed him to fail.
This time it would be different. This time, he had more powerful allies and more experience.

He pressed a button on his armrest: a holo screen appeared on the window. He began reading,
savoring his breakfast. A call came in, disrupting his quiet routine.

- Holling, I see you are enjoying yourself thoroughly.

Holling smiled. A life-size image of the general appeared on the screen.

- Dixon! What a pleasant surprise! You are rather early. Skipping on sleep, I suppose?

Dixon was not finding this amusing.

- Cut the useless chit chat. The matters at hand are numerous and we have little time to discuss
them all. How fares the preparation for the awakening?

- Pretty well I must say. We have secured Athena, a new Artemis and, pretty soon, a new Chronos.
We will only be missing our Hermes.

Dixon frowned,

- Why do you insist on collecting more? Where is the necessity? And, pray tell, how are you going
to achieve having two more Keepers ready in so little time?

- All in due time. You see, Olympus was designed as four distinct systems, all intertwined. Having
only one keeper means we will only get the chance to have one-fourth of these activated. Placing
an AI or any other type of automation in their stead is pointless, thus we require their ability to
assess danger and work in stressful circumstances. Computers and robots are too straightforward
but also are bound to the laws of robotics. Humans, however, rely on instinct: they will stop at
nothing to kill their own to survive. They only need to be minor enhancements to correct their
human flaws.

- You make it sound so arrogant. Survival instinct is exactly what made your last brood turn on
you. They cannot be blamed for that.

Holling rested his cup.

- The previous Keepers had too much freedom. We are remedying that as we speak. This new batch
will be on a tight leash.

- Let us hope you do not make a fool of yourself this time. The Council has approved the operation
in Bereznik. Are your men in position?
- The troops are ready to launch the first strike when you give the word. This war will be a very lucrative one.

- As long as everyone plays their part, I do not mind going on with this. Remember that we cannot let this escalate into another Global Conflict.

- All we need is enough casualties, nothing more. Peace has lasted long enough; the world has been quiet for too long. When Bereznik is hit at full strength, their allies will join in and the world as we know it will change. The need for weapons will flourish and the stock will increase.

Dixon nodded. He almost had a smile on his lips. Holling clapped his hands: an attendant came and removed the tableware. The businessman proceeded in his discussion.

- Will you be attending the ceremony, General? I have high hopes of reuniting some of the richest investors in this world. You could take the opportunity to boost your social credits.

- There are already enough tasks to keep me awake at night, Marcus. Do not forget who does most of the work while you play the socialite.

Holling took a deep breath. He was offended but kept a smiling face.

- And do not forget who paid for your face, General. All those rejuvenation treatments, the reversal of your radiation poisoning and the numerous mandatory plastic surgery after your pathetic accident. I have gotten you back on your feet only for you to take petty revenge on the GDF. You owe me more than I owe you, Dixon. You are still alive because of me. Erasing that pathetic moment of your career was no easy feat. Bear that in mind.

Dixon did not reply. He simply nodded and signed off.

Holling dismissed the screens. He rose and approached the windows to gaze at his life's work. Very soon, all would come to fruition. Soon, the face of the world would change.

"Chronos was right. Your friend might have been made a God".

Scott looked at Zeta. His hands were shaking. Images of Kayo's limbs being butchered and replaced by horrifying looking prosthetics crossed his mind. He sat down as his legs almost gave out from under him.

How could this happen? Why would Mei hand her off willingly to these people?

Zeta remained of ice. She ignored Scott's attitude and decided to leave the room instead of facing him. She knew she would not get on his good side if she advanced any of her theories.

The elder was determined to get some answers. Ignoring Penelope's advice, he called Doctor Chang repeatedly. No answer. It was hard for him to contain himself; he was shocked and panicked and almost brought to tears.

- It's not going to end well, I assure you. I'll beat the answers out of her, I swear!

Penelope took a deep breath.

- Do not rush into trouble, Scott. You know very well an open confrontation will not only fail to provide answers but also completely alienate our efforts in understanding the situation. Whatever you do, think about it. The whole world is in crisis, we shall not yield to panic. As the leader of
International Rescue, you have the responsibility to remain calm and to give your orders logically. You can't abandon yourself to a fit of rage every time somebody comes to harm. Kayo can take care of herself; you know that.

She was calm. Her words did not reach him in any way even though he knew she was right. The past years were taxing: he was not fully ready to accept the full burden of a big organization such as International Rescue even if it felt easygoing at first. The more he dove deep into the politics, the more aggressive he became. All the financial, legal and administrative parts of the job were not for a man of action like him. But that had to be resolved some other time. Right now, the urgency was to find out where Kayo was and to try to figure what Holling was up to.

Scott massaged his fists nervously. Gordon looked at him and could tell he would punch anyone who spoke against him. He remained silent during the entire confrontation. He resented his brother's angry fits but did not want to have a beef with him. Instead, he continued his random search for information in the island's database while browsing the internet. He ended up on Brain's notes on Thunderbird Shadow's recent repairs after Kayo's accident, reading about a tune-up of the guiding system. That is when his eyes lit up.

- Hey, wait a minute! Brains worked on Doctor Chang's ship. He tuned up Mei's aircraft not so long ago, we may be able to use her localization through Thunderbird five!

Scott's face lit up.

- Good idea, Gordon! Let's take a look.

Having to scavenge through Brain's files was quite the feat. Hundreds of documents, logs, drawings, new ideas handwritten on quick note files were one of the many things they found. It took Chrono's processing power only seconds to find the serial number of the aircraft's communication module then narrow down the exact present location of her vehicle: Alaska. Alan began searching from there.

- She landed fifty kilometers in the north of Fairbanks. I don't get many readings from that place. It looks like a runway a control tower and a small building, that's all. There is nothing else.

Scott frowned.

- That's nowhere near Newcastle. I knew she was hiding stuff from us.

Penelope looked at the images.

- We need to gain access to the cameras from that area. Can you do this, Alan?

- Right away, ma'am.

She could see his face shift from enthusiasm to deception.

- For some privately-owned airfield, the clearance level is very high. I can't even get through simple cameras. I'll have to ask Chronos for that one.

- It did not take a second for the sentient being to materialize, seated where Zeta had been a few moments before.

- Yes, I shall gain access to this footage for your convenience.

He remained silent for a moment.
Strange. This is military-level clearance. Let me find more data relative to the ownership of the area.

A full file appeared on the holographic screen. Chronos continued, pointing a new location on the map depicting a facility in the woods.

- It seems this airfield is owned by the GDF and this building to a "doctor without borders" organization related to them. They rely on dispensing treatment to remote and disadvantaged areas. It does not have a label name, only a registration number. No individuals are linked to it. This is no nascent project either, it has been operating for at least five years.

Penelope studied the map.

- If this is a GDF facility, then we might want to be careful. Dixon is in par with Holling. What if…?

No, this is preposterous.

Scott looked at Penny.

- Speak your mind, Penny.

- What if Holling is using the cover of the GDF to hide some of his less ethical research? With Dixon's help, he can obtain all the clearance he needs. It is a farfetched guess but Holling's research did serve the military at some point in the past. This place might be a good one to scout and look for answers.

The elder clapped his hands.

- It's settled. I'm going. Are you feeling well enough to come along, Penelope?

The aristocrat hesitated.

- I doubt this is a good idea at the moment. With a wounded shoulder, I will not be much help. We need to think this through.

Even with the good care of Brains and Grandma, removing the bullet was painful. It wasn't lodged very deep and barely grazed the bone; it was enough for her entire arm to tingle in pain. Yet, determination shone brightly in her blue eyes, as if she was possessed with a high purpose.

Scott looked at Gordon and resigned himself from asking. He could not put his younger brother at risk again right after he had almost gotten shot during an encounter.

- I'll go alone then. This will be a covered OP. I'll take one of the leisure crafts and fly there. I'll figure out more on the way.

Penelope sighed.

- Don't get yourself into trouble, Scott. We cannot afford to lose you at a time like this.

As she continued browsing through the Secret Services' database, she was abruptly disconnected. She tried reconnecting to the platform but was completely cut off.

- What in the world is that now? Chronos, is that your doing?

The AI responded quickly.

- You have been literally kicked out. The server has been completely shut down. I will try to get
the link back online, please wait a moment.

- It took a few minutes before he answered.

- The server does not respond. It was taken offline three minutes and forty-five seconds ago with no sign of going back up. I am deeply sorry for the inconvenience.

Penelope's communicator beeped. She received mail explaining that all agents must keep communications open until further notice. The database had been compromised and the Director was missing. Suspicions of Bereznik infiltration were evoked. She frowned.

- Now that does not help our cause. I will send this to Zeta immediately.

Gordon laid down his tablet and approached the aristocrat. He grabbed her hand.

- Maybe we should take a break. Let's get some fresh air on the patio. I have to stretch my legs a bit.

She smiled.

- I would really enjoy it, but just a few minutes. We still do not know what will happen next…

- Stop troubling yourself. You didn't get any rest since we came back. You need to relax a bit… Please?

- You are right, Gordon. I feel this whole ordeal has taken its toll on me. Rest would be welcome. And with this rain, it would be unwise to remain outside for so long.

Her shoulder was hurting. She smiled, still, trying to hide it. Gordon did notice Penelope was trying hard to hide her pain.

- Relax your muscles. You are tense. Your pain will only get worse. Let's have some hot tea on the way. I'll fix it up for you.

- That would be marvelous.

They left the room, hand in hand.

Scott's mood drove the Slavic agent out of the room. Her views differed with the elder's and she knew better than to share them with him in his current state. Most of all, she had to remain hidden for the time being. The island was the perfect place for her, right under the nose of the Council. She could also benefit from Chronos' abilities for her own profit.

She sat down in the living room and beckoned for Chronos to appear. The AI was more than delighted to show himself.

- Chronos, you said you had access to most of this world's data, am I right?

- More than data, I must say. What I can access is limitless.

- Good then. Show me everything you have about Chang Meiying and her relations.

He produced several files each containing a lot of data. John arrived in the room.

- So, what's new?
Zeta smiled. He struck her as a smart young man. A shy cutie, too. She could take advantage of that.

- More research. Do you want to join me?

- Sure. What are we looking for?

- There was a doctor Chang who used to do a lot of illegal experimentation in China a while back, say… maybe thirty years ago. I want to see if he is related to your Chang Meiying.

John popped up his UI from Thunderbird 5 on the main living room computer and began searching. Chronos picked several files and displayed them on the screen.

- By Doctor Chang, you must mean Chang Zhongshe. Brilliant genetics professor and scientist of renown. When cloning became a trend in China, he developed a lot of techniques for cloned individuals to retain the initial properties and genome as their initial DNA bearer. He also found a way to transplant a functioning brain in the cloned younger body of its aging owner. This has sparked quite an outrage in the international community concerning the ethical question of eternal life. A brilliant neuroscientist.

John was amazed.

- Where did you get that information from, Chronos? I haven't seen any of this in the black boxes or in Penelope's files.

- Doctor Chang was one of the original founders of the Olympus ideal. He was a stern man, as rigid as they come. He raised an ample sum from his pocket for Holling. He put so much faith in that project that he almost lost everything when the Council shut down all operations after the mutiny. This rendered the poor man violently ill. He had to sell all his exterior assets to avoid bankruptcy.

Zeta crossed her arms.

- You met him, I bet. What was your vibe at first sight?

- Trouble. A madman who committed more atrocities than miracles in the same category as Frederic Hanse.

- Do you think she was working for Holling to find a way to get payback for her father's bankruptcy?

John looked at the screen.

- She's playing a dangerous game. This feels so weird: she knew us since we were teens, and was a good friend of dad too. Guess we'll only find out if we dig in. Her comms have been dead for almost an hour now. I hate to peer in someone's private life like that but the ends justify the means.

Chronos overheard and began executing his task.

- I will now proceed in total data extraction from every aspect of her life. This may take a while.

Zeta received a forwarded message from Penelope about the Secret Services Department. The Slavic agent sighed; it was bad news. The search warrants Phelps had taken down on her were probably going to be posted again, enticing more than one bounty hunter who wished to claim the million-dollar prize on her head. She would have to remain put for a good while until things are
sorted out.

It took about fifteen minutes for Chronos to come up with information.

- The translation is complete. Chang Meiying's native language is Chinese, which does pose a problem in properly interpreting handwritten characters. It seems I am deficient in that matter and will patch myself in the very near future. I do hope the information gathered lives up to your expectations.

The file was quite voluminous. Records of online transactions, emails, credit card numbers, vehicle registration numbers, body measurements, fitness records, everything. John whistled.

- Now, that's an awful lot of info to search through. Let's get to it.

Chronos smiled.

- Let us begin chronologically. This will aid us.

- Fine then. Let's start by looking in the last six months.

- Very well.

Zeta observed the space monitor speaking freely with the AI. Her recent escapade was catching up on her, she was beginning to lose sense of what was happening. John, on the other hand, was looking tirelessly through the communication logs Chronos was sending his way.

- I don't get it. There is a big blank at the moment she got abducted. We know she went to Peru on her own. But can we really prove it was deliberate? We have the footage from that day when she met with a man in the lobby and left in his vehicle. The same man fits the description of the one who abducted the minister's daughter.

- It seems her reservation at the hotel was paid by an unlabeled expense account. She did not wish to be traced. Unless she was played. This we will never know…

John frowned.

- I want to know. If she hadn't tried to play vigilante, my youngest brother would not have suffered as he did.

Zeta sighed loudly.

- I hate to interrupt but dwelling in her past mistakes isn't going to lead us anywhere. Instead, focus on the present. If the doctor has ties with anyone, she will contact them in the future. Why not tap her comms now and monitor her activity instead? You look good at it, pretty boy.

John blushed and ignored her comment. He hesitated not knowing if she was mocking him or if it was a compliment. The Slavic agent got up, yawning.

- Not that I don't enjoy your company but I'll hate to miss out on something, being dead tired as I am right now. Get some rest too, all right.

She left the room, the space monitor resuming his usual duties.

Strong winds and rainfalls kept Scott from entering the Alaskan airspace for a whole hour. He was beginning to tire too; he left the island a bit before midnight. The elder was beginning to regret his
decision but his stubbornness got the better of him. He landed at Fairbanks Airport, leaving
distance between his destination and his escape route. He thought that, if he was tailed, his
pursuers would find it difficult to catch him in a secured area.

He rented a vehicle and made his way towards the airfield. The road ended at a barred fence,
circling the whole compound standing sixty meters further. Scott left his vehicle in a side path,
hidden from the main road by trees and bushes. Approaching the fence, he could not make out
much else around in the darkness; he recognized Mei's aircraft, parked near a building. The
windows were completely dark, with no sign of light inside. There was no external lighting either.
He began going around the perimeter slowly, trying not to trip on anything in the darkness.

Footsteps were coming his way. Guards were surveying the perimeter, flashlight in hand. He
moved away quickly, hiding in a ditch through the cattails, waiting for the men do leave. Staying
put a while, Scott realized was ankle-deep in mud: his shoes were starting to take on water. To add
to his torment, the rainfall resumed. The guards moved on slowly, dismissing the moving weeds as
a possible threat. He moved slowly out of the ditch and back around the fence. The rain was getting
heavier: even while wearing a good protective outer shell, he felt it beginning to take on water. He
had to reach the building quickly.

Luckily for him, he ended up finding a gate held with a simple metal wire and no padlock. He
undid the metal tie and entered the area. The building was not so far away, he could reach it in less
than a minute if he ran. Yet, it was risky and he felt fatigue beginning to settle in. He proceeded to
cross the runway, hoping the sound of the rain would hide the noise from his footsteps. Once near
the entrance, he looked around to see if he had been spotted: no sign of anyone. The guards were
on the opposite side of the compound. It would be unlikely that they could distinguish faint noise
in the distance with the pouring rain.

Scott tried to open the door: it required a magnetic card. He cursed: he was not equipped with any
electronic hacking tools. He had, however, a portable plasma torch. It was a lot smaller than
Virgil's lamp torch but could get through most malleable materials. The outside of the magnetic
reader made of plastic. It took him less than a minute to get through the wiring and short circuit the
lock.

The door opened without any noise. There was very faint lighting coming from the corridor in front
of him. Rooms on both sides contained boxed materials and supplies. He read one of the labels: it
was addressed to one of Holling's plant in Africa. Digging through one of the opened containers, he
stumbled upon IV bags. Most of them were saline but others looked as if they had been prepared.
A dilution ratio was written by hand on the header of the bag but no drug description. The bags
came with an administration card and warning labels: he had stumbled upon a stash of
Acidosemine. The more he was looking around, the more he found. He was tempted to set the
place on fire at one point.

Noise came from the corridor. He quickly took refuge behind a stack of boxes. A feminine voice
was heard: it was Mei. Without a second thought, he went for direct confrontation. That is when he
met with a tall dark-haired man with arms the size his thighs. Scott gulped, facing the giant
military clad individual who did not hesitate to grab him by the shirt and pin him to the wall. The
elder grimaced, the man was almost twice as strong as Virgil. The soldier questioned him.

- What's your purpose here? Hmm? Looking for trouble?

Another soldier approached him. This one seemed a lot more composed.

- Is that one of those kids again?
- He's a bit too old to be a kid.

The second soldier examined his face. Scott remained silent, staring at them menacingly.

- A hobo maybe? They should not have let this place unguarded for so long. We need to move the materials quickly before anyone catches a glimpse of what we're doing. Doctor?

Mei appeared from one of the furthest rooms, holding a plastic case.

- I have all I need. You can message the crew: move everything before sunrise. Deliver all the materials to the main facility...

Scott roared.

- And what do you think you're doing, Mei? Stealing from the GDF?

She was so surprised to see him she froze in place. Her heart raced: she dared not think of the things he could have done in a fit of rage if her guards were not with her. She whispered a form of blessing, relieved he had been caught.

- You're lucky my private bodyguards found you when they did. Had it been Holling or Dixon's men, they would have killed you. To think that a leader would have been smart enough to wait patiently…

He interrupted her. He was speaking so loudly he was almost screaming.

- Wait? What do you think I've been doing in the past few days? You will tell me where Kayo is… or... or…

- Or what? Tell me exactly what kind of leverage you would want to use against me? Jeopardize your organization simply to try to get the upper hand? What would your father think of you now?

He clenched his teeth. What little restraint he had was gone as he let his emotions speak from him. The soldier was still holding him pinned down on the wall as the elder was trying to free himself to get to Mei.

- You are despicable. We know you are working for Holling and about that partnership, you signed with him after Peru. Why put Alan's life in danger? And what's your deal with Newcastle?

She sighed.

- You speak too much, self-righteous young man. The world is not all white and black, they are millions of shades of gray. You can't expect people to keep a straight line and make a living. Your father had his secrets too you know, and a lot of these he confided to me.

She motioned to her guards.

- We'll never be left alone as long as he's chasing us around. Let's bring him "home". Bind and gag him, use the drug. I don't want to have to listen to his whining during the flight.

The composed soldier noted. He went into the next room and produced a syringe filled with what seemed to be Acidosemine. Scott tried to pry himself free, kicking the giant soldier. This only resulted in him strengthening his grasp.

He remembered Abigail talking about the drug and its use during dinner time with Alan and Mei. He recalled the drugged men during Kayo's investigation of the rogue camp. He was now more
scared than angry… he did not want to lose his mind. As the syringe was plunged in the tissues in his neck, his eyelids closed and his mind drifted. He could hear everything around him but could not move his body; his limbs were jelly. They carried him into the aircraft, strapping him in a seat and tying his hands in his back with plastic ties. He eventually passed out, unable to fight the effects of the powerful narcotic anymore.

The grey rain clouds contrasted with the black of the night sky. A cold wind had risen, enough to motivate the second eldest Tracy to go back inside the house. He knew everybody was working hard to find information about Holling and Olympus: if they did find enough, who would believe them then? The GDF was under the control of the enemy, the World Council was completely powerless without its army and, with the conflict at hand, it would be impossible to remove Holling since he is their main provider of weapons. He thought about the whole thing for a while, until the fact of Abigail's surrender came back into his mind.

Round and round he went, his thoughts always going back to the same point. He had to do something. He could not let everyone work hard and let his heartache overwhelm him. Helping the others might bring him solace and quell his anxiety.

The sound of an aircraft's reactors brought him back from his reverie. One of the civilian jets was leaving the island. He tried to tap into the computer to know who left; Alan popped up on his communicator.

- Hey bro. Feeling better?

Virgil breathed out.

- Kinda. Who was that exactly?

- Oh, that was Scott. Penelope agreed to have him investigate some GDF warehouse where Mei might have gone. It's not a bad idea…

It was a relief. The second eldest did not know exactly how he would react facing his brother in the current events. Yet, it did not feel right.

- I bet he's going to punch her and end up in jail. Good for him.

- Don't say that. He misses Kayo…

Alan refrained from saying more. He understood quickly when his brother remained silent.

- That's not what I meant… I miss Abigail too you know. She's the reason I'm here right now, up in space. I can't thank her enough for that. Her life must have been a nightmare.

Virgil kept his eyes from tearing up.

- It was. She was in paradise on Tracy Island. I can't count how many times she said that. Every night she looked at the stars… Like if she had never seen any. Will Kayo share the same fate? To be locked away and experimented upon? We need to save them…

- You remember she told us something about that awakening thing that was supposed to happen when we found her?

- Yeah... the reveal of Olympus.
- Well, I think I've found something interesting while looking through Dad's mail. John used to do a lot of paperwork for Scott... so he had access to all of the Tracy Industries info. An email came in today. It's too weird not to be related.

Alan moved the image to fit the screen and sent it to Virgil. The electronic announcement, addressed to Jeff Tracy, was inviting the Investors' Circle, an organization grouping numerous rich people interested in funding projects approved by the World Council. The event was an auction of weapon patents and the reveal of a new state of the art defensive technology that could turn the tide of future wars. It required a reply in order to obtain the whereabouts of the venue.

Virgil wondered:

- Wait... why did Holling send this to us of all people? He knows Abigail was here.

The Circle of investors sent the invitation. I don't think he's going to be preoccupied with our presence. Nobody knows what happened here other than Dixon and Holling anyway.

- Scott's going to attend?

- Nah, he can't do that. Preferably not John... he makes a good undercover guy but he doesn't have the nerve.

- Who did you have in mind?

The youngest Tracy smiled.

- You, of course!

- Wait... Me? Are you serious?

- All you need to do is scout the place, find Kayo and Abigail and try to get them out.

- You make it sound so easy, Alan. This is not what will happen.

The astronaut sighed.

- I know. At least you won't make a scene.

- Did you talk to Scott about this?

- Nope. He's onto Mei spilling the beans about Kayo. Nothing's going to make him change his mind until he's got an answer.

- Let's hope he doesn't get hurt. Okay, count me in.

They both looked at the date. Virgil noted.

- It's in a week. Short notice for busy rich people to clear their schedules.

- Yeah, but we have all the time in the world now with that flight ban and stuff. Try to make the most of it. Well, today was a looooong day. I'm gonna try to get some shut-eye.

- You said it. Good night bro.

Alan disconnected.
Virgil looked at the invitation and confirmed his attendance. A special mail containing all information about lodging and schedules would be sent forty-eight hours prior to the event. "State of the art defensive technology," he thought. This was not just a coincidence. Holling had planned this all along. He clenched his fist; maybe Scott would have been the best candidate for this mission. If he ever met Holling face to face, he knew he might not be able to contain himself. This event was going to test his limits.
Meanwhile on Hawk Island

Happy Valentine's day! To you all my dear readers!

Please, bear in mind that I did not watch the second part of Season 3 so there might be some discrepancies from the series.

For the setting, the stories in the "Meanwhile" series will be in the same format as the five days sequence.

Enjoy!

A happy tune played somewhere. It was not loud but just enough to make out the lyrics. The air smelled of salt and sugar. He felt uncomfortably cold for some reason. His throat was burning, he craved water, gasping, as he began to return to reality.

Scott opened his eyes. His limbs were back under his control. It took him less than a minute to put his thoughts back together and spring up to his feet. He was dressed in a hospital gown; all of his belongings had been taken away. There was a sole mattress in the room: no bed, no furniture, no window. The only light was coming in was from the cracks around the door; it was barred tight with no handle on his side. It was meant to be a jail.

He was not going to let anything get in his way. The elder tried to kick down the door to no success. After doing a terrible ruckus and trying to force open the only exit, the door's speakeasy opened. It was small yet he tried to cramp a hand in it to catch whoever was on the other side. The person backed away and screamed. Startled, he pulled his hand away quickly, not without scratching it in the process. His sight was adjusting to the light outside his room; he could see she was wearing scrubs as she backed towards the opposite wall. The woman was very clearly afraid. The corridor was devoid of any decoration and painted in tones of beige. He then heard a man's voice.

- Please, calm down.

- I won't calm down! Where am I? What is this place? Let me out!

The man's voice was calm and comforting. At least he was trying to be. He remained out of sight.

- We ask you to calm down first. If you want us to talk, you'll have to tone down a bit.

He remembered having been strapped to a seat in Mei's aircraft as they took off. Did they drop him off at a hospital? He breathed in and out before sitting down on the mattress.

Minutes passed like an eternity. After about ten in complete silence, he heard the door unlock and slide slowly with a loud squeaking. The lights came back on, blinding him for a second before his eyes adjusted. A man wearing scrubs appeared in the opening: mid-twenties, laid-back, wearing piercings in his nose and brow. His hair was braided in a myriad of small, colorful braids. He brought a hand to his chest designating himself.

- My name is Nik. I'm your nurse. I don't want to harm you. Please, be calm.

Seeing that Scott was seated, he did the same but crossed-legged on the floor, near the door. He
was facing the elder Tracy the whole time.

- I'm all ears. Tell me what's bothering you.

Scott sighed. Whatever that place was, he wanted to run out and escape. But that guy in front of him seemed so intent on listening to his plea… Maybe Nik was genuinely trying to help.

- What is this place?

The young man smiled.

- That's not for me to tell.

The nurse scrutinized him.

- Your eyes have gone back to normal. The withdrawal symptoms seem to be gone. Can you stand? Or do you still want to rip my head off?

Nik said that with a smirk. Scott did not smile in return but understood something might have happened. He had to ask.

- Did I do something bad?

- A straight punch to an intern; broke her nose. Hopefully, you won't be made accountable for that. Withdrawal is quite brutal on Acidosemine. Even with your hands and feet bound, you still managed to give us a hard time. I never thought anyone could throw a chair like that with his hands tied together!

Scott frowned. How did he know about that drug? He realized this place wasn't any regular hospital. He stood, knowing he had no choice but to comply in order to leave. Nik held his hands in front of him, rising at the same time.

- Easy. I don't want any trouble. If you've calmed down, we'll let you go have a well-deserved shower and lunch. Then you can meet the professor.

- What else can I do? Clobbering everyone in here won't get me anywhere. Might as well accept that invitation of yours and see where this leads me.

The nurse stood, smiling.

- That's the spirit.

The elder made his way through the corridor, holding the unruly back panel of the gown that kept flying away and show off his backside. He felt very uncomfortable and powerless, his modesty protected by a thin piece of fabric. The personnel must have stripped him completely of his drenched clothing upon arrival. What he was eager to know was where his stuff was. He was anxious and distrustful. He felt the need to talk to his brothers to ease his conscience.

Nik brought him towards an elevator. The upper floors looked more like a hotel than a hospital. He was shown to a room; small, yet, cozy. Scott could see the bright sun outside and feel the sharp warm breeze of the sea coming from the room's balcony door. He was on a tropical island, for sure. His clothing was folded on the bed, freshly laundered, his boots cleaned of the swamp gunk and his coat hung in the closet. His communicator was nowhere to be found. He breathed deeply. Nik noticed and approached him, patting him on the back and smiling.
I was like you before, y'know. I really wanted to leave this place. They saved my life. You'll see for yourself. I'll have lunch brought to your room while you shower. Once you're clean and have a full belly, the professor will want to see you.

Scott turned towards him.

- And my family? I need to talk to them and tell them that I'm safe.

- In due time, friend. Go clean up and eat then meet me near the elevator. Got it?

Scott sighed, annoyed by the sudden friendliness.

As soon as Nik had left, he quickly inspected the room for hidden cameras, microphones, or communication equipment.

- Nothing.

No phones, no surveillance, no TV, no tablets, no clocks, not even newspapers or magazines. The doors were locked with old fashioned magnetic cards and mechanical locks. He sat down, relieved that he was not spied on but also anxious as he didn't have any idea where he was. Right now, his salvation rested in a warm shower, a copious breakfast and a large amount of water to quench his thirst. His throat was still hurting.

The bathroom looked recently renovated. The walls and floors were of polished concrete; not the kind of finish you expect to see in a hospital. He toured the place for more surveillance equipment: still nothing. "Paranoid, I'm just being paranoid..." he said to himself, hoping to ease his conscience.

He hopped in the shower, letting the water flow on his back for a long while. Cranking the heat a bit, he enjoyed the dampness of his surroundings and tried to relax. Yet, thoughts rushed back in his mind about everything that happened: his brothers, the GDF, Kayo... Why did he have to run after Mei like this? Stupid... childish... He refrained from hitting his head on the concrete wall, knowing all too well he would need another stay at the hospital if he did. This whole charade had to end quickly; he needed to return to Tracy Island and fast.

He heard the door open and the jingling sound of metal and glass in the other room. Wearing only a towel, he went to investigate. Just like had Nik said, food was delivered on a metal cart as it befits a hotel's room service. He had expected a plastic tray and cooking comparable only to Grandma's. On the contrary, the food smelled amazing and the variety of dishes was astounding. A large cut glass pitcher was filled to the brim with fresh, cold water. It was half empty less than a minute after. Satisfied, he dug in without any second thought. Everything was delicious. "This is no hospital food..." he acknowledged gladly.

After his copious meal, he dressed in his own clothes. The weather would be a bit warm for his attire but he could manage an hour or two under the bright sun. He was no stranger to resisting scorching heat during rescues, after all. A knock on the door surprised him: it was Nik, dressed in casual clothes. Scott thought of it a good moment to ask about his missing belongings.

- The place's your liking? And the food?

- Some of my stuff is missing. Where is my communicator?

- It's in a safe place. We can't let you have access to that until the professor says otherwise, my friend.
Scott felt annoyed. The young man was trying to be too friendly to his taste.

- Aren't you supposed to be working? Why the hell are you here?

Nik smiled.

- There is so much you don't know... I do work here as a nurse, that's my profession. Sometimes, they cut my shift short and ask me to do other stuff. Like keeping tabs on you.

- I do hope that professor of yours will have a VERY good explanation. I really don't get it.

- Guess it won't matter if I tell you a few things on the way. Come.

They both exited the room and made for an elevator. On their way, Nik activated every locked door with the back of his hand: Scott wondered if he had an implant. He became very suspicious of his new "friend". Nik, on the other hand, seemed pleased to show him around.

They went down to a lobby. The floor was of beige marble, polished to shine. The walls, scarcely decorated, were painted in a hue of yellowish-grey. It brightened the place but gave a weird antiquated vibe. A woman was busy behind the counter, not paying any attention to them as they passed through. The place was alive with people reading newspapers, having a coffee and workers busying themselves with everyday chores, quite the typical hotel lobby. Nik began speaking as they went outside. There was an immense garden surrounding a pool with large palm trees everywhere. He could see the beach further on.

- We all owe the professor at some point. He saved our lives. My Pa was working at some sort of pharmaceutical plant. He was promised good pay. My Ma and I tried our best to support him until he became weird... almost possessed. We later learned that something happened at the plant, some sort of incident and that he had to be checked by a doctor. It was never disclosed, the entire thing was covered up. There was no way to get answers from the company. Even the media couldn't get anything. He changed afterward. Some days, he would not come home from work. Ma believed he was cheating, so she followed him and found out he was slaving at work for entire days straight. She was able to drag away and forbade him from ever going back there. After a few days, he went mad. As luck would have it, the professor found us and explained what was ailing Pa. He said we had to flee and arranged for transport. At first, we didn't believe him, but when armed men came and trashed our place, we gladly accepted the invitation and left with what little we still had. The professor saved my dad and welcomed us to live here. In return, we work for him and keep his secret.

Scott listened closely. He recalled the men in the encampment during Kayo's investigation. What if these men were trying to escape Holling's grasp and waiting for the "professor"? This could have explained why Artemis came and massacred everyone.

Nik waved at a man mowing the lawn. The worker replied with a smile

- See there? That's my Pa. He's never been happier.

- Do you ever leave the island?

- Never. That was one of the conditions. Fortunately, I only had my mother and father. We didn't have any other close family. It was harder for some to choose between disappearing forever and endangering the rest of us.

- That professor of yours saves people with learning chip implants?
Of all things, yeah. He's done a lot. The success rate is 98%. We have a few deaths... some are already doomed or on the verge of mental collapse, can't do anything with them then. We remove the chip and rewire their cerebrum then help with their addiction. It takes a while, a few weeks. I usually monitor the progress of such patients and accompany them towards recovery.

His opinion of his chaperone suddenly changed. And the professor now sounded like a great man to him.

They came upon a villa. Nik instructed Scott that this was the Professor's residence. He showed him to a flight of stairs.

- He will be waiting for you on the second-floor balcony. I'll be on call.

Scott made his way up the stairs and into a corridor. Various photographs of historical events were on display, each depicting successful scientific projects that occurred during the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. His eyes caught the launch of the Zero X rocket; he smiled. One of the pictures was an homage to the signing of the peace treaty after the Global Conflict. He recognized a few faces he had seen on television, each one an important politician or General. Stopping an instant to read the names, one caught his eye. The name of General Dixon was written on the plaque but his face was different. The first names were not enounced, perhaps it was a different General Dixon. He did not bear further attention to the matter.

He resumed his walk towards an opened balcony. A man in a white and blue short-sleeved dress shirt and linen pants was sitting cozily in a rattan chair, obviously waiting for him. He had the features of an older gentleman under his clean-cut beard. His hair was grey, cut short in the military fashion. A waitress brought a pitcher of water and a platter of antipasto. While she was pouring the water, the man rose and greeted the pilot with an outstretched hand. Hesitantly, the elder Tracy shook his hand. The old man smiled.

- Welcome, Mister Tracy.

Scott frowned. How did he know his name? It was surely Mei's doing.

- Funny how you know my name but I know nothing about you. I've complied until now; I believe you owe me an explanation.

- True. Please have a seat. Help yourself to the platter if you wish.

Scott sat down. He had eaten his fill already. The old man grabbed a few olives and began to speak.

- First of all, welcome to Hawk Island Facility. I am Gregory Hawkinburg, physician, professor and philanthropist. This is a privately owned hospital where we treat the untreatable. We disguised the place as a resort in order to evade unwanted attention. Do not worry, we are not partnering with Marcus Holling.

The elder's eyes widened. How did he know that much? He was curious about how somebody could manage to make this place work and where the money came from.

- Let me apologize for my stepdaughter's attitude. From exposing your ward to letting your friend fall into the wrong hands, administrating a dangerous drug to you... She is erratic. A good doctor but with so much hate inside of her. Since her father disowned her, she has done things you cannot imagine. But, if you look at it with some hindsight, she has a good heart.
- Don't tell me you approve of what she did! It was dangerous and reckless. She has endangered me and even my brother, for what? Money? Pride? And what about Kayo whom she sent to Newcastle to be treated? Why did she send her directly into the tiger's maw?

He clenched his fists so hard his knuckles were white. The old man motioned for him to calm down.

- We cannot undo the past. They were lucky Athena was there to save them. After all, the Keepers were created to protect and serve. As for your friend, you mean the young Mrs. Kyrano?

- Precisely.

The old man reared in his chair and looked at the horizon.

- That was not solely her doing. I have contributed… directly.

Scott brought his fist down on the table, spilling his glass of water.

- The fuck does that mean, old man? You better have a good explanation for this.

The man took a deep breath. His tone of voice changed, becoming stern and serious.

- Listen to what I have to say, young man. Not all is black and white in this world. There are myriads of shades of grey. Surrendering your friend to Holling was not easy, but it was necessary. Mei knew her to be combative and in excellent physical condition. What's more, she had the right genetic mutations to catch Hanse's attention.

- I don't trust you. You say you're not with Holling but you're curiously acting just like him.

- Quite the contrary. I have dedicated my entire life in trying to reverse his experiments on people, going as far as saving entire families from his grasp. There is a risk, a big one, and I am willing to take it. But for that to work, we need help: courageous people playing a big part in a game too big for them alone to grasp. Mei has been screening the isles for a long time to find compatible individuals in her clinics: a good candidate who could cooperate and would be the key to the success of this mission. This is why your friend was chosen: to infiltrate Olympus and be our inside agent. She is unaware of her role and not yet able to achieve it, but everything will come to fruition in due time. Being a Keeper exempts her from harm, she is acclaimed, placed above even Holling himself in terms of survival. She is unique and precious to them.

Scott was still furious; the man rose as the water spilled towards him on the table. The waitress hurried to clean the mess. The old man joined his hands together, calm as a monk. His voice came strong and intimidating as he pressed on each of his words, looking at the young man straight in the eyes.

- Unfortunately, we cannot risk an emotionally unstable young man jeopardizing the entire operation. So, either you calm down or we will keep you in a cell until we are done. Am I being clear?

He swore he could hear his father scold him when Gregory spoke. It struck him as if it was not the first quarrel he had to settle. Mei might have tasted his medicine too. The elder Tracy calmed down, sitting on his chair. Water had splattered on his pants but he endured it. He was bent on listening now and nodded to the professor. Gregory helped the waitress by raising the platter from the table. As he saw Scott returning to his seat, his smile grew back.

- Good. Now, listen closely. Since you are here and have your share of experience with Holling,
you can either accept to cooperate or not. That being said, if you refuse, you will have to remain here until we are done. If you accept, we have a job for you. Mei has told me you are quite the daredevil. We have need of people who like action and are not afraid to jump into the fray.

The professor did not mention International Rescue. Scott hoped that Mei had not disclosed their identity. This could be a major breach of confidence if she did.

- If this means to rescue my friend, I'm all in. But I'll have to call my family first to tell them I'm safe. Otherwise, they'll move heaven and earth to find me.

- You are advised that the nature of our operation is secret. Choose your words wisely. We have been lucky to escape both the GDF and Holling for this long, any estranged contact with the outside world may put us back on the radar. Any communication we send needs to be heavily encrypted.

Scott smiled. The old professor really had no idea who he was. Maybe he could get the upper hand of this whole situation after all. He grabbed a pickled pepperoncino and reared back in his chair as his host had done before him.

- What if I told you I possessed a communication system that rivaled the GDF's in both security and scope, that this said system also has the most advanced AI the world has ever heard of? I think it's my turn to make you an offer, professor.

- I do know of your father's company, Tracy Industries, and know you might be an asset for us too in the matter. But by all means, Mister Tracy, I am all ears.

This time, the professor hailed the waitress for beers. Scott did not refuse. After both had taken a good sip, the pilot began his story.

- If you let me go back home, we can make good use of your knowledge and my resources. You should know that we have communication tools you could only dream of. We also possess a lot more information on the subject of Holling and can contribute greatly to your cause.

The professor laughed for a long time. He calmed down and went on.

- I'm afraid we cannot do that. My time is precious, Mister Tracy. The whole purpose of this talk was to convince you to help us, not to let you go freely after disclosing important information. I require a compromise on your part. You remain here and assist us then I shall permit you to get in direct contact with your family. Until then, you should devise some white lies to address their concerns.

Scott smirked. He was getting there.

- They won't buy that; they are not that gullible. You have no idea who I am, professor. And by that, I do not mean to boast. Let's say we exchange secrets; would this appease you? Trust is something hard-earned, from your side and from mine. We have information that could benefit you and, what's more, we have technology so advanced that the GDF pales in comparison. In return, you have knowledge and science that could benefit us. This could also be payback for the problems Mei caused us.

The professor sipped his beer. He dismissed Scott's thought with the back of his hand.

- Are you asking me to believe you have such technology that could rival Holling's or the military?

Scott's smile dropped. He looked at the man with a deadly serious stare. The professor's smile
faded. The elder Tracy went on.

- Professor Hawkinburg, you are standing in front of the leader of International Rescue. We saved Athena from the depths only to... let's say we had no choice in surrendering her to Holling. With our help, she recovered the black boxes from the other Keepers' laboratories. We were also able to recover Chronos from the depths of space, he is now a permanent resident in our space station. One of our special agents is working on gathering incriminating evidence to bring Holling to justice. We have been struggling with all this for so long now... You have no idea how relieving it is to hear we are not alone.

As he went on, the professor's grin melted in awe. His eyes widened and filled with tears as if Scott suddenly became a godsent revelation.

- Young man... where have you been for the past five years! Why did Mei not tell me about this?

- She did her job of keeping our identity secret. Now, we have to live with the fact that she betrayed us in order for your "plan" to take effect. Tell me, what was she trying to achieve by sending the pictures to Holling?

The professor regained his composure.

- Athena is required to activate the defenses of Olympus. Without her genetic code, nothing will be able to function properly. You see, the nanites in her body modify the genetic structure of cells and adapt to the ever-changing environment. This means that she will never have the same genetic sequence twice in a row. The defenses are programmed in such a way that they will react to the changes in her body, to a molecular level, which is processed through an infrared spectroscope connected to the main computer. For our plan to begin, we needed Athena to return to Olympus. It took longer than expected.

- Why has nobody found a way to bypass this?

- Many smart programmers and engineers have tried to break the code but always without success. It is said the programming is so complex and perfect that only the author himself can edit it without rendering the whole thing deficient. Unfortunately, Dennis Edwards died with his secret...

- Not quite.

He raised his head. Scott went on.

- Chronos. He said something about a "downloaded" conscience into the system. Could it be true?

The professor rubbed his chin.

- Knowing the extent of his intellect, he could have found a way to emulate a human brain with code. It could be him or simply an AI acting with a similar thought pattern. Fascinating. This means we could have a try at the code.

He rose his glass.

- Here's to you, Mister Tracy. You have brought joy and hope to this old man again. Knowing we have you as an ally in our fight for justice is a relief.

Scott did the same.

- I knew we could come to an accord.
They drank in silence, both looking at the horizon as if this sudden revelation had said it all. Something was bothering the pilot. He felt as if he had been unfair to Abigail the whole time. Looking back, he knew he was guilty of selling her off for John's safety, but he had no regret about doing the right thing to save his family. Until recently, he was ready to abandon the fight and carry on, as if nothing had happened. But his brothers would never have accepted this: after everything they had gone through, they had to bring Holling to justice and save the world. After all, isn't this what International Rescue does?

Having met people with similar goals revived his combativeness; he was certain now they could do something. He remembered what Penelope had shown him: documents linking Tracy Industries to the funding of Olympus. That meant some of the information Gregory was looking for might have been out of reach from him the whole time. And the black boxes so precious to Abigail had a more important significance now. Searching through the mine of information sitting at the base was the only way to make the plot whole. For that, he needed both Chronos's processing power and the professor's knowledge.

The waitress kept bringing in beers. After his third, Scott decided it was enough. He could have taken more but he had to keep a straight face. Worse: alcohol made him talkative.

- About Abigail... I... turned her in. It's not that I hated her but... so many bad things happened with her around. I betrayed the trust of my brothers, for the sake of saving our organization. This has led me nowhere... we're back at square one, and, moreover, grounded by the GDF.

A man came forward and whispered to Gregory who took on a dire expression. He dismissed the waitress and stood, ignoring Scott's laments.

- I understand you have a moral dilemma to discuss but we will have to continue this talk later. An urgent matter has arisen. Tomorrow, you shall make for London; be ready at no later than 5 AM. You will be briefed upon departure. A courier will fetch you at your room.

- Yes Sir.

- Good. Then have a good day. Nik will escort you back to your room.

As the professor left the balcony, Nik arrived, whistling. Scott rose and stretched.

- Want a quick tour of the place so you know your way around? I can show you the areas you can access: pool, bar, café, gym…

- I'd rather go back to my room. There are a lot of things I need to think about.

The young man escorted Scott back to his place then left him alone, clearly disappointed that Scott did not share the same enthusiasm as he did.

Sitting on his bed, the elder tried to gather his thoughts, wondering what type of mission he would be sent on in the morning. If it was some kind of rescue mission, he would be in his element and his experience would clearly come in handy.

Dozing off, he thought about Kayo: what could they have done to her? After everything Abigail had said about the treatment she had to go through, he could not bear to imagine Kayo going through all this. She was strong and capable to withstand a lot but just how much was he capable of seeing her bear on her own. If only he could hold her in his arms and tell her that he was coming to save her. But that would be a lie... right now it was impossible to do anything.
A knock on the door startled him. He tried to ignore it, and sincerely hoped it was not Nik again. The knock was persistent: he got up and answered. A young woman brought him an unlocked safe box and left. Examining the content, he found his communicator. Finally, he could call his brothers. The unit tuned in to Thunderbird Five's systems almost immediately after booting. Unfortunately, the geo-tracking could not give him his exact location. Hawk Island is equipped with a strong field capable of scrambling small devices. At least it did not block the clocks. With the time zone, Scott estimated he was near the Maldives. He looked at the time and date. It relieved him to see he had only been away for about thirty hours.

Barring the door, he selected the most secure frequency he could think of before calling Tracy Island. It did not ring long. John picked up, hair disheveled, a blanket slipping from his shoulder. From the looks of things, he had been sleeping on the couch. He was relieved to see his brother's face again.

- Scott! Thank goodness you're safe! Where the hell are you?

- Long story John. I can't go over details like this.

- You'll have to tell me more about it. Where can we pick you up?

- That's the thing… You can't. I'll get in touch with you guys tomorrow with more details, hopefully. Recall my aircraft but don't try to locate me in any circumstances. Wait for me to call back. I'm in no danger. I've eaten my fill, drank and showered.

- Sounds like you're having a good time. All right then, I'll follow your instructions.

- How is everyone?

- Hanging on. Virgil's anxious to act as our leader in your stead. A few rescue calls came in but the GDF insisted we remain grounded and they take over. Penelope stumbled on more interesting papers you should take a look at. And Chr…

Scott interrupted his brother, motioning a hush.

- I'd really like not to discuss this over the comms. In due time, I'd like to hook "his mighty greatness" or whatever he calls himself to their system. They can help us and I want to know more about them.

John was puzzled. His brother had never been that secretive before. He was not used to him not spilling out information straightforwardly.

- Just be careful. We'll be keeping our eyes peeled for anything new.

- Great. Glad you guys are holding on. Wanna do me a favor?

- Sure, what's up?

- Get some sleep. You look horrible.

John laughed as he hung up. Scott let go of a sigh of relief. His brothers were safe. He could rest easy and try to enjoy the rest of the evening. Yet, he could not. Kayo inhabited his thoughts.

Nik came knocking and tried to get him out for lunch but the elder politely refused, using the pretext of "getting some rest". At one point, he wondered if he could talk about his concerns to Nik. After all, the nurse had open heartedly offered to listen to him. He took note and told himself
Scott awoke quite brutally to the sound of loud banging on the door. He turned to his communicator: 4:30 AM. It was not what he had expected in terms of "early". He shouted "Coming" and hopped in his clothes. In a matter of seconds, he was ready and headed for the door. To his surprise: it was Mei, clad in a tight black full bodysuit.

- Good morning. Time is not on our side, hurry.

Her voice was cold and full of resentment. She turned around and left him at the door. He caught up with her.

- Wait, Mei! I'm… I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone all out at you.

She remained silent, looking straight in front of her as she called the elevator. She did not answer.

- I mean… I can't understand what you did. At least explain.

They entered the elevator and headed for a lower floor; one Scott had not visited yet. Mei swapped her card beforehand and the lights changed from white to blue. Still, she did not speak.

They stumbled upon a large opened basement where a multitude of crates was stored. It looked like the entire building's lower part. At one end, a mobile platform was being loaded by Mei's "large" bodyguard with whom Scott had a brush-up. The man did not even look at him when he passed through. The other bodyguard from Fairbanks, the one who looked more like a soldier than a goon, was waiting on the other side "This should be fun." Scott thought, sarcastically. The man threw him a bulletproof vest and a full bodysuit.

- Welcome to the team. It seems you are out new star. Put these on. Don't want to be swiss cheese on your first assignment, don't you?

Scott caught the heavy uniform, wondering just how good the man was good at keeping a poker face. Mei began checking the content of a military plastic case. She ignored everyone. It was probably better that way. The elder Tracy turned towards the soldier who was cleaning a pistol.

- So… what's this mission about? Can I at least know what we're going for? I'm not really a shooting type of guy…

The soldier sneered.

- They all say that before they hold a gun and have fun shooting with it. Might as well bury the hatchet now before it backfires in our faces. I'm Coldy. That big guy over there is Reid. He's not much of the talkative type. Get your shit together and board the platform.

Coldy began reassembling the pistol. Scott hurried the suit on: it was heavier than his uniform and larger. He strapped what he could in order for it not to get in the way then boarded the platform. The soldier seemed satisfied as he holstered his gun and did the same, followed by Mei and Reid.

The ride took less than five minutes. They ended up in a hangar where five other soldiers waited. An aircraft was parked there; as soon as the platform stopped, the soldiers began loading the crates into the cargo bay. It was a hybrid aircraft, between a GDF carrier and a large cargo ship, similar in design to Thunderbird Two. The size, however, could not rival the green giant as it was much smaller.
Scott took a crate and followed the others inside. Mei passed through, heading for the cockpit when the elder Tracy grabbed her arm.

- I'd like an answer. Going into this kind of mission blindly with no ground training makes me a bit nervous. Are you expecting to get me killed?

She sighed.

- What an impatient youngster you are! Your job is to stay alive. Simple. You're our backup pilot. Once we pick up our parcel, I'll have to tend to it. That means someone else will have to fly this monster.

- I can take the controls right now. Unless there's a good reason for me to remain in the bay, I'd be happier up there.

- You still have to go through debriefing. This is not some rescue mission, there might be resistance… armed one. Remain in the cargo bay until the end of the briefing then maybe I'll let you take over... maybe.

- FAB. I mean, as you wish.

The doctor went back towards the cockpit. An alarm sounded: it was time for departure. All the material was loaded and the soldiers were strapped in their seat, awaiting takeoff. Scott had missed his chance to look at his surroundings through the cockpit window. Knowing technical information about the whereabouts of the runway could have helped a lot if he needed to make a quick escape. He dismissed the thought, having already agreed to the professor's conditions. Hopefully, his "comrades" would not let him get in trouble. He was not dumb though; he was wearing his communicator, hidden under his clothing.

Once the aircraft was in the air, Coldy came back in the cargo bay. Reid and the other soldiers began setting up the content of the cases: a medical table over which towered UV light set in a plexiglass dome. Cylinders of medical gases were attached to the table. Scott did not understand much of it, but it seemed to him that the others did. Once they were done, Coldy spoke.

- Briefing. That's going to be a brief one.

The soldiers smiled. There was nothing to smile about. It was a terrible pun. He resumed.

- The map was sent to your mini-computers. Follow your assigned group and formation. Try not to shoot the medical personnel. If there are any armed security guards, shoot to disable. Any military-like individuals, shoot to kill; they won't hesitate to do the same. Once we get the parcel, merge back together and protect. Try to secure a stretcher or something with wheels, there's a good distance to go. Questions?

Nobody raised a hand. They all looked very satisfied with the explanation and went to check on their arm-mounted computers. Scott had questions, but he decided it was not worth asking any. He was not eager to get into the fray.

Coldy reached out in a crate and distributed large armbands to everyone. Scott asked:

- What's that?

The soldiers smiled and laughed in a low voice. Coldy looked at Scott.

- Forcefields. The best kind. But they only protect you from the side the lens is facing. Be wary.
Wear it on your arm at all time. That way, if it shatters, you'll be lucky with only losing a finger or two.

He pointed at the lens, showing Scott how to wear it. He then motioned for him to go up in the cockpit.

- You're clear, rookie. Let's hope you're better at piloting than soldiering.

Scott smirked and nodded, making his way towards the elevator.

Up in the cockpit, Mei was at the command. She was doing an okay job if not for the fact that she was relying on auto-pilot a little too much to his taste. He sat down behind her. They were alone. He remained silent for a while, looking at the instruments, trying to find words that would not be either aggressive or sarcastic.

- You still haven't answered me. We have time to talk.

She sighed deeply, swearing in Chinese under her breath.

- You are an annoying prick, Tracy. I don't have anything to say to you.

- Hey, you owe me an apology. Turns out Holling sat foot on our island because you told him where Abigail was in the first place. Don't you have any remorse?

She remained silent. He knew she was fuming, it showed in her actions. It was not the time to get her mad while piloting; she was good but might not be able to recover from a false manoeuver. He tried to play the apologetic card.

- I'm sorry for what I've said at Fairbanks. I'd like to know; it would ease my conscience. What you did not only endangered Alan but also backfired on us terribly.

He was to blame for that too but she didn't have to know. In truth, he regretted what he did after seeing the reaction of his brothers. Virgil was decimated, Alan disappointed, John mad as hell. Only Gordon looked like he did not have a straight opinion about the situation but he quickly sided with his brothers after Penelope's perilous abduction and his adventure in Bereznik. "Dad wouldn't have acted like this. He would have known what to do, what to say. I'm not him... I didn't know what to do. I'm sorry" he whispered to himself.

After a moment of silence, Mei only said a few words:

- Apologies accepted.

That was all. It was not going to be a joyride. He continued double-checking the instruments, correcting the course twice without her knowing. Eventually, she opened up.

- I hate Holling. I hate Olympus, the Keepers and everything they represent. My father lived and died for that project, ignoring my mother and me for too long. The devastating effect it had on my family... It needs to go down and disappear forever. Whatever you choose to do, don't get in my way.

- You understand that you doomed Kayo in the process, right?

She laughed. He flushed in anger but breathed in.

- She's not doomed. Stop worrying. Hanse's fresh new toys always get the rich treatment. If they
don't turn against him that is…

- Is that supposed to make me feel better?

- Relax. All in due time. Gregory is never wrong and his plans play off perfectly every time. Mine don't. Let's keep it to that. Help me with navigation, we've reached land.

The commercial flight ban had cleared the skies, giving them some extra airspace to fly through. Unfortunately, this did not exempt them from the regular controls of the countries they flew over. Scott had seen the identification requests populate the nav screen; they were filled and returned by an automated reply as if they were a freight cargo. All the paperwork was accurate to the last detail.

They were approaching their destination. Coldy came back to the cockpit.

- Ready for landing.

Mei nodded and flicked a few switches. The main power went off, switching to auxiliary. Semitransparent panels moved down to cover the aircraft's windows.

- Done. We are now in shadow mode.

Scott was impressed. Advanced reflective cloaking was something owned only by wealthy military companies. This really piqued his curiosity; how could the professor afford such technology?

After landing, Mei rose and left for the cargo bay. Scott was about to follow her when Coldy stopped him.

- You stay here, rookie. We need you to fire the engines as soon as we tell you to. Don't let anyone in. Keep your comms open at all times. Don't get out of the aircraft or approach the building. That's if you want to live, of course. Capiche?

The elder nodded, annoyed by the fact that he was going to stay put. Although considering gunfire was implied, he preferred the cockpit to anywhere else in the vicinity.

- I'll stay here and familiarize myself with the aircraft. Don't worry, there is nothing that motivates me more in staying inside than gunfire.

Coldy smiled, tapping Scott's shoulder and whistling between his teeth "Good boy" as he left.

"An easy mission, nothing to worry about. This is going to be a piece of cake."

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