He Is, They Are

by ThatGirlSix

Summary

Fixing what was wrong with their family was going to take longer than the span of a Disney movie, but they'd get there eventually. They lived on an island. It wasn't like there was anywhere else to go. (A film-fix fic)

Notes

Thunderbirds is the brainchild of Gerry and Sylvia Anderson. Go worship at the altar of their brilliance. I hear a bottle of tequila and a dollar bill do wonders. This story is rated T/M for heavy swearing (including the F-word; I've been married to the military too long not to have a mouth) and implied but not explicit violence; Gen (because I don't do much else), but that's about it. Spoilers for this particular story are Movie-based because, like many, I was so very disappointed in the lack of family and brotherhood. (Hi, Tracys! We remember you, even if your own movie didn't!) This was my attempt to remedy that, along with reconciling some of the differences between the series and the film (like why they don't carry guns in the film, etc.). Others have done it and done it better, but I'd like to throw my hat in the ring.

What started out as a one shot distraction has turned into a full on, ten chapter fic that I never would have dreamed would be a part of my collection. It is my first foray into the world of Thunderbirds, brought to you by my children, a 20 hour drive with only a Busted CD in the cubby, and my husband, who will geek out with me over just about anything.

As always, thank you for taking the time, even if you're shy like me and don't comment. Your time alone is appreciated. Thanks for reading and enjoy! Six
The thing about living the majority of his playground-aged life on an island? Eventually a guy will run out of places to hide. While Alan Tracy had more hidey-holes strewn about each and every square foot of the joint than the rest of the family (places none of them would dream because he was, after all, the youngest), it wasn't likely he would manage to find another one. Not now. Certainly not when he only had a few seconds to spare.

Alan was, in a word, screwed.

Feeling up the rock skimmer on his belt, he thought about sending out a warning shot to whichever one of them had the balls to track him down — *Leave me the hell alone!* — but the handkerchief knotted around the rock that parachuted out over the mouth of the footpath stuffed the words back in his mouth. All-out hostility would only make things worse and, he had to admit, whichever one of his brothers had gone to the trouble to white flag him deserved to cross enemy lines without being shot at. Yet.

"I come bearing gifts." Gordon's voice quivered melodramatically from behind the tree trunk. "Don't shoot."

"That depends on what you're here for."

"Food, dude. You ran out before breakfast."


Gordon stepped out from behind the tree, one hand up in surrender while the other held up a towel-covered plate. "No fight with Dad is worth missing these." He whipped the towel off, revealing a treasure trove of muffins surrounded by a moat of probably two large bananas' slices. He made a show of waving his hand over them, wafting the aroma over to Alan.

"Tease," Alan grumbled.

Gordon cocked his left eyebrow with a strangely predatory grin, leaving the look up to interpretation. Alan didn't want to know.

Onaha made his favorite. So this was how the Trojans felt. He briefly wondered whose idea it was but figured there was no point. It was too early for his father to be in a concession-friendly mood, and even if he was, Jeff Tracy didn't negotiate surrender until all his other options had been exhausted. So either Onaha was feeling sorry for him, or someone else had stepped in on his behalf to loosen their father's heartstrings. Great. Now he was a sympathy case on top of everything else. There were times he hated being the baby.

Gordon snagged a banana and popped it in his mouth, circling the plate around some more. "Going once, going twice."

"Gimme."

They found a spot in the sun down closer to the water line, cuffed their pants, and planted their bare feet in the water and asses in the sand. Alan picked at the breakfast, not entirely sure even a bribe that good could make him feel better. He had barely slept the night before, his stomach churning with the waves he could hear below his window, a feeling that only grew as time went on. Dark hours were spent replaying the fight with his father, but no matter how he looked at it, it couldn't turn out any
differently. He was still the baby, and Jeff was still unwilling to listen. No muffins, no matter how salivating, could make him not fourteen, not the youngest, not Dad's not-favorite. As the muffins progressively made the gnarling in his gut worse, he felt more and more alone.

Alan pretended not to notice Gordon and his bottomless pit pilfering more and more from the plate. By the time the sizeable bribe was gone, he was pretty sure Gordon had finished off at least three-quarters of it.

Side by side, they watched the brilliant blue waves come in for a while, soaking in the quiet, companionable whoosh of water meeting sand. The silence wasn't quite as comfortable as it used to be, not like it had been before Gordon was granted leave from the kids' table, but it was close enough. If Alan closed his eyes, he could almost believe they were still friends, still a team. The Terrible Two still breathed somewhere in the spaces between them. Somewhere.

Why he went and destroyed that, Alan didn't know, but he was mentally kicking himself before the words were even out of his mouth. "So you drew the short straw, huh?"

Gordon kept his backward-leaning position, supporting himself on his elbows. The eye contact was all too brief, strangely hesitant, before he said with his usual buoyancy, "I wanted to."

"You mean Scott's mad, Virg is still sleeping in, and John didn't want to get put in the middle."

It wasn't like it was some big mystery. Of course they would send Gordon. They were the Terrible Two, were they not? It was simply expected Gordon would know how to talk to Alan, especially when Alan was under the (correct) impression that none of them knew how to talk to him anymore. At least if it was Gordon, the conversation had the opportunity to not descend into total chaos. His brothers tended to forget he knew them as well as they thought they knew him.

Or rather, that was how it used to be.

Alan shrugged, struggling to match his brother's cheerfulness. "You didn't have to. I'm not in need of an intervention or anything."

"You would rather face the smother hen on an empty stomach?"

"You aren't denying it."

"Don't need to." There went the last of the banana slices. "I asked you a question."

In the awkwardness where Gordon waited far too patiently for Gordon — he was getting weird in his old age — Alan let his skimmer talk for him. He didn't aim at anything in particular, but he got some good distance on that one. Trouble was, he ran out of stones too quickly to keep the conversation at bay.

"We don't talk, Gords. We get in trouble. We goof off and make it our mission in life to make their lives interesting. Anything more serious than that leads to questions about our health and feeling us up for fevers." Alan slapped away the hand Gordon was already reaching toward his forehead. "I feel fine, by the way."

Gordon swatted the hand back, still smiling. "We used to talk."

"We used to do a lot of things."

Alan reached down between his legs to dig a finger into the sand. He traced it around in a circle, dragging around and around until his finger was buried to the first knuckle. He crooked it back and
forth as much as he could until the wet sand gave and popped his finger out. He scraped the sand back into the hole, tapped it down firm, and started all over again. He wondered how long he could keep it up before his brother got too frustrated with him and left him to his own devices. It wasn't like Gordon to sit this quiet this long without good reason. He had too much energy coiling in him to do still. The others must have bribed and/or blackmailed him with something pretty damn good for him to keep at it.

Tenting his knees, Alan let his elbows limply rest on top, his fingers playing a rousing tune of nervousness, which only made him antsier. Still Gordon sat there waiting for him, soaking up the sounds of his beloved ocean, almost like he was deriving his newfound patience power from it. Escape-and-Evade would be a lot harder this round.

It was weird, not helping his stomach at all kind of weird. He couldn't remember a time when he couldn't talk to Gordon — not that he ever had anything all that serious to lay on his partner in all things crime — but he honestly didn't have a friggin' clue at all what he was supposed to say. It wasn't like Gordon didn't know what was wrong. He'd been ten feet outside the door. He heard. The whole house probably heard, one way or another. So it wasn't like they were hurting for topics or anything. And yet, he couldn't find a single word to say.

The sadness of that realization overwhelmed him, hunching his shoulders under the weight. So far? Spring break sucked.

"So no talking then, I take it?" Gordon sighed. "Good. Don't talk. Just listen. It'll be a lot less painful for both of us."

"Let's not and say we did."

"Sorry, kiddo, no can do. Direct orders. Besides — and, god help me, I'm gonna come off sounding like Scott here — he's right about some of this stuff. I know he's right about this."

Scott was clearly a bad influence.

"I know you think we don't have a clue what you're going through." Alan opened his mouth to argue, but Gordon cut him off with a jab to the ribs and a strict bark. "EH! Listen. You're ticked off at all of us, and that's okay. I get it. I mean, I don't get what it is I did. Neither do the rest of the guys, and we really wish you would tell us so we can fix it, but we get it. After Christmas, the message came through loud and clear."

Alan flinched. He didn't remember doing anything or saying anything to close himself off from them, but apparently something had happened he didn't even realize. He stole a glance at his brother, hoping for some sort of sign of what it could've been, but Gordon had his face turned up to the sun, keeping his eyes closed and hidden from interpretation.

Okay, so if one of the waves could randomly suck him in and take him out to sea right about now, that would be fabulous. Or his head, there was plenty of sand just lying around for the taking. A few hundred pounds of it would bury his head from all this, wouldn't it?

There was never an emergency rescue call to answer when he needed one.

It was entirely possible that there was no way for his day to get any worse — and it was only ten.

Contritely biting the bullet, Alan said, "You didn't do anything. And I'm not ticked. Not like that. It's just … I don't know. It's everything. Everybody. It's, like, I can't wait to get home, but once I'm here, I can't … " He ran a hand through his hair, only to grit his teeth. Stupid sand. "You guys were gone
a lot last time I was home. Even if I wasn't grounded, I doubt you'll be around much now either. School sucks and all, but being home isn't exactly all that and a bowl of Cheetos these days."

"Hmm," Gordon agreed, thoughtful, but still with his eyes closed. "I'm not gonna say you didn't get off to a rocky start. That stunt in 'One wasn't exactly your most brilliant maneuver ever." Again Gordon cut Alan off without even seeing the open fish mouth about to interrupt him. (Seriously, Alan had to wonder if being an older brother meant receiving an extra pair of eyes in the back of your head at birth.) "But! I know you didn't hear because you were too busy storming off, but you missed out on John smoothing things over for you and then Scott and Dad getting into it. They both stuck up for you. Scott even told Dad to lay off for a while. I thought he'd completely blown a gasket, but he said some stuff, and, well ... I guess we all forget sometimes what it's like to be fourteen. And being The Jeff Tracy's kid isn't exactly an easy job for any of us. I mean, c'mon, having him come in for parent career day is a pretty crazy thing when the other kids are bringing their accountants and doctors in, right? Then you have Scott and Johnny and Virg doing the out-overachieving the overachievers thing, and it all becomes a lot to live up to. Fourteen sucks enough as it is without that kind of pressure. We forget that sometimes. For my part in that, I'm sorry."

Alan gaped at his other overachieving brother, wondering briefly if his modesty was intentional to put at least someone only a few levels ahead in the playing field instead of entire stadiums. "Is this supposed to be a pep talk?"

For this, Gordon popped open one somehow comically grinning eye. "No."

"Good, because right now you pretty much suck at it."

"You want a pep talk, ask Scott." The eye closed again, slamming shut the opening they'd found. "I'm not Scott."

"But you took the job."

"You aren't a job, kiddo. A pain in my ass, yes, but not a job — even if we make it sound like it sometimes. The point is Scott's not mad about last night. He can't be. It isn't like he didn't take the keys to Dad's Mustang when he was fifteen, and if you had to avoid anyone's wrath, it would be his. So you don't have to hide out down here. No lectures. He just wanted you to know we know, okay? Don't be in such a rush to get in that plane."

"You were."

"You aren't me."

Alan rubbed at his heart through his t-shirt. Ouch. "Gee, thanks."

"That isn't how I meant it, and you know it. You have plenty of time to catch up with the rest of us, kiddo. Be a kid while you still can. IR'll still be there when Dad thinks you're ready."

The ensuing silence was filled with Alan's angry, unsaid But I am ready, and you know it. But Gordon couldn't read minds, and he wasn't particularly good at reading body language either. That was Scott's thing. Part of him couldn't help thinking Gordon should be able to read him anyway. They shouldn't even be having this discussion. His brothers should just know. They expected him to just know.

Damn it! When did family have to get so freaking complicated?

He stared at the water, wondering if, if it washed him out to sea, he would actually become part fish like Gordon. He didn't love the water nearly as much as the Aqua-Tracy, but he could learn to. Find
himself a little mermaid to hang out with, one who would listen to him, only him, and understand. One who didn't have a dad who still thought she was a kid, too.

Out of the corner of his eye, he wondered if Gordon was thinking the same thing. Oh, god, they were probably after the same imaginary mermaid. And like with everything else, Alan would lose because how could he not when put up against the rest of the Tracys?

Why didn't they just know?

"I gotta tell you," Gordon said, taking him away from his mermaid and the safety of the watery world. "And if you tell the others I said any of this, I'll deny it, but … I wasn't ready. I thought I was, but the first year, man, I was *not* ready. There are things we've seen, things I wish I could un-see. So many things. Is it really so bad that we don't want that for you yet? Because, let me tell you, once you see those kinds of things, you can't … You're too young. You may not think so, but school is where you need to be right now."

"That's not how you made it sound last night. Or any other night. What happened to *out of hand* and *awesome*?

"You aren't an idiot, Alan. I know you aren't. Do you listen to this house at all?"

Alan shrugged because, quite frankly, he *was* feeling like an idiot, or at least like his brother was talking to him like he was one. If this was how the lecture was sounding coming from Gordon, he could only imagine what it would sound like coming from Scott. "Can we just stop talking now? I get it. Okay? Just drop it."

"You haven't been home now for almost three months. You wanna know what it's been like the last two? Or did you not hear Dad get up and check Scott's door twice in the middle of the night? Because I gotta tell you, little brother, those nightmares are sounding pretty good compared to what they were there for a while. The only reason Virg slept through it last night was — "

"Don't." A particularly strong wave came in, drenching Alan to the knees. Oh, sure. Even the water was against him now.

"Don't what?"

"Yeah, I get it. Okay? It isn't all a cakewalk. It isn't all easy like yesterday. Next you'll start in like Dad on how I need to learn responsibility. I get it. No lecture needed. I just — I wish … Damn it!"

Alan fell back into the sand, arms flung over his eyes. None of this was going the way it was supposed to. Dad wanted him to show some responsibility? He couldn't even get through a conversation with the only brother close enough to his age to still get it without him losing his temper. How was he supposed to convince his father of anything when he didn't know how to talk to any of them anymore?

Gordon sat patiently waiting for him to say whatever it was he wanted to say, which only made Alan want to punch his lights out. The only thing worse would be if it were Scott sitting there. Whichever brother the pack sent, it didn't matter. They would sit there and listen and be so damn *nice* about it that the only possible outcome to it all would be Alan feeling like an ass for being, like Gordon had reminded him, fourteen. And yeah, he felt fourteen and miserable and sorry and, really, could this day possibly start off worse?

The thing was he knew he should be trying to fix this rift he didn't even know existed. He should be trying to find a way to make this next week something that Christmas hadn't been. He should be
telling his brother he was proud of him. Anything but sitting here like a pouty kid.

It wouldn't just be blowing smoke up Gordon's ass if he were to only talk about it. How could he not want to be Gordon? Or Scott? Or any of them? And not just because of IR or the stuff he saw them do on TV all the time. No one had brothers like his. It was like something out of an old Western or something. They were the Earps, living legends, right there next to him. He should say that, not get into the same fight he'd been having with their father. He should say so many things. And yet.

It was impossible not to feel their shadows soaking him up, eating him up, devouring him until he disappeared. It was impossible to not feel a lot of things.

Gordon's voice was softly encouraging even as he threw a handful of sand too close to Alan's mouth. "I'm not a mind reader."

Alan didn't look up, keeping his arm draped over his eyes. He wasn't sure he wanted to see his brother's reaction to what he had to say. "How much of last night did you hear?"

"Mostly you screaming at Dad. You know him. He doesn't really yell. He just uses The Voice. Why? Did I miss something?"

"No," Alan lied.

No. He couldn't do this. He felt stupid for even starting down that road. Maybe if he let things go long enough, Gordon would change the subject. Something. Anything to get him out of this conversation with only the injuries already incurred.

"I could totally be a mind reader."

Okay, that wasn't quite the anything Alan was looking for, but if that was how Gordon wanted to play it? Let the man daydream away. He grinned up at the sun, mirroring his brother's posture of elbows in the sand, toes in the water. "Sure, Gords."

"I could."

"Fine. What am I thinking right now?" Pick a number. Any number. Three. Everything comes in threes.

"That you wish you'd eaten even half the muffins Onaha sent out."

"Not even close."

A finger poked at an Alan too slow to get out of the way. "Your stomach's growling different."

"I'll find something later."

"Not muffins."

"I'll find something."

"Gordon Tracy: Mind Reader. It has a ring to it."

Alan snorted. His brother was a lot of things, but a snake oil salesman would never be one of them. "Until you get sued for false advertising."

"I'll fit something into the fine print. But I could do it. Gordon Tracy: Mind Reader. I see potential."
"Yeah, well, Alan Tracy: Fortune Teller sees you dateless for all eternity if you try to use that in a bar some night."

"We should go into business together. We could have some sort of acronym or something. Oh! We could have cool aliases and work out of a back room in a greasy spoon diner or something. Brains could trick it out with hydraulics under the table and a light show." He raised his voice to a feminine tone, preened, and quoted, "Orlando, do you like it? It's Autumn Sunrise." Back in his own voice, he sighed. "That'd be awesome."

Alan finally sat back up, took off his jacket, and fanned it in front of Gordon's face. "Wow. No more sun for you."

"Only if you tell me what you were thinking." Gordon lifted an eyebrow and one corner of his mouth to say see? I can be sneaky, too.

Caught. Damn.

"Nevermind," Alan said quietly. Well, if ignoring things didn't work, maybe a little (more) misdirection would. "Scott's having nightmares?"

"Hmm. There was this job in this little village outside Paris the end of January. We lost a couple and their two kids. We got almost a hundred other people out of there, but … The one kid looked a lot like John did at that age. A lot, a lot."

"Paris? That was the one with the hotel fire, right?"

Misdirection accomplished because Gordon's face fell hard and fast. "How did you know about that?"

It would've been easy to laugh if Alan didn't have a mental picture of his oldest brother screaming in his sheets at night over it. It physically made his heart ache for Scott, the idea of his nights so tortured.

Scotty needed a mermaid.

Still, for a guy who was down here thinking he had all the answers and could zip up this little family squabble with mind reading, Gordon was pretty damn clueless sometimes. "You're kidding, right?"

"We've been going out of our way to not talk about that one around Scott, let alone you. John's the only one who didn't have nightmares the first month. How did you … ?"

"TV, dude."

"They were there? I knew about last night and a few of the others, but Paris? Really?"

Alan shrugged. "IWN might as well rebrand itself 'Discovery: IR' or something."

"And you saw it?"

"You mean the part where 'Two took a fifteen foot flaming rebar through the cockpit windscreen? Yup. They hang back as much as they have to, but somehow they always manage to get somebody to the scene. How did Dad get her home, by the way? It looked … cold."

"And you saw last night?"

"Unless it happened after hours, I've probably seen it. You … " It was Alan's turn to be amazed.
Gordon looked so strangely sincere, so oddly innocent of it all. Although, come to think of it, he
couldn't think of the last time any of them were off the island unless it was an IR or Tracy Industries
thing. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"What it's like out there. Away from here, away from Dad's office and the dinner table. What it's like
to just listen to people talk about you."

"Weird, huh?"

"Sure. I don't know. I mean, it's cool. It can be cool, anyway. I mean, c'mon, there are only five guys
in the whole world who do what you do. It's awesome that there isn't a guy in school who doesn't
know the name 'Thunderbirds' or think of you guys instead of an old car. It doesn't get much cooler
than knowing there isn't a single guy in school who doesn't want to be my dad and my brothers when
he grows up. You can't imagine what it's like to have some peewee seventh grader running through
the halls yammering about how the Thunderbirds are gonna be on TV. Trust me, someone always
knows. Someone always makes sure we all know."

"But?"

Alan caught the tone too late, the seemingly masterful change of conversational direction steering
him back to his own issues instead of Scott's. Before he realized what he was saying, he admitted,
"But the Thunderbirds are gonna be on TV."

"Ah."

"You guys sat there last night going on and on about Peru and how awesome it was. Sure,
it was awesome — right up to the part when I watched you get knocked off the rescue platform and
crushed between it and the cliffside."

Alan felt Gordon flinch, his back probably feeling the impact again simply from memory, stretching
his barely healed body, but the look on Gordon's face only spurred him on. He had to get this out.
Who knew when he would get this chance again? Maybe, if they understood …

"Have you ever seen thirty guys all look hurt at the same time just from watching somebody take a
hit like that? Where you just know it hurts like hell, even though you aren't the one taking the hit? It
was like they were sitting in a movie theater. They were watching The Thunderbirds. Every single
guy in that common room was holding his breath. Me, all I knew for sure was that one of my
brothers wasn't moving and the damn basket was moving up into 'Two without him. Fermat tried to
talk to me, but I couldn't move. I couldn't turn off the TV and tell them all to shut the hell up, that it
wasn't a movie. I couldn't tell them to just shut up so I could try to catch any sign at all that you were
okay. I had to watch while the basket just sat there while that reporter woman babbled on about how
brave it was and how she wasn't getting any word on the condition of the downed Thunderbird.
Because obviously her getting news was so much more important than how you actually were."

The more he went on, the less he could stop it all from building up in his chest. All the heat, all the
worry, all the humiliation of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing or of just not being one
of them made his lungs tight with frustration. If he was going to make Gordon understand, he had to
make his brother understand all of it. It wasn't that he was fourteen. It was that he was.

Angry now, though he wasn't entirely sure how he got there, Alan snapped, "And it sucks. Being
there sucks. Being here sucks. But the waiting? The seeing it and knowing I'm going to come home
to it all being shoved in my face like last night, so awesome, so … so … so yeah, it was awesome."
Or what about Istanbul? You guys thought that one was so damn cool, too, right? Virg came home with a concussion on that one, right? Took a couple stitches in the back of his head, didn't he? Which none of you bothered to call me about, by the way. I got to watch it happen, but it wasn't important enough for me to know about from your own mouths."

Alan hauled himself to his feet then, too much energy thrumming through him. If he didn't get up, he was afraid he'd explode from the anger, or that it, too, would eat him alive. He had to ... had to ... damn. He just had to move.

He shook his hands out as he paced a line in front of Gordon's feet, unable to contain it. Where was a mermaid to kidnap him out to sea when he needed one? Where was their Gordon? Shouldn't he be making Alan laugh about now? Why wasn't he doing anything? Why wasn't he saying anything to make this exercise in torture end already?

That's it. Next time Scott got to draw the short straw.

"Alan."

"Don't. Don't 'Alan' me. You don't know. You have no freakin' clue what it's like to sit there and watch. At least John knows everything that's going on up there. I'm strapped with Reporter Barbie, who half the time doesn't even know what country she's in. At least Johnny knows."

"And gets to feel as helpless as you," Gordon said bluntly. "Have you even asked him what he thinks about that?"

"He gets to talk to you the entire time. He hears everything."

"Yeah, kiddo, he hears everything. You wanna know what it's like to listen to — you know what? I didn't come out here to argue."

"Then why did you?"

"Because we miss you, kid. We miss our kid brother. Our Alan hasn't exactly been around much lately."

Alan winced. There it was again. Kid. Not Dad's favorite. Not one of them. And yeah, he supposed he was being fourteen, as Gordon had so eloquently put it. Maybe laying any of this on Gordon (which meant it would be repeated and laid on everyone but Dad) was mean. Maybe it was unfair. But was it really such a bad thing to want a little attention? Was it such a bad thing to want to be with them? Maybe he hadn't gone about it the right way. Maybe he wasn't seeing things big picture. But still. It was kinda hard to see the big picture when his world was confined to a secluded island and a dormitory on the other side of the world, neither world having anything to do with the other. Just like him and IR. Always different, always separate. Never quite settled. Just like him.

"When was the last time you were in Dad's office — not Command and Control, his plain office?" he asked thoughtfully, balling and releasing his fists alternately to calm back down.

"Hello, non sequitur."

"When was the last time you really looked at it?" Gordon shrugged, still confused, so Alan went on. "Not that it would ever happen, but if a stranger sat in there, what do you think they would see?" Again Gordon waited — so damn nice — because it was probably obvious he wouldn't guess the right answer anyway, so he might as well wait for it. But Alan wasn't in the mood to let him sit this one out. He wanted an honest answer. "Nothing?"
"I don't think it matters what someone else would see. I think what matters right now is what you see."

He knew he was about to sound like the most bitter, fantastically spoiled rich kid in the world, but he couldn't stop the tone, not when it was right there in the back of his throat fighting to get out. "Me, I see Jeff Tracy and his four sons."

"It isn't like that, and you know it."

"Do I? You know, I get him wanting to flood the place with pictures from before, when Mom was still here and we were all together. I get those. I want those there as much as the rest of you do. But if you look around otherwise? After Mom, I'm gone. I'm not even close to there. Sure, they're just pictures. It shouldn't matter. It shouldn't say he loves me less than anybody else, but it does. It's childish and immature, I guess, but it is what it is. Maybe if I wasn't already mad at him I wouldn't feel that way, but standing there last night, having him ream me out with the five of you staring at me … Anyone who isn't us would walk in that office and see him on that wall with his four kids. What's behind that mural, no problem. I get that part. But if there is supposed to be this line between IR and us as family? Where do I fit into that? It's kinda hard to say I'm part of the family but not part of the team, not when I've got reminders like that up on the wall."

"Allie, that picture doesn't mean — "

"You aren't the one left behind, Gords."

Alan turned away and walked further into the water, letting it cool him. He imagined steam coming out of his ears as blue rose up his neck, across his face, and up into his hairline, overtaking the burning red. He couldn't bring himself to look at his brother, not after letting that one out. He'd kept that one quiet for so long now. He wasn't even sure what made him admit it, but yeah, he hated that damn mural. It spoke to everything that was wrong about them right now. It was everything he wanted and everything he didn't.

Shaking with his inability to take back the embarrassment, he said without taking his eyes off the rocks protruding from the water, "Forget I said anything. Please? Can we let this go now?"

But it was too late to take things back. It was too late to simply come home and tell his brothers he was glad they made it home okay (because he was). It was too late to keep his mouth shut in his excitement to talk about anything at all with them (because, yeah, it wasn't Scott's first time, and he was an idiot for trying to work himself into the conversation). It was too late to take any of it back with Dad. Maybe all he could do was stay down here for the day, sneak in somehow, go to bed, and start over tomorrow. He'd be bright and cheerful, talk about whatever they wanted to talk about that had nothing to do with him, and get through the rest of break like he had Christmas. It had worked then. By the time he came home for the school summer, the humiliation and the anger and everything else would be forgotten.

Of course, he'd have to find a way to bribe Gordon to keep his mouth shut about this little Judy Blume moment they'd been having, but that could be arranged. He only had to get rid of the guy for the rest of the day. It could happen.

So much for Gordon being a mind reader. There he was, right next to him now, definitely not in on the plan. Alan willed his brother, telepathic wonder that he was, to read his mind now. Go away. Don't say whatever it is you're going to say. Go away.

But, no, Gordon had to bump his shoulder like they were friends and could talk like they used to.
"You know, Al, I get it. I do, but that doesn't mean I want to. You have to understand, as much as
you wish you could be out there with us, I would give anything to keep you here forever. You're
safe here. I get it. On top of the awesome — yeah, I'll say there's plenty awesome to go around —
there's plenty to worry about. But the worry … Man, you with us, out there, may feel like one less
thing for you to worry about, but it's one more thing for us. And honestly, I don't think I could
handle having to worry about one more brother out there. I only have so many pairs of eyes, kid.
And if you were to ask Scott or Virg, I bet they'd tell you the exact same thing. Don't even start me
on Dad. He doesn't say it, not to us, but you better believe he doesn't breathe from the minute we
leave until the minute he checks each of our beds when it's over."

Alan waited. No, the ground wasn't going to help him out, open up, and swallow him whole. He had
no choice but to wait.

"You're gonna take this the wrong way — God, I know you are — but you need to hear it. Being
out there, I can't tell you how many times we've all said how lucky we were you weren't with us.
Peru scared the hell outta us, too, Al, more than you'll ever know. The only thing that got us through
that flight home and Virg bleeding his damn brains out all over 'Two was knowing you were safe at
school. You don't want to hear this, but right now, you'd be a liability. You're still due for at least one
more growth spurt. Hell, your voice is still changing. You're not ready. We'd be spending all our
time worrying about you, not about keeping our own asses out of the fire. Literally."

"Thanks, Dad. You know, you really shouldn't have let Scott send you to do his dirty work.
Whatever he — "

"Scott's not here. I am. I'm the one talking to you."

"Enough already," Alan said, blowing off the unspoken plea to dial it down. "I get it."

"No, you don't. When you're ready, man, it's gonna be a great thing for us to see. It'll be so fucking
awesome. You are gonna be awesome. But right now — "

"Thanks for the pep talk, really, but I think the liability needs to walk it off. I'll see you later."

"You didn't hear a single word I said, did you?"

Alan glanced down at the hand wrapped pleadingly, painfully tight around his wrist. "Go away,
Gordon."

Uncharacteristically angry, Gordon snapped his hands up in a classic sign of I give up. He turned
around and made to walk away, throwing his last bit of parting wisdom over his shoulder instead. "If
you don't want Scott to hunt you down, you'd better find someplace better to hide. See you later."

Alan tried to make it look like he wasn't watching Gordon walk away. He couldn't give him the
satisfaction, not now.

Yup. The world could do him a favor and swallow him whole now.

Any second now.

Any time.

Swallow him right up.

He waited.
(End Part One)
Gordon and Scott

Needing to burn off the noxious mental disquiet of that heart-warming encounter, Gordon sprinted from the beach up to the house, using the run to ramp up his breathing. What he really wanted to do was throw up every single one of those bananas, but hyperventilating would have to do. Besides, if he couldn't breathe, he certainly couldn't scream. The last thing he needed to do was alert the entire household to what a spectacular strategic failure that battle had been. The invasion of Normandy, it was not. No, what happened back on that beach made Market Garden look like a resounding success.

Not that anyone really won this one. Four on one, one on one, it didn't matter. They were on the outs with their kid brother. There was no winning in that.

By the time he reached the patio, Gordon's lungs ached with his effort to hold it all in. Hands balancing the breakfast plate on top of his head and squeezing the life out of it, he counted his breaths. One breath for every point Alan made that made sense, one for every point he made that made Gordon want to wring his neck, one for every point that convinced Gordon his only little brother had somehow been body snatched.

Wharton needed to invest in a better security system. What was Dad paying them for if not to protect its students from aliens and revenants?

See? If Alan hadn't tried to kill the chemistry lab, he wouldn't have had to change schools. Gordon didn't remember there being aliens at Welton Academy (although Mr. Todd did look an awful lot like a revenant of that guy from Phantasm). And it wasn't like he didn't spend half his senior year looking for the mothership to take him away from those godforsaken hallowed halls (and Mr. Todd), so he would know. None of this would've happened if Alan had been at Hellton.

Where had Alan Tracy: Fortune Teller been when they needed him, huh?

Gordon so could've been a mind reader — if it wouldn't give him such a scuzz-sucking nasty headache. Kids were hard work.

Shaking off the most heated of the frustration, he wiped a hand down his face, set his shoulders, and made for the bar. Onaha stood behind the counter drying a row of glasses with a towel that probably needed a good wringing out. He wanted to tell her it was pointless to be drying the dishes in this humidity — they were on a tropical island, for pete's sake — but the woman was an immovable force that even their father didn't dare challenge. She had her ways, time-honored routines and traditions, and the gods help the mental patient who dared suggest otherwise.

Speaking of mental patients … Scott was hunched over his laptop like, if he crawled inside, maybe somewhere in there was the answer to why their little brother had gone completely wacko on them and what he could do to force the kid out of it. Gordon could actually see the tension in the shoulders under his brother's shirt. He had to admit, Gordon suddenly had a whole new respect for Scott. How he'd done this now four times without committing some quality fratricide was beyond impressive. Gordon thanked John's lucky stars — and Scott's, Virgil's, Alan's, Dad's, and even Grandma's — that he was only going to have to go through this the once. Scott could keep his big brother gig. He was better at it anyway.

Neither of them seemed to notice his approach, but the way Onaha's towel worked a little faster after a glance at her wrist said they were both waiting impatiently for his return. Sensing his presence, her eyes flashed up to his, the Is he all right? bright and obvious. Gently passing her Alan's empty
breakfast plate, he thanked her with what she'd sworn was a smile that would charm the pants off any woman under forty (besides her) in a fifty mile radius. Her face fell when he saw she recognized the smile for the lie it was. It was a sad day when her muffins didn't do their job. He patted her hand to let her know the effort had been appreciated anyway. She smiled and shooed him off toward the poolside table and impending doom.

Sneaking up behind him, Gordon smacked Scott upside the head. "I hate you," he only half-heartedly grumbled.

Scott sank into his chair away from the computer screen, hands lazily waffled on his stomach and eyebrow arched too knowingly. He tried to look innocent, but it only came out smug as he asked, "That well, huh?"

"You set me up."

"Call it a lack of choices. You're about the only one he'll talk to these days. I'm lucky if I can get two full sentences out of him, and one of them is 'Hi'."

"You set me up."

"What did he say?"

"That you set me up."

Gordon cuffed Scott's dark head again and then ambled back toward the bar, knowing full well he would be followed. If he had to have a second conversation of epically uncomfortable proportions in one morning, he needed that fruit bowl. Hey, he was a growing boy, and being everyone's favorite go-between was hungry work. Worst case scenario: a banana slice could keep him from saying something he shouldn't. Dad raised him to not talk with his mouth full.

"I said he's been a pain lately. I didn't say he was dumb." From behind, Scott clapped a hand on either shoulder, forcing Gordon down onto the stool with a far too cocky grin. Yep, he knew he'd won.

"You set me up!"

"Strategy, Gords."

"Self preservation, jerk." Gordon elbowed his ribs, knocking him onto his own stool, maybe a little harder than necessary but totally deserved.

"He knows exactly what I would say. Virgil, too. All he has to do to avoid John is push a button. Having it come from you was our only option."

"You set me up," Gordon grumped, dropping his head into his crossed arms on the bar. Scott's blatant enjoyment of his pain only made it worse. He raised his head enough to beg, "Never again. Anything you want, it's yours. Just don't make me do that again. I had to be all serious and pep-talky and, well, you. It was disgusting. I felt myself losing cool points with every word coming out of my mouth, and I couldn't even stop it. He sat there, looking like I kicked his dead puppy, and you — " He jabbed his accusing finger into Scott's sternum. "You made me not cool. I hate you."

"What happened?"

Head thudding back down to the bar without his arms to cushion him, Gordon said into the weatherproofed surface, "You set me up."
"Yeah, I got that, smartass, but I can only deal with one of you sulking at a time, and Alan's melodrama outranks yours right now, so get over it," Scott snapped, his patience finally going the way of the do-do. That didn't take too long. Damn. And Gordon was having fun, too.

Ultimately, Gordon knew Scott wouldn't turn off the solitary light bulb of inquisition before he was satisfied he'd heard every single insult traded and endearment ignored for the sake of pride anyway. Squaring up, he faced his brother like he would their father in the field, giving him the sit rep he so desperately wanted to strangle out of him.

"It pretty much went down like we thought it would. He got defensive and blew me off. He's angry, Scott, really angry, but a lot of it is stuff he just has to figure out on his own. I don't think even he knows really what he's so angry about, except that he's ticked off at the world. Something he said before it got real bad was — it made some freaky kind of sense, if you look at it like you're fourteen and stuck on an uncharted island four months out of the year … I don't know. He was right. I don't know how to talk to him like that." Gordon perked up, his face jerking the thought away with a grin and waggle of his eyebrows. "That's what we have you for. Go. Be pep-talky. Be one with your inner motivational speaker. Be aggressive. Be-ee aggressive. A-G-G — "

Scott reached over and clamped his hand tight over Gordon's still mumbling mouth. He rolled his eyes and said over the nonsense, "Shut up before you hurt something. I get it. Let him cool off first."

"Rwawad."

"Huh?"

Slapping the hand away, Gordon taunted cheerfully, "Coward."

"Absolutely. Where was he?"

Nope, no sarcastic look was needed. Gordon's pathetic groan of Will the torture never end? pretty much accomplished that. He sat against the back of his stool, head thrown back while he wished for the ax of a guillotine to somehow strike him from the ceiling. He kicked out with his feet (Scott's shin was hit, bonus points were incurred) and used the momentum to spin around a few times. When he slowed down, he trapped his feet and twirled back the other direction. He wondered how long he could keep it up until Scott got bored and found someone else to bug.

"The beach. Lay it out for me: what's it gonna take to get me out of this conversation with all pinky swears intact?"

Scott snorted. "He's begging us to treat him like a grown up, but he made you pinky swear?"

"Five years ago. I was forbidden from ever ratting him out on this one thing that has pretty much turned into five years' worth of things. Blackmail ensued. It was this whole big thing. A pinky swear is forever, dude."

"I think you can let it go this once."

"Easy for you to say. You didn't pinky swear."

Now it was Scott's turn to drop his forehead into the bar without a cushion. He growled, deep in the back of his throat, shaking his head. "It's like pulling teeth with you."

"What? I did what you asked. I talked to him. He talked back. There was no provision in the agreement for me turning traitor. Sorry." Gordon propped his feet on the stool and craned over the bar to snatch the glass of juice next to Onaha's cutting board. He didn't care what it was as long as it
kept his mouth busy and gave Scott a second to breathe. After a deliberately protracted gulp, he said evenly, "Look, he'll be okay. Spring break will suck as much as Christmas, and then we can start all over come summer vacation. He'll act fourteen, we'll get annoyed, he and Dad will fight, business as usual. You just have to wait him out like the rest of us. I get that that sucks for you, but you can't kiss the boo-boo and make this one go away."

Gordon couldn't help but wonder how much longer he had to suffer this back and forth before Scott realized there was a lesson to be learned regarding the men of this house each minding his own business sometimes. It was hard enough to have your own life when everyone was trapped on all sides by a helluva lot of water, but if anything, that should be a big blue cosmic clue (say that ten times fast) that there were boundaries. This chess game of brother vs. brother, sneaking around and strategizing, and forcing confrontations was plain wrong.

Maybe he was making the extraction difficult, but he was tired of being in the middle. Yes, they should be getting involved, and yes, they should be trying to work things out with Alan, but they should be doing it because they loved him and were genuinely concerned, not because Scott (or any of them) was nosy. Gordon planned to spend the rest of the kid's time home doing just that. The age difference between them had never felt so much like the Grand Canyon before, but they'd made a start. They'd talked. Virgil and Scott were just going to have to do their own talking, not leap frog the issue and use Gordon as their set up man. He wasn't lying when he said he wanted his brother back. If Scott wanted to fix things, he needed to do the same. Beating the answers out of Gordon wasn't going to work either.

And yet, the guy looked so pathetic in his frustration that Gordon couldn't help feeling sorry for him. For all the scheming and back room work, it came out of Scott loving them all. He was nosy as all hell — protective, in Scott-speak — but his intentions were born from his brother having a heart bigger than the tiny world of Tracy Island could contain. And yeah, Gordon loved him for it. Still, Scott needed to learn to deal with the melodrama himself a little. This wasn't a life or death thing. They had all of break. Scott needed to take a step back.

Really, there was never a rescue call when you needed one.

"What about you? You wouldn't be making this so hard if it wasn't a tough conversation. You okay?"

Oh, no. Hell no. No freaking way was Scott allowed to try to back door this whole thing by making it about Gordon. No way. Looking for a quick exit — or a new wingman, seeing as how his was beach-ward — Gordon perked, "Where's Virg?"

"Sleeping."

"Still?"

Scott simply gave him a look. Yeah, that was a dumb question. Whatever.

"You, big brother, need to lighten up before your brain implodes." Gordon reached to point at that crease in between Scott's eyes, the one he got when he was about ready to dump one of them in the pool whether they were dressed for it or not, but the older man pulled away swatting. "Your face is gonna stay that way."

"You're impossible."

"And your crow's feet are gonna have their own crow's feet if you don't relax."
"You're as bad as he is."

"He did remind me that it's our job to make your life difficult. I've taken it far too easy on you lately. And that's what you get for sending a little brother to do a big brother's job."

"Please? Drop the act and — just, please. Okay? Please."

Ouch.

That one word made Gordon involuntarily shiver. Scott never said please, not like that. He gave orders; he didn't ask. Not really. Not that he was a bully or mean or anything, but he did have certain expectations of them all as the youngers. While it was so very rare that Gordon be put in that position — that headache-inducing, traitorous position — when Scott wanted him to be an Older Brother (caps implicit and intentional), well, he expected results.

Suddenly he had a choice to make that he'd never seen as a potential consequence of being his older brothers' informant: was he their little brother or Alan's big brother? How much of what Alan said to him in confidence was drawing a line in the brotherhood that could not be crossed?

Gordon bit the inside of his cheek, seeing his true position for the first time. He'd only been joking before, but now he wanted to tell them all to screw off. They set him up. Both sides. And he let them because, really, he didn't have a choice. He was Alan's big brother, and that was a responsibility he did take moderately seriously most of the time and entirely seriously when it counted. It was way too hot too early in the morning for this shit. Dropping his head into his crossed arms on the bar, he mumbled his low level scream.

His stomach lurched. That third set of bananas had been a spectacularly bad idea. Then again, he was about to turn traitor on Alan; he deserved to feel like shit. He'd never really intended to, not the way Scott was trying to rubber hose it out of him, but he should've known he'd be left without any other choice. With an unsettled breath, he dropped all pretenses and blurted out the thing he was fairly sure, when Alan found out, would have him even further out than the rest of them.

"Do you think there's anything we can maybe do about him seeing the news coverage when we're gone? Like maybe Dad can negotiate a couple minute delay with IWN or something? Or something with the school?"

"Which one did he see?"

"All of them."

"Wait, what?"

"Peru, Paris, Cairo. You name 'em, he's seen 'em. Zoomed in and in HD. In front of all of his classmates. He made it pretty clear it isn't the Hey, look, my family's on TV! that's the problem."

"It's the Hey, look, my family's on TV," Scott said, his much less enthusiastic tone saying he knew exactly what the difference was. He ran a hand through his already humidity-drenched hair, gripping it tight at the base of his neck. "That bad, huh?"

Startling them both with her authoritative, motherly voice, Onaha rounded the corner of the bar, returning from a supply run, her arms loaded with the peppers and other bits she needed to start lunch. "You think you are the only ones who worry in this house?" Her eyebrows met in the middle with her disappointment as she dropped her supplies to the counter.

Gordon narrowed one eye on the woman, lazily taking the peppers and towel from her to clean them
himself. If her hands were free, she had no excuses. "You holding out on us, Onaha?"

The woman smiled at Gordon first, but she obviously intended her answer for them both. "You were the youngest for how long? How much of that time was spent wishing you were your older brothers?"

Gordon could feel himself blush. It was the natural order of things. Little boys wanted to grow up to be their big brothers. Little boys wanted to grow up to be their dads. It was how things worked. Why any of them thought Alan would be any different, well … It was probably one in a long list of oversights they were working with right now.

Onaha wasn't done, though. "There are three children still in this household, two of which are sent away without the advantage of seeing everyone come home when danger is past. You all see each other, whole and safe, while they wait for a phone call that most of the time is forgotten in the excitement. It is not intentional, but it is forgotten. In the simplest of terms, International Rescue was created out of worry. You are a family of worriers. That does not change because some of you are not here. Those boys simply get to worry somewhere else."

Scott glanced between Gordon and Onaha, clearly stunned. "He talks about IR like it's the — he can't wait to get in the — why wouldn't he say anything?"

"You are his brothers," Onaha said, patting Scott's hand, kindly but reprimanding at the same time. "He should not have to."

"But we've always made sure to keep the bad stuff out of it. We never told him — "

Gordon winced. "Like I said, HD."

"So unless we put an all-out ban on cameras and reporters, he's gonna hear everything." The side to side of Scott's lower jaw working his molars showed the gears turning in that thick head of his again. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing, at least until he's out of school? Protect his identity a little bit, too?"

"Dad needs the press on our side," Gordon disagreed. "It took how long to get even the US and UK governments to accept we weren't a terrorist organization? It's taken him too long to build up those relationships as it is, and as much as I despise them, the press was a big part of that. We take away that good will now, you can pretty much bet they're gonna be shooting us down the next time we end up in the wrong No Fly."

"We can't exactly take away every single television set on campus." Scott ran a hand over his head, making his hair stick up all over the place. "Damn. Why couldn't he be upset about something we can actually do something about?"

"I'm not done. You ready for this?" Gordon sucked down some more juice, his head warning him to shut his big fat, traitorous, protective, why the hell couldn't he have come first so I could be the youngest? mouth before he said this one, the one he truly couldn't take back. Alan would kill him for letting this one out. And yet, he couldn't stop himself. "The mural in Dad's office."

Yup, he was a ninth circle of Hell kind of traitor.

"What about it?"

"Have you ever really looked at it? I haven't. I mean, if I'm in Dad's office, it's because I screwed up. The last thing I'm doing is looking around and getting caught not paying attention, you know? The Voice is bad enough; I don't want to bring down The Wrath, too. So until he said something, I guess
I never thought about it. I've always hated that thing, mostly because I think we all look like complete morons, but Dad had to put something there. Alan's looked at it, though, a lot. Enough to read into it things that aren't there."

"He was at school when that thing was taken. Gordon, he wasn't here."

"You know that. I know that. That isn't how he sees it. All he knows is there's evidence everywhere that he isn't part of the team. It's … Mom took all the pictures when we were kids. I don't think Dad even knows how to operate a camera."

"He tried. Once. Remember?"

As much as he would like to stroll that particular alley of Amnesia Lane — anywhere but here — Gordon had to get this out before he couldn't. Willing his brother to understand, he stared Scott down hard. "You can't mention this to him. Talk about the TV stuff, school, home, anything else — I don't care — but you leave the mural out of it. If he has to take it up with anyone, that one has to be with Dad. The kid is in a rough spot, and we made it worse. There wasn't anything we could've done about it. We don't control the world outside this island. He's fourteen and, in case you've forgotten, the world out there sucks. We can't do that for him here, too."

"He didn't want to come home, did he?" It was more a statement than a question as Scott ran a hand through his hair. Gordon didn't answer, but he got the feeling he didn't have to. Under his breath, Scott was already formulating his next plot to fix things. "Then we'll just have to make sure he doesn't want to leave."

Gordon inwardly rolled his eyes. Yeah, the whole No Scheming or Plotting thing wasn't catching on at all. Frustrated, exasperated, the whole bit, he rubbed his hand over his hair at the same time Scott carded his hands through his own. They clearly spent too much time together.

"Can we be done with this now? Alan's gonna kill me three times over as it is. When he does, I'm saying you beat it out of me, by the way. It was painful and I cried. I was too out of it to know if bamboo shoots were involved. I may need medical attention."

Scott wrapped both hands around Gordon's neck, flopping his body side to side. "Did you really have to make that so hard?"

Both Gordon's hands went to his throat, but he didn't waste the energy to get rid of his brother. Instead he groaned, "Go back to your porn."

Yeah, that got rid of him real quick.

"Ugh, that was excruciating." Gordon moaned, throwing his head back to ask Heaven once again what he did to deserve the torture of three overprotective (nosy) brothers.

Scott Tracy: Interrogation Specialist, he thought. Scotty could be their bouncer and debt retrieval expert. All he'd have to do is stand there and stare people down; they'd beg him to take their money. Virg could … Virgil could do the special effects Brains didn't want to do. He dealt with enough blood and stuff to know how to make the fake stuff look real. Johnny could outsmart anyone; he could be the one to set up their marks. Yeah, they could so make this a family operation. Tracy Industries was always looking for new businesses to acquire. They'd have matching jackets and everything.

Onaha saw him smiling to himself as the nefarious business model blossomed in his head. "You look like you are up to something."
"Up to something?" he said, his best *I'm innocent* voice firmly in the most effective vocal register.

"Uh, huh," she laughed, clearly skeptical. From under the counter she produced their well-worn deck of cards. "Whatever it is you are thinking, young man, it is a terrible idea. First deal."

By the end of the third hand, Tracy Psychic Services was forfeit — but it had a slogan! — as was the bag of Swedish Fish Gordon had stashed in his room. She conned him, good and hard. Why he kept playing her when he lost eighty percent of the time, he didn't know. At least, he should know better than to actually put up bets. Her company he'd keep, unlike his Swedish Fish.

She kept the conversation light, if a little taunting, about his rummy-playing skills. The woman was ruthless with a deck of cards. Poker, blackjack, casino, go fish: you name it, she could play it. For two hands there was even a business plan involving her, him, and a three day weekend in Vegas with John counting cards from up in Five. She killed that one, too. His good humor returned to where it belonged so that by the time she did decide to chime in with her one piece of advice, Onaha had no chance of destroying his mood.

From behind her cards, she said, "He misses you."

"Who? Alan?"

She laid down a three of aces with a soft *hmm*.

"I didn't go anywhere."

"You did not mean to. No one does."

She laid down her cards, picked up her favorite in a full collection of utility knives, and sliced away the top, bottom, and ribs of a green pepper. He watched her, like he had done since he was a kid, fascinated by how she zipped across the pepper so fast it didn't even look like she was moving. Grandma could do that, too. If Gordon tried that, he'd end up without a few fingers. When she had neatly piled strips, she turned back to her cards. She fanned them into as clean a line as possible with the dog-eared corners. Onaha never hid how she liked things neat and organized in this house of growing boys and chaos. Without taking her eyes off the cards, she said in her lilting voice, "Leave your door open tonight."

"Huh?"

"Leave your door open tonight."

"You like being cryptic just to test us, don't you?"

"I don't know. Do I?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"Do you or don't you?"

"I don't know."

"Third base!"

"Exactly." Gordon snorted into a fresh cup of water. "See? *You* get how it's supposed to go. You're so much more fun than Scott. He has no sense of humor."

"I heard that," the comedian in question piped from behind his laptop. Gordon wondered if he'd
found his spell to cure possessed teen yet.

"You set me up!" he said cheerfully before focusing back on Onaha, thunking over his shoulder at Scott, and telling her, "He set me up."

"He does like his schemes," she said solemnly. He caught her wink and smiled, knowing what was coming before she said, "You like schemes."

"Yeah, but mine are fun," he said into his cup. Being a smartass was thirsty work.

The warning came out of nowhere, ridiculously loud and screeching. Red alert. He'd only ever heard that warning signal when Dad tested it to make sure it still worked. It was the only signal that was automated; everything else came in the form of one of their own voices over the intercoms calmly telling them to saddle up. That, more than anything, got Gordon to his feet. He heard Onaha gasp, but he couldn't spare her the glance to reassure her like they all normally would on the way out the door to a rescue. Scott was already sprinting past him, rolling his ankle along the way and hopping it out just before he hit the stairs. They both took three steps at a time only because they couldn't simply fly to the top.

The non-descript woman's voice announcing they were facing a red alert really needed to shut up now.

Footsteps pounding the hallway above were coming from every direction. As they made their way to meet them, Scott stopped in front of Virgil's door long enough to hammer it with his fist.

Over the shotgun pow! of Johnny Cash entertaining the men at Folsom — Virgil's already broody music of choice when he didn't want to sully anything beloved with ugly, broody memories — Scott shouted, "RISE AND SHINE, FU —"

A shocked awake Virgil whipped his door open, snarling, "Eat me."

Gordon couldn't help it. He laughed. What? Virgil woke up like a toddler falling out of bed — disoriented and crabby as all hell. His hair stuck up all over the place (not deliberately), and his eyes had this blind Don't Touch Me fury in them which clearly said that until he woke up he would be a useless lemming following the herd. If they walked him back to bed right now, he'd be asleep before he hit the pillow.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Scott's jaw work. Yeah, he thought it was funny, too.

The next second they were reminded, oh yeah, red alert. Buzzkill.

As one, the three of them surged down the hall, heads ringing with noise so that it all sounded like one long blare. Gordon heard the clank and whirl of the shutters revolving into place as they headed toward the office. Dad was just ahead of them when they rounded the corner, throwing his head over his shoulder for a headcount as they converged. With practiced smoothness, the closer they got to the door, Gordon glided to the front of the line behind Dad, Virg behind him, and Scott slightly to the side so that they weren't all colliding Marx Brothers style into the doorway while allowing them easiest access to their appropriate doors.

All it took were the words "Thunderbird Five" from Brains and "meteor" from Dad to make Gordon's stomach drop. He cringed at how the tube door closing on him had a ring of finality to it this time.

Damn it. He knew he hated his brother being up there alone on that fucking tin can for a reason. But if he had to be on a tin can, at least it was their tin can, one from Brains's mind, one both Dad and
John had approved of before marooning his brother there. It was still a tin can, though.

No one managed to say much as they slipped into their flight suits. Gordon's hands shook, and it took him three tries to get the zipper up, swearing a blue streak under the zzzt! He saw Scott's eyes slide over to him with their strange mix of amusement and concern, but Big Brother wisely kept his mouth shut. Maybe he could learn after all.

Dad must have noticed they were quieter than usual (or ever), because his voice startled them all. "Focus, boys. It doesn't do any good to worry until we know there's something to worry about." The pinch of his eyebrows said he knew he was lying as much as they thought. They did as told, though, their synchronized steps echoing toward the loading scaffold. Unnecessarily, he ordered, "Virgil, Gordon, get up there and get through pre-flight as quickly as you can. Check each other's work if you have to. Scott, you're with me."

Gordon flinched. It was no secret Dad needed to issue orders when he was scared. He hated the hollow quality of his father's voice when he was scared. No way. His dad was Jeff Tracy. Until the day he died, his dad wasn't afraid of anything. End of story.

Scott nodded and peeled off with their father while Gordon caught Virgil's much more alert gaze. Even as they ran, they looked at each other a moment, too aware and obviously thinking the same thing: of all of them, John was the one who was supposed to be safe. What the fuckity fuckall anyway?

In that one look, all the worry they chose to ignore on a daily basis took root behind Gordon's tonsils, liquid and bitter and gritty. What in the world were they thinking? IR had to be the dumbest thing they could ever have done. John was sitting up there with six inches of steel between him and his lungs exploding when he couldn't keep his body from reflexively taking in a breath. And they'd put him up there.

No time for recriminations, though, some of which he had a feeling would be taken up in a family meeting later. Shaking his head, Gordon reminded himself that if he was as pleased with his position as fourth in the birth order as he liked to think, then he'd better get his ass in gear to keep it that way. There was no way Alan could handle the Four position right now. It took too much planning and optimism. He was better off staying at the Five. John was good at the Two. For all the grief they all gave each other, they were exactly where they needed to be. That settled it. Not saving John's ass wasn't an option.

"You know he probably just pushed the up button to go down or something. Presto, false alarm," he said cheerfully, allowing Virgil to steer him toward the hatch so he could enter the code in the keypad on the cockpit door. That had to be it. John may be an incredibly brilliant man, but he couldn't tell his right from his left half the time. Johnny put his shoes on the wrong feet and it messed up his entire day. It wouldn't be the first time. An hour from now, Gordon would threaten to kick his big brother out the air lock and all would be right with the world … well, space.

They took their seats behind their respective consoles, strapping themselves in one-handed. Gordon spared a sideways glance at his brother's trembling hands. "You awake yet, Sleepy?"

Virgil grunted something that sounded affirmative, along with a mumbled "Johnny had better have the coffee on", although the yawn kind of killed the effect. Good enough.

"Command from Thunderbird Three."

"Go a-ahead, Virgil," Brains answered.
"Commencing pre-flight procedures."

"Read-reading system Three. You're, uh, up and online."

Still on task, Gordon glanced at the video screen as his fingers flipped their way through physically memorized switches, knobs, and doohickeys of expensive equipment that he tended to think of as a glorified cab service. "Brains, in case 'Five's systems are unable, can you get us some imagery so we know what we're flying into? If 'Five really did miss something big enough to damage her, I don't wanna know what else she might've missed in the blind spot."

"You'll have it one-once you're airb-borne."

"FAB."

As Virgil uplinked to the system that tethered all of the machines together, the warning klaxon came back to life over the little icon on the screen that represented Thunderbird Five. It took everything Gordon had not to punch it. Yes, they got it. John was in trouble. Yap, yap, yap. Telling them so on a loop wasn't going to get them there any faster. It might as well be saying Are we there yet?, for all the good it was doing.

"Can't you shut that thing off?" Virgil seconded.

"Wow. Somebody woke up on the — "

Virgil flipped him the bird. Gordon grinned, if uneasily, feeling some sense of internal imbalance resettled to where it was meant to be (away; far, far away). Dad was right. Focus. All he had to do was focus. John was fine. It was a false — and really damn annoying — alarm. He wondered if Dad would take the cost of fuel out of John's allowance.

Another warning buzzer assaulted his ears, this time while Scott took his seat and buckled in. Virgil swore under his breath, making Gordon laugh and Scott ask with a smirk, "Trouble, Dopey?"

Together Virgil and Gordon backtracked and reset the system to compensate for the error. Still too startled to be amused, Virgil grumbled, "Don't tell me Alan found his way in here, too."

Alan. Oh, damn. Damn. "Fermat, you still there?"

"G-g-go ahead, Gordon."

"Alan's sulking down on the beach."

"I'll f-f-find … t-take care of it."

"Try to keep his mind off it 'til we know what's goin' on, okay?" Out of the corner of his eye, Gordon caught Virgil question Scott with a cocked eyebrow, Scott answer with frown, Virgil respond with a quick raising of his other eyebrow before they both collapsed into a deep frown in the middle, and Scott's shrug of We'll deal with it when we get back. Over his shoulder, Gordon told them both, "This won't go over well."

"We'll fix it," Scott said, like by virtue of being Big Brother, he was right, Gordon was wrong, and there was nothing Scott couldn't do.

Gordon caught the moment Virgil realized what Scott's pronouncement meant. Unable to resist, he had to let him in on the fun. "You set me up."
"That well, huh?"

Gordon gaped. "You two need to get a new line." He heard Scott snort at that, turned in his seat as much as his harness would allow, and pointed his index and middle fingers first at his own eyes, then at Scott's. "Consider yourself on prank alert, pal. Sleep well tonight."

Scott rolled his eyes, clearly saying he wasn't afraid of Gordon or his prank alert, but he did drop it. Gordon sniffed in satisfaction. Yup, Scott was quaking in his moon boots. Score.

Dad stepped into the cabin, his face grim. "Status?"

Gordon waited for Virgil to flip through the last sequence he needed before he handed the primary control over. With a nod, he reported, "Thunderbird Three, ready for launch."

"Take her up, boys."

When they broke through atmo and touched where the stars stopped twinkling, Gordon found himself sucking in a sigh of amazement like he did every single time. It reminded him why his brother loved living up here among them, the sheer awe it inspired in them all. He still wished it didn't mean John had to do it from that rather expensive can of —

Holy mother of god.

Oh, Johnny.

Whatever had hit 'Five, the debris field alone was … wow.

Breathe, he reminded himself. He literally had to remind himself to breathe. John's voice came over the comms, telling them what a dead weight 'Five truly was. John may be a lot of things, but an exaggerator wasn't one of them. If he said he was losing all power, he meant it.

"Hold on, John. We're coming in."

Right, Dad. Job to do. Minor details.

Seeing all the flotsam and jetsam of 'Five they would have to thread through to get to John, Gordon couldn't help thinking the cosmos, beautiful as it was, could go screw itself for messing with his brother. Nobody and no thing messes with his family and gets away with it. Between IWN, Wharton Academy, and the whole freaking cosmos, Gordon's Shit List was kicking ass and taking names today.

Docking went off without a hitch. It was the least the cosmos could do for trying to blow his brother out of the sky.

"Emergency packs, boys," Dad reminded them needlessly.

In the half second between when Dad went to John and began issuing orders, the three of them took in the sparks and the screaming metal and fire and, yeah, Gordon was pretty sure Scott was thinking he was never letting any of them set foot on this aluminum foil death trap again. Gordon couldn't exactly disagree, and yet, part of him couldn't help thinking Alan would be so disappointed. He really did want to get the kid up here some day. John had talked on more than one occasion about how he couldn't wait to show his stars off. They couldn't use one meteor to keep him from that.

John's voice, alive and whole and coherent, telling Dad how glad he was to see them made Gordon smile.
Take that, cosmos.

Apparently he kicked too hard because the cosmos couldn't control her impulse to kick him back. *Don't talk back to me, kid,* she said. *You're on my playground now.*

"Attention, Thunderbird Five, as you can see, I have taken over your facilities."

Sickly, as the bald-headed psychopath went on about money and chaos and all the things he'd read in comic books over the years, Gordon couldn't bring himself to put to words what was so clear — not when it would sound like the single most smartass, cruel, awful thing he could possibly say.

You set us up.

And then, just to emphasize the point, the cosmos flashed a rat-tat-tat of sparks at the console he knew John liked to use during Tracy Island time night when he did most of his writing. It knocked the picture frame off its precarious balance, smashing the frame among the others that had already fallen victim to the collision. He didn't have to see the actual photograph to know which one it was.

Yes, damn it, he was paying attention. Bitchy cosmos.

Even though he knew the mics would pick up anything, he leaned as close as he could to Scott, tugging on the cuff of his flight suit to get his attention. Out the side of his mouth, he whispered, "The kids aren't there."

"You'll never get away with it!" Scott yelled to cover his voice. His furious eyes never left the screens, but he turned his wrist so that he could gently tap his finger on the inside of Gordon's wrist. Morse code. Dot dot dash dot, dot dash, dash dot dot dot. FAB. Then he squeezed, hard. He didn't need to spell out the implicit, Big-Brother-approved *It'll be okay.* Gordon wouldn't have believed that one anyway.

As Brains, Kyrano, and Onaha were marched across the various office cameras, prisoners of war on display to pay for all of Dad's mistakes, Gordon's eternal optimism abandoned him.

Hey, look, his family's on TV.

(End Part Two)
Scott and John

The Tracy boys knew their NASA history backwards and forwards, every mission, every glitch, every success, every single rotation of crews from Mercury on up the line. When they were kids, legends of Gordo Cooper's antics and Al Shepherd's chronic ear problems and the inner workings of Redstone rockets were their fairy tales (The Little Test Pilot Who Could, Goodnight Moon, Today I Feel Dizzy). They were their examples when Dad didn't know how to explain things. Things happen, boys, hatches blow for no reason. It wasn't until they were older that they realized, no, their knowledge was not normal. But then, they weren't normal. Look at Gordon. That kid was as far from normal as it got.

Yeah, Dad was slightly obsessed. Just take a look around.

Scott had to work to keep the smirk off his face when the Amnesia Tree beat a branch square into his brain with thoughts of how many times Gordon had had his mouth washed out with soap after repeating Virgil's namesake's favorite line. Sometimes Scott swore the kid did it just to see the looks on the adults' faces, like they thought it was so damn cute and hated to know they would have to punish him for it. Gordon knew he was cute, and he knew he had the big brass ones which made the grown ups respect him. He was such a weird, complicated kid. He wasn't any less weird or complicated as a man. Freak.

He exchanged a raised eyebrow with the abnormality in question as they watched, from the relatively safe distance of the generator pit, while Dad tried to contain his frustration over in the corner. Obviously the tweaks he was making with the satellite relay functions weren't coming along as he'd hoped. But then, his children were trapped on a sinking ship without a single rescue dingy in sight. Scott thought the man was coping startlingly well for now. He thought they all were.

"What's so funny?"

"You are."

"C'mon, you've gotta be proud of me. I haven't made a single 13 joke."

"I am." Scott's nod was deliberately solemn, trying to discourage the breaking of Gordon's quiet streak. Sure, he figured they'd all already thought it a few times, but they'd all had the good grace not to say it out loud. It was tempting Fate if one of them did it. "Very proud."

"But it's tempting."

"Don't."

"Not even one?"

"Holding pattern, Gords."

"I don't think I can."

Scott rolled his eyes. Really, there was nothing normal about his brother. The kid was actually asking permission to make a smartass comment. He knew he should probably take it as his brother feeling the gravity of the situation and wanting to keep it in the right perspective, even if it ran completely against type for him, and yet, it was just stupid. Who asks permission to make smartass comments? Wasn't that one of rules of being a smartass? Only Gordon ... "Okay, go for it. I know you want to."
Gordon bounced on the balls of his feet, giddy and entirely six years old. "Houston, we've had a problem."

"Got that out of your system?"

"Fuckin' A, bubba! Systems are a-okay." The grin on his brother's face was priceless enough to make it hard for Scott to be mad at him. Who knew how many smiles any of them had left in them? He wasn't going to take that away. Then, as if he were reading Scott's mind, Gordon's smile did falter. They shared a look that said it all: systems were anything but a-okay.

Systems were anything but fuckin'-a-bubba, that's for sure.

Gordon's smile withered some more before it crooked into grimaced apology. He busied himself with a screwdriver and the base for the timing element for the heat exchange. The ceramic base had sustained a slight fracture in the initial explosion, and of course, because none of them had bothered to rub a leprechaun's head on the way up here, the replacements were locked away on the other side of the station (which might as well be the dark side of the moon at this point). It hadn't stopped Gordon from trying to find a creative solution, though, with some spare copper wire and a soldering gun. Scott would never let it be said that his little brother didn't use his creative mind for both good and evil. If it worked, he'd never say his brother was less than an evil genius ever again.

Well, maybe that was taking it a little far, but still. Little brother was a lot more inventive than people gave him and his pranks credit for.

Leaving him to it, Scott eavesdropped on John trying to talk Virgil through yet another frustration, which was quickly becoming less talk and more sighing from both of them. While John was the one to know 'Five inside and out, he'd never been any better at explaining her to them than any of them were at explaining their 'birds to him. To have to ease Virgil through what was essentially her power up sequence, which hadn't been done since she'd taken flight, and do it without taking power away from Scott and Gordon in the pit, well … It didn't sound like it was going well at all. Virgil was doing his best to keep up, but, like Scott, John's mind saw the progression from Point A to Point G in one fell swoop and forgot to explain B through F along the way. Each of his brothers were geniuses in their own rights, had tested off the charts — which made John's brilliance look so damn phenomenal that it was hard to believe he wasn't at least part computer up there in that head of his — so when even an overachiever like Virgil wanted to throw his hands up in surrender, it had to be pretty big.

Sparks unexpectedly flew in Gordon's face, prompting a growled "hey!" as he shook out his foot from where his toes had connected with the corner of the toolbox. Virgil yelled a tight "sorry!" back — the third one in ten minutes — but it did nothing to improve Gordon's mood. Everyone was getting punchy. Things were short-circuiting left and right, as another yelp from Gordon testified.

"This is getting ridiculous." Gordon pulled his wrist back like he was ready to smack the generator into submission, but let it fall weak and flat at the last moment before he hit something he couldn't fix.

"That wasn't me," Virgil hollered, "I swear."

An electrical zzt! of something disagreeing had Gordon swearing a blue streak back. Scott carefully reached into Gordon's personal space to pluck the wrench from his brother's hand with an I'll take that, thank you wince, and then he held his arm out with a sweep. As you were.

Glancing between the pit and John's workstation, Scott could see it was time for a change in direction. Virgil bent over at the waist, hands on his knees and breathing hard. John's head ducked
while his free hand ran over his hair over and over, pulling on random bunches until his hand came away with red crust from the cut. Over by the airlock, their father wasn't doing much better in his futile attempt to reroute the power from the keypad itself to the door's sliding mechanism. The last thing they needed was for one of them to lose his temper and jack this up any more than it already was.

"Gimme two seconds." Scott clapped Gordon on the shoulder, about ready to switch himself out with Virgil when 'Five decided her death throes had been ignored in place of their piddly human problems. As the lights flickered, he glanced up at his father and saw him thinking the same thing he was, but everything cut short when another explosion had Dad slingshoting overhead into the work console half way across the room.

The force of the explosion knocked Scott off his feet, his tailbone catching whatever impact the back of his head didn't absorb. An electric shock vibrated up his leg as a small secondary explosion next to him mourned one more lost opportunity to get the hell out of this mess. He was pretty sure his teeth bit through his right cheek, the blood overpowering his throat. Gordon called his name, but the ringing in his ears was too loud, warning him to not try to shake it out if he wanted to still be able to hear when this was over. Then his brother was there, with Dad's help, pulling him to his feet around smoke and sparks and more chaos. Gordon reassured their father of something, sounding like he was a substitute teacher in Charlie Brown's classroom.

"The heat exchange is blown," he told them. Yeah, his own voice didn't sound right either.

Dad gripped his arm a little too tight. "You don't say."

Gordon coughed around a snort. Scott groaned. He'd definitely had enough of the peanut gallery for a while. His ankles tried to go in the direction he wasn't going, dropping his knees in another. His father and brother caught him with a synchronized "whoa" and eased him over to the work table.

"I'm good," he apologized even as he ceilinged his hands over his father's to keep them from gripping his face like an overzealous aunt. He heard John and Virgil shakily laugh next to him. "Oh, shut up."

Dad snapped his fingers, patience long gone. Scott met his eyes then followed the finger without direction. Not until he was satisfied that he didn't have another son out of commission did Dad sigh and hang his head.

"Damn, kiddo."

As much as it hurt, Scott wrangled his own face into a grin that might another day have been mistaken for a grimace and knuckled his skull. "Cast-iron, old man, just like yours."

Dad laughed, the first real laugh he'd had since Take Off, and gripped the back of Scott's neck. "All right. Take five. Virgil, Gordon, you're with me. You two, stay put." Before Scott could even open his mouth to protest, The Commander (not Dad, Commander; there was a difference) zipped the air. "Five minutes. I won't ask for more unless you give me reason to, I promise."

He didn't wait for a reply, turning his back and effectively cutting off the conversation. Scott was glad his newfound headache did at least something productive: Gordon and Virgil smirked at their father's over-reactive mothering, Serves You Right twin gleams in their eyes. Gleams were good. They went to work with a slightly renewed energy, Scott shaking a Why I Oughta fist at them both.

The hits he took for the team, man …
John licked his lips next to him. Dryly, like a sauntering cowboy, he said, "Don't you just hate it when he does that?"

Yes, all right, he got it. Undertones understood. You know, for all the bitching they did about his so-called mother henning of them, they never actually let him do it. Scott rolled his eyes, but he did nod. He could do five minutes. It was what he'd expect of the rest of them. Hell, he did order them on a regular basis. Besides, there was nothing in Dad's order that said he couldn't still work. He simply couldn't be on his feet to do it.

He let his hands fall into his lap, his long legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles, parallel with John's. He leaned his head back into the cupboard behind him, the metal surprisingly cool against his scalp. He closed his eyes, tuning out the sights and sounds of destruction and confusion and imminent death around him. For a minute, it would be him and John, alone, The Two. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had that. Maybe that night they'd sat up drinking during Christmas break? Or was it last summer? Whatever it'd been, it had been too long.

He would never do anything to trade away any of his brothers, but there were times when Scott did miss the idea of the two of them, The Two, like they'd been before the name had been co-opted and modified for the younger two. For so long, they'd been the only ones. Without John, Scott might not have learned how to be a big brother, to be a friend, to share, to think about others. Scott knew all too well from conversations over the years how easy it was for his brothers to discount their own importance in his life. Alan was just the baby; what did he matter? (Which, thinking back on the night before, fighting about him with Dad, Gordon's clandestine mission, and everything that had happened since, he really would have to have a talk with the kid about that when they got home.) Gordon was fourth, never special, never a stand out in any way that mattered. Virgil was the middle, even if he was Scott's partner in crime when it came to IR and life on the island with John gone so much. John was Number Two, gone all the time, out of sight, out of mind. Okay, so maybe he needed to talk with all of them about that. They were all so important; without them, Scott wouldn't be Scott.

But John? Without John, he never would have learned to be Scott to begin with.

He allowed himself one jerky, selfish breath, one dark moment to realize that he hadn't had enough time to tell them all that. He wouldn't be him without them. But then the breath was gone, one precious breath in the last few hours they had before the clock ran out, and he had to get back to work. His job was to get his brothers back to the island, safe and sound, so that he could spend more time in this life forgetting to tell them exactly how much he needed them because no one actually says that kind of schmaltzy shit to someone when it doesn't matter.

Besides, he figured they understood when it did matter. It had to be good enough.

Scott's eyes opened. Moment gone.

There would be no deathbed confessions today if he could help it.

Adjusting into a more comfortable position, Scott's hand found the corner of the broken frame that John usually kept right at his work station. Scott hadn't spent enough time up here on 'Five to know what pieces of the family his brother kept with him, but that one in particular was one all five boys kept within easy reach. It was different to each of them, but for the most part, it was stress relief. One look at that picture and none of them could keep from laughing.

Three years ago, there was a major slip in protocol. The Tracy Boys (all six of them) made People's 50 Most Beautiful People issue in the Most Eligible Bachelors section — without Jeff's permission. His adult sons found it funny, especially when little Alan, not even twelve years old yet, and just
barely sixteen Gordon were called out: *Careful, ladies, these two aren't available outside the prom just yet.* Jeff went thermal, calling in an entire wing of Gage Whitney to handle what his sons saw as the press trying to get a rise out of him. Besides, what was he going to do? Recall every copy of the magazine after it had already been out two weeks? It renewed a waned interest in the family, setting them apart like the previous generation of Hiltons and Johnsons had been reluctantly outed to the public before them.

The picture of the goofy, grinning Tracys — which looked professional and possibly taken during Virgil's graduation, though that would mean one of his classmates had sold him out, which Virgil refused to believe — had been accompanied by a short blurb about them. There wasn't anything even remotely interesting said, only the usual tear-jerker about Mom's death and Dad sequestering them away when the press got too hot. It got the boys each a few dates and a "fan" letter or two, but that was about it.

That was what they were to the celebrity aquarium — a blurb. Where other quote-unquote celebrities in the section of the magazine were quoted on such bracing topics as what they look for in a woman, what they cook to impress a woman, or what their favorite book was on a rainy day (to impress the ladies, of course), the story on Jeff Tracy and his kids (The Tracy Boys, like they were a boy band or something) was filled with little fact. It might as well have been pina coladas and getting caught in the rain.

But then, one afternoon, cheeky little Gordon, who had yet to start filling out and was still a growth spurt away from not getting his height checked for rides at the fair, had had the balls to call their father out on it. It wasn't that they got the story wrong. Oh, no. It was that they didn't bother to get Jeff's opinion on a woman's baked goods. Gordon had ended up fully clothed in the pool at Dad's hand. Scott couldn't remember seeing his father laugh so hard.

"What?" John asked, not bothering to open his eyes to Scott's sighing laughter.

"Baked goods."

"Ah."

Scott reached up behind him to return the frame to its proper place, turned his head, still anchored at the crown on the cupboard behind him, and grinned grimly. "You need to have a little chat with the wife."

John didn't say anything at first. His eyes remained closed, but he smiled a smile Scott had seen too many times on the faces of victims in Danger Zones, the way a man smiles at his wife when the options are gone. All they can do is shoot her up with some morphine to make her goodbyes as painless as possible. John's free hand caressed the floor, tracing the diamond pattern stamped in the steel plates of flooring. Scott was starting to wonder if John had heard him when he spoke, so deathly quiet that Scott had to strain to hear him.

"She took a bullet for me."

"Yeah, she did," he agreed, infusing the required reverence for the dying into his voice.

"I didn't see it coming."

"Nobody did."

"She did. I didn't have enough time to — "

"No one could have. John, none of us could've seen this."
Scott wasn't quite prepared for the anger in his brother's voice as he focused it, hard and bitter, furious enough it hurt to hear it. "She took the bullet for me."

"Hey." Scott bumped his shoulder into John's, mindful of the sling but needing to get his point across. This was not John's fault. They would've come up here to help, no matter who was commanding her at the time. Being mad at them, at his machine, at anything wasn't going to do anyone any good. "She took care of you the best she could. After that, you did everything you could to protect you both. You held on until we got here. That's all we could ask."

"She's hurt."

"But she isn't gone. Not yet." From the tone, Scott had to wonder if they were still both talking about 'Five.

John's hand rested flat against the floor between their hips. "You feel that?"

"What?"

"That vibration. It comes and goes about every five minutes." John turned his chin and eyes toward him, the back of his head staying where it was. "She's stirring the tanks, trying to give us every single atom of oxygen she can get out of them."

"She's a good girl."

"The best."

Scott grinned. Even now, they were somehow finding a way to compare 'birds. If John pulled the But mine's the biggest, Scott might just have to save a piece of her for John to eat later. For now, though, he wasn't lying. He needed John to talk to his 'bird, to get her to tell him what they needed to do to get out of this mess. Waxing poetic about their metallic wives wasn't going to get the job done.

"How ticked is she gonna be if we tear into the wall?"

"Hotwire the locking mechanism?"

"Yeah."

John didn't even have to think about it. He shook his head, sending a thrill of disappointment through Scott's throbbing head. "All the power is in the scrubbers at this point, and we need it there. We designed her failsafe, in case of catastrophic damage, to function like a rocket. The oxygen provides power just as much as breathing air. But she wasn't meant to do that for longer than it would take for you guys to get up here. At this point, there isn't enough power to open the doors and maintain atmo to get us to 'Three. And even if we did get there, we have no way of knowing what condition she's in. You're talking about step eighty when we're still back on step twenty-four."

"So what do we do that we aren't doing? Because obviously what we're doing isn't working."

"I don't think the power up will work. There are too many steps to skip in the right order, but every time we try, we end up frying Gordon. I don't … I just don't know."

Scott wiped a hand down his face, using it to hide his disappointment. All that stuff about his brother being a genius? Yeah, that didn't change simply because John didn't have an answer. If he didn't have an answer, it wasn't because he wasn't seeing it; it was because there wasn't one. That was something Scott wasn't about to accept quite yet. There had to be a way. He wouldn't let this be the day there wasn't a way.
"So we're already squeezing as much oxygen out of her as we can get. What else do we have here that's good?"

"Can I get back to you?"

Scott had to pull his hand back before he reached for the bloody mess on the back of John's head. Yeah, that would make him think a little slower, too. Figuring that was the problem, he gently agreed. "Sure, man." Scott detoured the hand to John's uninjured shoulder and squeezed. "Hang tight and see what you can come up with. I'll be back in five."

"Dad's gonna freak if he sees you up and around before he clears you."

"Somehow I think he'll let it slide today."

John's smile was teasing. *Yeah, right.* "There's ibuprofen in the drawer over there under what's left of the southern hemisphere."

Scott winked, made a show of heading that way, and then circled around to find Dad, only to have to rush back at the absolutely beautiful sounds of Alan shouting for their father. He found his legs wobbly as he ran, like if he got there it would be a mirage tricking his tired, guilty conscience into thinking he could hear his brother's voice one more time. But they were all sprinting to John's side, a staggered chorus of "It's Alan" celebrating the first good news they'd had in next to two hours.

As soon as he got there, thankful he was tall enough to see over Gordon's shoulder, he was pretty sure he didn't care how terrified the baby of the family looked because he'd never seen anybody look so damn perfect. Alan was okay. All the kids were okay. Something was on their side for a few priceless minutes.

The relief in everyone's breathing surrounded him, filled him, telling him it was okay to breathe with them. A few quick moves on Fermat's part and they'd be back in business. They'd get home, get that bastard off their island, and do some quick ass redesign work to keep John from ever being a sitting duck again. And then, just like that, it was gone as they all started to realize that the signal Alan was so desperately trying to send them wasn't going to make it. It was only the eye of the storm, calm and gorgeous and hopeful, soon to be overtaken by the clouds and rage of the storm any second. They were just too damn far away.

As Dad issued orders to Alan and the kids to rendezvous and all the safe stuff they had talked about — which, it suddenly occurred to him how rather scary it was that his father had anticipated such an event — Scott had to tamp down the urge to yell his own orders. Take 'One and get as far away as they can. That's all he wanted them to do. Get the hell off the island. Any English-speaking country would have friendly-enough soil to take them in long enough to get help. It wasn't ideal — leaving thugs and potential murderers free access to their home didn't seem like the most brilliant thing they could do — but it would keep Alan and the other kids alive.

It was too brief a second, one that if he used it he couldn't get back, but Scott felt Virgil's hand gripping his wrist so damn hard from behind Dad's back. He glanced at his brother and saw him fighting not to do the same thing. Their machines were still there. If they did it right, the kids would have enough time to get out of there, yet neither of them had the heart to disobey orders and waste their last contact with Alan arguing about it. Scott curled his hand around to wrap his fingers around Virgil's wrist in return.

Hadn't this been the whole point of International Rescue? To have the machines capable of saving people's lives when nothing else could? Wasn't that what their machines were for? And yet, here they were, useless simply because their operators couldn't bring themselves to break their father's
heart. There was something entirely screwed up about that. Not that their lives weren't screwed up already, but this was … It wasn't right.

Most of all, Scott couldn't believe that the last time he saw his little brother's face it was going to be as he was screaming for their father, panicked and frightened and so very fourteen. For the first time, he truly got it, hard, so that he hyperventilated. The Hey, look, my family's on TV was awful and heartbreaking in a way that made him physically sick. And then Alan was lost to him, to them, and it started all over again.

If they got out of this, he would have to talk to their father. No more press for IR, not unless it was vital to the operation. No good will from governments that still thought of them as second string was worth any of them seeing this kind of thing again.

Still, even as they all looked at each other, sick with their disbelief, Scott couldn't help hoping Dad had some sort of Gene-Kranz-helmed brand miracle up his sleeve. Just one more. Maybe Mission Control on speed dial for a cab ride back home? A rousing speech of some kind to motivate them into figuring out that one light bulb moment of eureka to get them out? A superpower vest? Something, anything to help them work the problem and get them the freaking hell out of here. There had to be something.

That's when Dad said the magic words, like he'd been following the movie script all along. "Boys, we work the puzzle." As if it was that simple. Billion dollar pieces of broken machinery could be fixed with a snap of the fingers and a directive, just sticking one colorful blob next to another as long as they had the four corners in place. Easy peasy.

"Which one?" Gordon said. Scott heard the darkness in his voice, saw it in the way his shoulders turned to sharp edges when he straightened up away from the console. It was awful and mean to hear the kid's voice break first. Scott had to think it wouldn't have been such a dagger to hear it from one of the others first, but from Gordon? Eternally optimistic Gordon? It stung.

Scott saw Dad flinch and knew he was thinking the same thing. He covered well, though, swallowing around the bitterness, his Adam's apple taking on the stress as he ordered, "We hope Alan listens and they figure something out on their end, but we don't wait. We can't help him 'til we're back on the ground. Work the problem here. John, I need an inventory of what is still functioning and how much longer it can function. Scott, Gordon, I need you to try to reroute some of the power to 'Five from 'Three, see if we can't draw something from her to give John what he needs. Virgil, I want you checking the emergency packs. If we move to the oxygen, it may give the scrubbers enough time to resupply at least a little air for us. Find me a plan, boys."

As the others leapt to execute the orders, their fight renewed with the knowledge that they had to get back home because there was simply no way they could leave Alan to that maniac (which, yes, that was certainly a priority), Scott felt his own feet nailed to the floor. He watched Dad's retreating back with a feeling of fire rising from his fingers, along the hair on his arms, up through to the now brutal pounding in his head. It became harder to breathe in a way he'd never felt before. But then, Scott was fairly sure he had never, ever been this angry before.

They'd had a plan. Dad didn't follow the plan. Sure, it sounded mutinous and petty, but Scott didn't care at the moment. They'd had a damn plan, and Dad didn't follow the fucking plan. He didn't get to tell them to find him one now.

"Scott?" John asked quietly next to him, but Scott shook his head.

He'd mutiny all he wanted in his own private piece of mental real estate, but he wasn't going to drag his brother down with him. He went to work, seething as the burn flowed down his spine where his
tailbone was still protesting right there with him. His hands shook as he removed the panel that opened next to the now fried heat exchange. He saw Gordon glance at him, up to John, and back before he picked up the wrench he needed for his own task and left him to it.

Damn it. He didn't want them seeing his temper. Not now. And yet …

This wasn't the fucking plan.

When Dad had come to visit him, unannounced, that April day four years ago, Scott had welcomed him into the apartment he shared off post with McCallister and Baia, much to his roommates' embarrassment. Scott didn't think anything of it, but the other men were unprepared for having to fit the aura of Jeff Tracy into their small living room/dining room/kitchen. They did their best to keep the man entertained with stories about Scott's more colorful exploits (which Gordon would one day put to shame), but soon they left the Tracys to their own mischief because, quite frankly, it may not have been an inspection, but to McCallister and Baia, it felt like one anyway. Just being in a room with Jeff Tracy made them want to be better.

Dad sat him down in his tiny apartment, opened a bottle of Woodford Reserve, lit some cigars, and let Scott have it. It was ready. International Rescue was mechanically ready to go operational. All he needed was the personnel, and while it had never been discussed so that the five of them would have real choices in their lives, it was their father's hope that they would join him. Scott remembered the surge of electricity that went through every neuron in his head, putting together the pieces of the puzzle faster than Dad could get the words out, seeing his father's dreams as if they were his own. By the time the sun went down, there were blueprints taped on the walls and spread out on the floor, bits and bobs of capital S Something coming together to make one generous, dangerous, incredible picture.

Yeah, they'd all known something major was happening with the island. A man doesn't buy an entire damn island only to get away from the press, no matter how protective he is of his children and their privacy. Even presidents didn't go that kind of extreme. They'd all seen the parts flown in here and there and stored somewhere under their feet, though they'd never been allowed down there. Dad had always promised they'd know when the time was right. But still, the way it all fit together, the pieces of machinery and their uses like they were designed to be an extension of each Tracy's personality … It was damn brilliant.

When he left the next morning, Dad didn't even need to ask if Scott was in. Eleven months later, he gripped hands with a slew of confused officers and comrades who wished him luck even as they shook their heads in dismay at the loss of a potentially exceptional career. By then, John was on board with only six months left to fulfill in his own NASA enlistment. When Virgil was told, it was like kismet, all the remaining puzzle pieces coming together to make one perfect picture. It hadn't made sense until then, but once they had all the pieces, all of them had had that moment of Well, yeah, that was kind of obvious.

Gordon and Alan were still kept out of things; Dad wouldn't take their choices away, especially since they would feel like they were gone already with the three older boys joining the cause. But they all came home and got to it, training, modifying the designs, becoming. More pieces of the puzzle were added, muddling the picture a little bit, forcing Scott to find a way to get to high enough ground so he could see the picture more clearly and make the proper adjustments. With only Gordon and Alan's pieces set to the side, Scott realized he'd figured out something his father hadn't seen yet. It terrified him.

It had been a deal breaker kind of moment. Six months before they'd taken on their first rescue, Scott came to his father with tumblers of Woody in each hand, sat the man down, and named his one
condition. If he was going to let his family go into god knows what to face god knows what, he was going to be the first one there. His brothers had trusted him with that responsibility his entire life, and he couldn't change that about himself now, even if their father was their boss. He didn't care if Dad thought his own back needed watching or not. Either he got to go in first or he walked.

Dad listened intently, carefully, showing Scott for the first time what it would be like to have his father for his commander, issuing orders and running a show. He saw his father take into consideration his request as both father and commander, mulling it over with the swirl of bourbon, and agreed.

He remembered Dad's smile at that, him ruffling his hair like he was still a little kid, and nodding. Okay, Scott, he'd said, like he understood, which Scott liked to think he probably did because his father was just as balls to the wall as he was. Okay.

Never once had he gone back on that. Not once. Until today.

Dad hadn't followed the damn plan today, and now it was going to cost them. Scott could wring his neck for that one — right after he wrung his own. Physically impossible, yes, but he figured he could let it slip what he was thinking to Gordon and let the guy have at it. Gordon was getting mad enough himself, if his staring contest with Dad was any indication. That was not the plan either.

Scott truly wished he could've come up here alone. It didn't take all four of them to come up here. He could've seen the situation for what it was, got John out, and left 'Five to burn before that psychopath had the chance to lock them in. She could be rebuilt. John couldn't. None of them could.

He wasn't questioning his father, not really. He trusted Dad to get them through anything. Dad was a survivor, and they all knew, come Hell or high water, he would make sure his sons were, too. If anything, Scott was mad at himself. Big Brother cocked up well and good this time.

Scott was supposed to go in first. He was always supposed to get there first.

So. Right. Puzzle. He needed to get on that, stop feeling sorry for himself, and work the problem. But Gordon was right: which problem? The heat? The broken machine? Alan? Dad? Oxygen would be out in thirty minutes; they'd hit atmo in thirty-seven minutes. Gordon and Dad were still staring at each other, looking like a good old fashioned wall-to-wall counseling session was in order. John was trying not to look away. Virgil was just plain quiet. And Alan was, well … they'd never know what Alan was, would they?

Work the problem, jackass.

Of course, the problem with that directive was that it was getting harder to think. He could focus on things he already knew — five times five was good — but coming up with something new, that was becoming a problem. He thought about trying to hotwire the locking mechanism, but he figured that wouldn't do them any good. Opening the hatch now would take juice they didn't have. Juice would be good right now, actually. Man, he'd sent Gordon down to the beach without even juice to wash down the muffins this morning. No wonder Alan was mad at him.

No, that wasn't why Alan was mad. The family was on TV; that was why he was mad. And something about pictures. It wasn't the one he'd seen Gordon flinch over, the one that fell when 'Five decided to hiccup an extra explosion when The Hood — seriously, what kind of uber-evil-doer name was that anyway? — announced his presence to them. No, that was the picture from the magazine. Scott wondered if Dad was still mad about that, too.

He knew he was getting repetitive in his thoughts — blame himself, don't blame Dad, work the
problem, lather, rinse, repeat — and the heat was getting to him. It was getting to all of them. That hole Dad just put in the screen under the broken northern hemisphere said he was pretty damn mad.

They really should have let him come up here first.

It wasn't until he caught Gordon in a stare that wasn't directed at anything — not Dad, not the machinery in front of him, not anything — that Scott got it all. Easier thoughts, repeated thoughts, things getting harder. They were running out of air. It was real, and they were running out of air.

Scott kicked the cupboard next to John's head before he saw his own foot moving. Even his apology was in slow motion so that John's stunned "Hey! You be nice to my girl!" took a moment to register.

"Sorry, Johnny."

'Five didn't take his apology. Another whine of sound and flickering of lights had their heads snapping up in unison, comically in the same slow motion. Then their hips and feet and everything in between joined them.

Dad finally lost it then, but the effect of throwing his wrench was a bit lost when the lack of gravity carried it up and away from the intended target on the floor. "You have got to be kidding me!"

Scott watched Gordon's eyes close in a too long, thoughtful blink as his head rose above the monitors. By some miracle of something Scott couldn't put his finger on, he saw That Look pass over his little brother's face, war for control, and then, beautiful as it could possibly be, a grin split across his cheeks hard enough to hurt. Gordon's hand went to the ceiling to brace himself as he crossed his legs like he was sitting on the living room rug. "Well, that's it, then. Johnny, bring out the keg."

Virgil let out a calming breath so that he sounded about half in control as he teased, "You can't have any. You're too young."

"Dude, you're really gonna let me die without having ever had a beer? I don't think so. You're such a goody goody. I can't take you anywhere." Gordon chuckled and used his hands to push off, pulling a Dick Van Dyke in the lack of gravity. "I love to laugh," he sing-songed, giggled, and then froze his face in a glare. "No, seriously, where's the beer?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," John said.

Gordon's "It's in the fridge, isn't it?" sounded pretty much like Well, duh. Scott tried to contain his laugh while John stared their brother down, waiting for the answer to come to him. When it did, Gordon looked so damn disappointed, Scott pushed off the wall to get as close to Gordon as he could and patted him on the head. The kid pouted, "And the fridge is in the kitchen. Well, whose dumb idea was it to put a fridge in a kitchen anyway?"

"Brains," John laughed, out of breath.

"I'm disappointed in your hospitality, John," Gordon said petulantly, yawning. "The amenities in this joint suck."

John's fingers flicked at a piece of debris floating in front of his eyes. "I'll take that … under advisement. We can comp you this trip, but you might … want to take it up with the management before you make further reservations."

"Dad, I … I want a beer." Gordon crossed his arms over his chest. Scott thought that if he could have, his brother would've stomped his foot. The next yawn simply didn't have the same effect.
Scott's heart pretty much broke at the same time their father's face crumbled. He could see Dad's And I want ... (to see your brother grow up, to see you marry, to see you boys get another day, want, want, want) building, struggling to make it past the knot in his throat. His lungs were starting to burn, his head to ache, but he wasn't sure if it was from seeing the pain in his father's face or knowing the same look was on his own. When Dad reached over, pulled Gordon to him, and kissed his temple, Scott was sure it was his father's pain because it had to be hurting so much more than theirs.

He watched Dad say something soft and quiet to Gordon, who nodded. When they separated, Dad said, "We aren't done, boys. The heat shield is damaged, I realize, but I believe we might still have enough protection that, if we can ride it out, she'll hold. Our trajectory will put us within a few hours' rescue range from Japanese shores. It'll be a tough swim; I'm not saying it won't be. I'm asking you to give me a little more. Whatever you can give me. Please."

Under any other circumstance, Scott saw it as his job to be the leader here. Big brother, leader, whatever. They were all the same. He should be the one to rally them, to give Dad that one last shot he so desperately needed. But he was stunned when he simply wasn't needed. Gordon nodded first, whatever Dad had said privately to him doing the trick. In that nod, Scott saw the man his brother would have become, strong and confident beyond his years, able to face anything. Next to him, John nodded, too, but it was Virgil who spoke, taking Scott's job and breath away from him.

"You got it, Dad."

Scott oddly thought he'd never been so proud to be rendered irrelevant.

Dad nodded, his throat obviously not working again. They all looked at each other to keep from seeing him push himself off the ceiling to hide whatever else he couldn't say from them. With practiced ease, like riding a bike, Dad swam through the weightlessness, scooping up the floating emergency packs and strapping them to his arms until they were all collected.

Scott did step up then, big brother, helping his little brothers get ready for school. Their backpacks were a little heavier than he thought they should be for the first day of school, but then ... No. Not backpacks. He shook his head, clearing it. Emergency packs. He strapped Virgil in first because his would be the quickest. Just like in the crashing airplane, he was supposed to help himself first, but as far as he was concerned, helping himself meant helping Virgil. Virgil would need the oxygen so he could help John with his pack, which would allow Scott to help Gordon once he was done with Virgil. Or was that Gordon first, then Virgil?

Since when were their backpacks so heavy? Maybe it was all the medicine he had to bring with him. Wait, no, it wasn't allergy season. Why did it hurt so much to breathe? Besides, John kept his plant experiments on the other side of 'Five. Unless the scrubbers were filtering the plant pollen with the rest of the air.

Geezus. 'Five really did want to kill them all, didn't she? Although what they'd done to make her mad, he couldn't remember. He was pretty sure he'd had that nightmare before, but now it seemed so much more vivid. No more movies for him.

"Scott?"

"Hmm?"

John's voice sounded so small, so scared as he asked, "You awake over there?"

Scott wondered if there was a storm, that he'd somehow missed one. He heard some banging, but it didn't sound like thunder. He loved storms. They were perfect for curling up in bed and watching the
lightning try to conquer the sky. "If I say … no … can I not … go to sch…schoooool?"

"You have to keep awake … for me … kiddo."

"Are Virg … and Gords … going?" For some reason, Scott couldn't remember why he thought Virgil and Gordon were sick, too. If they weren't going, he didn't want to go either. He was too hot, like the fever was trying to consume him, so that he tried to kick the blankets off, but they didn't want to move. It was too damn hot.

"Yeah, they're … Dad, he's … "

Scott could hear John sounding panicked, hyperventilating, like he wanted desperately to keep him from falling back asleep. He wanted to help John out, really he did, but his head hurt like nobody's business. If they would only let him sleep the fever off, he'd do whatever John asked. Just a little bit longer.

But then, 'Five turning on them had to be John's worst nightmare, too. Scott dreamed that enough for the both of them over the years, from the moment Dad told them his plan. But he could make it okay. It was only a nightmare.

"Don't … wo-worry, Johnny. I'll go first. She … won't … "

Scott forgot what he wanted to tell his brother 'Five wouldn't do, but he knew John would be okay with it. Scott would go first, he always got to go first, and he'd fix it all.

Big brother would fix anything.

(End Part Three)
John and Virgil

Somewhere in the heat of brain-blasting headache, John heard the pleas change. While Dad's words were still stay awake, the hand whispering over his hair clearly said Go to sleep, baby. Please. Go to sleep. So easy. All he had to do was let himself go, as he'd secretly encouraged his brothers. Do this one last favor for their father. Spare the man who shared his conscience more than any other any further pain. Dad wouldn't be mad if he went to sleep now.

John wondered if he would dream.

Some of the things Scott said before he was first to slip away (because Big Brother always goes into the danger first) indicated his brain still fired enough to let him dream. Hallucinate. Whatever. At this point, did semantics matter? Scott was trapped sometime, somewhere where he was still Scotty attempting to finagle time out of school so he could take care of the younger ones. That figured; Scott would want to take care of the little ones with his last breath. The overprotective jackass probably spent half the time since their arrival holding his breath to save a few extra atoms of air for the rest of them. Big dumb loveable jackass.

Virgil went quietly, humming the lullaby their mother sang to them when they were small. John wondered sometimes if, between the song and their father's encouragement, they were all conditioned to become the space and sky romping cowboys they had become. He wondered if Mom was there with him, tucking him in, the scent of her strawberry shampoo a wisp carrying him down into a dreamy sleep.

Gordon went last, quiet but smiling, using every last ounce of faith he had in them (because even when nothing else worked, Gordon always had faith in his brothers) to wheeze in their ears that he was okay, they were doing a good job taking care of him like always. He promised Scott he didn't have to worry anymore and that he'd meet him at the flagpole after school like he was supposed to. No promises that he wouldn't run some panties up the flagpole, but he'd be there.

No one said goodbye. None of them cried. In some ways, it was rather anticlimactic after the lead up of missiles and fires and megalomaniacal laughter and Gordon's sense of gallows humor. Sleep was good. He could use a full twenty-four, easy.

John hoped with all his heart that whatever playground Gordon was on, the girls all had long ponytails and he hit that one last home run right into the pool. He hoped Scott was reading them their favorite book — with Dad-style embellishments, of course. He hoped Mom and Dad had Virgil all tucked in, giddy up, giddy up, giddy away, my pony boy.

He could hear the terror in Dad's voice now, a skipping quiver as he struggled between craving and desperately not wanting it to be over. John couldn't imagine what it was like for him to see his sons lingering, to see the babies he'd … No, he wouldn't imagine it. His father's pain was his own. John wouldn't take that away from him. He'd never be a father. He'd never get to understand, not really. He had too much respect for his father to even try.

Sky of dreams up above, my pony boy.

It was getting (getting?) hard to think straight. There was something about skies and ponies.

John loved ponies. Grandpa and Grandma Tracy had ponies. His favorite was this gorgeous Tiger horse called Silas that Grandpa taught the three older boys to ride on. He liked to eat apples right out of John's hand.
Giddy up, giddy up, giddy away, my pony boy.

Mom wasn't a bad singer; she just wasn't good. She was an even worse cook.

It was a good thing John hadn't come by his kitchen skills from either parent — cooking and chemistry, not so different, really — because he never would've survived unending MREs up here if he hadn't learned to be creative. He'd show Gordon; he could amenity with the best of 'em. Seven courses, five stars, baby! Give him a few hours; he'd do Grandma proud.

"Entry into Earth's atmosphere in five minutes."

He knew that should mean something, but five was such a big number. Five. Things come in fives. Five fingers, five toes. Five shillings in a half crown. Five nickels in a quarter. Five Tracys. Five something or others.

Titanium melts at 1941K. Sunburn can occur in less than fifteen minutes. He didn't know exactly what temperature it would be when his skin started to blacken, but it was likely to be damn hot.

He never would've been any good as a fireman. Even the thought of burning alive terrified him. Losing that family outside Paris, hearing their agonized screams over the comms as Virgil and Gordon both had struggled to hold Scott back, the child's name becoming John's own, and —

"John!"

Dad was still encouraging him, but John heard between the words what his father wanted, despite the begging (because it was begging now, that weak in the knees on the way to the electric chair pleading for one last breath of hope that this wasn't the end, that this wasn't the way he would lose his children, not knowing, never knowing what happened). All Dad wanted now, for himself, was for his babies to not feel any more pain. So John would give him that last lie. He wouldn't answer him back, wouldn't blink, wouldn't let the agonized whistling in his own lungs betray otherwise. What Dad didn't know this one time wouldn't hurt him.

'Five announced in her tinny, not-quite human voice that they had four minutes before they would start to feel the effects of entering Earth's atmosphere. It was enough time for Dad to fall asleep. All he had to do was let go, stop being a father for the last few seconds of his life, and go the hell to sleep.

Please, Dad, just fall asleep.

Maybe if he sang Mom's song, he'd fall asleep.

Grateful his brothers were out — oh, please, it's a little late for mincing words, isn't it? The word is 'asphyxiating' — so that maybe, if they were lucky, they wouldn't wake up when the rock 'n roll really started, John resigned himself to what was coming. He was the captain going down with his ship. He needed to see it. Oh, he'd regret it as soon as the first real burn of atmospheric friction started to bubble his skin and boil his brains, but he couldn't help it. He had to be looking out that view port when the end came.

Re-entry would burn at 3000F. That was hot.

There was a line about starry skies in the song, too. It was right there, tip of the tongue. He should ask Mom. She'd know.

Dad needed to go to sleep first. John wouldn't scare his father now.
Oh, for Heaven's sake, what was with the screaming? He didn't have the energy to yell back — thinking and wishing and hoping were exhausting enough — but he heard it. He wanted to roll over and tell Alan to remember that some people in this household don't get up at the asscrack of dawn, even when they weren't fighting time zones. No. Not dawn. 'Five. Fire and hell impending. His lungs hurt too much to tell Alan to run, run as fast as he could away from the control room. Exactly what kind of cocked up, cruel, futnucking jacked up world did they live in that his little brother would've been able to save himself with barely enough time to watch the monitors cut out on him? He hoped Alan couldn't hear what he could, the way their breaths all wheezed, strained, pleaded for air that wasn't there. He didn't want that to be Alan's last memory of them. It was bad enough it would be his.

Then the screams became more insistent, dragging John from his thoughts because, man, sound? Wasn't a good thing. Oxygen deprivation (who was oxygen deprived?) headaches weren't pleasant to begin with, but on top of a concussion (did one of them have a concussion?), it was skull-splitting. Every single panicked yell pierced places in his brain that he didn't know had places. Commotion made it awfully damn hard to think straight.

"DAMN IT, JEFF, WAKE UP!"

John was glad Dad could answer because he was pretty sure if anyone dared whisper right now, he'd throw up. Okay, gross, yes, but he'd be alive to do it, so …

Right. Access protocol. Something about access protocol. He should probably take care of that. Minor details.

He could feel his brain and his heart struggling to stay level as he strained to get to the battered control console. Oh yeah, he was gonna puke. But first, he should probably stop them from that whole fiery ball of death thing, huh? The others might be a tinge grateful if he kept that in his addled priorities. The awkward angle it took to turn around and reach the panels he needed pulled on his one good arm in ways that sent jolts through his shoulder, neck, and head, but he kept reaching.

Twenty seconds to re-entry.


Ow.

That was one way to put it.

Aching and nauseous, John let muscle memory take over until his girl chirped pleasantly at him that they were back in control. Well, wasn't that the damnedest thing? Even the stitch in his chest couldn't stop his grin as he announced, "Confirmed. We are back online."

And then? For lack of better words: motherfucking ow. Yeah, he got it. Everybody's happy they aren't dying. Did they have to shout about it? Inside voices, people. Ow.

Through the jack-hammering of his pulse, he reminded himself that — what was it Scott and Dad liked to say? Work the problem? He had a problem to work.

Okay, baby, I know you're hurt, but I need you to get my family home. Preferably not on fire. Talk to me.

A slight tick-tick-psshhh said the oxygen scrubbers were back in business, but then the backup generator decided it'd had enough and threw a sparky hissy fit.
I'll make a deal with you, girl. You get us home, I'll fix you up nice and neat, so you won't even know there was anything wrong. I'll bring you something shiny.

In one ear Alan updated Dad on how ugly things were down there — if the kid didn't stop shivering here pretty soon, he would need dental work on top of it all — as 'Five told his other ear she was already giving him everything she had. She was only hanging in there long enough to get them to the lifeboats. Their gamble with routing some oxygen from 'Three to 'Five's batteries to keep them alive had worked, but the short circuiting had triggered a small series of explosions that, while not fatal to 'Three, had definitely blown a booster. There was no way London would be within their reach in time.

Alan's plan didn't sound any better. No, they were simply going to have to demand 'Three take up the slack now. Apparently, no member of the team was exempt today. Hell itself wanted each and every one of them to pay for such arrogant thinking that they could help the world and not have to suffer for it.

Behind him, Virgil and Gordon were trying to wake a groggy, blinky Scott. John couldn't help blinking himself. His heartbeat thrilled that much faster, though, when he realized, hot damn, his brothers were on the floor. They were awake. They were all awake, and they weren't burning, and — oh, right, one geostational orbit coming right up. He wondered if Scott's head was hurting as bad as his. Oxygen deprivation and concussion cocktails weren't exactly conducive to organized thought.

Dad was out of breath, but John wasn't so sure it wasn't from being completely overwhelmed at Alan. He didn't blame him. First chance he got, John was squeezing the life out of the kid. He was going to kill him for even suggesting putting himself in harm's way, but hard-earned hugs would come first. Then another beat down because there was simply no way John (and he knew without saying that the others would back him up on this) could allow his baby brother to see any more danger. Of course, danger seemed to be hiding out in every nook and cranny right now, but that was beside the point.

'Five, honey, I hear your pain and all, but if you don't cut it out with the klaxons and warnings, I'm gonna cut your tongue out for a few days.

Her klaxons only multiplied with old warnings of EBS systems and the like being out of commission. I dare you, she said back.

Nice. Oddly, John wondered if the other 'birds sassed back to their pilots as much as his did.

He saw out of the corner of his eye their father, so desperate to keep even one of them safe that he would consider, even for one second … Wow. Okay. He hated the plan, honestly, and there was no way Alan saw the good in it that John did, but Dad needed all the reassurance he could get that at least one of his kids was safe. Man, Scotty was gonna freak. A beat more and the light went on in Dad's eye that said he was thinking the same thing. John wasn't sure if Dad was looking to him to talk him out of it or to ease his conscience, but when he thought of the next few minutes of radio silence during re-entry and their inability to not let Alan out of their sight (for pretty much ever), he knew it was the only way. Scott was going to kill him for sealing the plan, but he nodded anyway.

See you in London, little brother. Safe skies.

Dad's arm around him was comforting, if a tad too strong. He'd take strong, though, to remind him that his dad was every bit as strong as John wanted him to be. Jeff Tracy was still the hero he'd looked up to all his life, John Wayne without a lung and still forging that river. His dad — that's right, Jeff Tracy was his dad — was still the strongest man he knew. They would all have to remind him of that for the next few days because Dad, for all his heart and generosity and bravery, was also
a guilt machine, churning out guilt like an Oompa Loompa pours sugar into that beautiful chocolate river. John wasn't so sure he'd ever not hear the desperation in his father's voice from only five minutes ago. He wondered, if there had ever been a reason to keep a loaded weapon up here, if his father wouldn't have divided the bullets equally and fairly there at the end. For all their mutual love of space and the stars, Dad had a special place in his heart for Westerns. Then again, it was all kind of the same, wasn't it? Knights, cowboys, astronauts, soldiers: there was something indefinable about them all that made for great stories. It would make sense that they should have gone out that way. Maybe not for himself because he needed to see it, but for Dad and the others. He would have made sure Dad took his bullet. 'Five had already taken his anyway. Great, now he would have nightmares about that, too.

He stumbled a little when Dad tried to ease him over the threshold to the hatch. Over his shoulder, he saw more sparks, heard more whines, felt more stuttered vibrations. He put his hand on the wall, caressing it with all the care he could give. Yes, it was corny, the way he and Scott talked about their 'birds like they were the women who might one day hold the other half of their hearts, but it was more than that. Scott had 'One because she gave him the ability to protect their brothers. She was built for his personality, for his need to be the first at everything because he was born to it. She allowed him to see and micromanage and all the things Scott needed to do, in the air or on the ground. If 'One was the eyes of the operation, 'Five was the ears. She was John at his most bare, unobtrusive and in the background, always listening, always hearing, protecting in the gaps.

How was he going to protect his brothers if he couldn't hear?

Dad's hand found the back of his neck and squeezed ever so gently. "I'll make sure you get to say goodbye."

Okay, that wasn't even close to what he was thinking. He wondered if his alarmed "Dad?" jolted his father as much as he thought (hoped) it did.

Dad looked away for probably the first time John could remember in years. Whatever he was thinking, he didn't want John to know, which only made it worse. He smiled, huskily reminded him "Alan's waiting for us", and charged forward, the pressure of his hand on the small of John's back brooking no argument. His heart sank with the awful feeling he wasn't ever going to see his girl again. He was about to lose his stars. He could feel it: this one had been too close. No child of Jeff Tracy's would risk his life for them — or the world they guarded — again.

"Virgil, help your brother get strapped in," Dad called, still looking away. "I want to see if I can do something about the rotation before we detach. Be ready in five."

"Dad?"

"We'll talk about it later, John."

Virgil led him away to the cockpit, his own glances shifting between brother and quickly escaping father. "What's he talking about?"

"Nothing good."

John let his mobile arm slip around his brother's back. He needed to think about something else and do it fast. He let his temple fall gently to Virgil's hair, despite the grime he could feel on them both. They must all look terrible. Great, just what they needed, to show up in London looking beat to hell. That would reassure people, no doubt. He caught the softness of his brother's hair, even with the slick, and had to wonder if the guy had been woken up for this little space jaunt. Poor guy probably hadn't even had a shower today. Yuck.
"How you doin', little brother?"

"Walkin' and talkin', surprisingly enough. You?"

"Same."

Virgil's snort said exactly what he thought of that answer, but he didn't say anything further about it. They took their time getting him settled into the (co-co-co-co-pilot) redundancy seat in 'Three's cockpit. All that time floating about had allowed his back to truly tighten up from the impact of being rag-dolled across the control room. His ribs screamed a few profanities at him as Virgil tried to find a way to buckle him in around the sling until they both finally agreed with nothing more than a passing glance that it would have to come off until they were on the ground.

John didn't care. On the ground sounded good. Good riddance, sling. He hated those things anyway. He could already feel the burn on his neck from the strap.

At least 'Three's world of fresh air and get-me-the-hell-outta-here lent itself to clearer thinking. If he tried, he could even come up with a fairly sizeable word right now. Six syllables at least. Oh! Circumnavigation. And supernumerary. Damn. He'd left his OED in his room, along with the picture of him and Mom the day he was born. The People picture was still on the floor.

Incomprehensible. That was a good one, too.

His thinking was clearer; no one said it was organized.

Virgil's head had that slight tilt to it that he got when he was trying to figure out how to word something. It was small, something you wouldn't notice of you hadn't spent a lifetime being one of the only two relatively — he said relatively — quiet brothers. Unlike the others, he and Virgil were more careful with their words, like the words needed permission before forming their sentences. John figured they all would be spending a lot of time with questions in their heads in the weeks, maybe even months to come, but the set in Virgil's jaw said it wasn't that kind of question, not yet.

John turned his own head back and forth — which, ow — to catch his brother's eyes until Virgil finally looked up from his too busy hands. "What is it?"

"You don't honestly think letting Alan go after these guys is a good thing."

"I think Alan being in 'One so that for the next hour we know exactly where he is, what he's doing, and who he's doing it with is a good thing. For one hour in the middle of all this bend over, grab your ankles fuckery, we know he's safe."

"He'll get there before we do."

"Ten minutes."

"A lot can," Virgil yanked too hard on the harness as he let it down over John's head, "happen in ten minutes."

"The kid has four older brothers. You don't think he's learned how to hold his own until the cavalry arrives? Alan's the little kid who hides from bullies until his big brothers get there and then sticks his tongue out at them from behind their backs. He's smart enough to not do anything rash."

A dark looked passed over Virgil's eyes that gave John chills. "You haven't been around lately."

Yeah, that pang of guilt that hit him daily? It had a voice besides his own attached to it now. No one
had ever said it to him like that before. It was always something unspoken, how much John missed because, quite frankly, his absence was a necessary evil. If he could do his job and still be home for dinner every night, he would, but he couldn't, and his brothers' lives depended on that. So it was small guilt, but an aching one nonetheless. To have it come with Virgil's voice, though, and not coming in a fit of anger from Alan or as a denial from Scott made it so much worse. Simple, but certainly effective.

"It's that bad?" he asked.

"From what I heard, Gordon's mission failed fairly spectacularly. I don't think The Old Alan applies here anymore. After this afternoon, when we don't have a clue what happened to him down there? I wouldn't count on anything right now."

John's first impulse was to say, *Wow, Virg, way to kill a mood*, but that was hardly productive. He closed his eyes against the prevailing cloud of dread hanging between them all. No, he hadn't been around in body, but he'd had his talks with Alan lately. He had. He'd talked algebra with the kid only last week. Maybe their conversations hadn't been heady or necessarily of the Reach Out and Touch Someone variety, but they'd talked. Their Alan was still in there somewhere. Maybe the others were too close to it to see it, but Alan would be okay. He was too much Tracy to be otherwise.

Two seats over he heard the zipping fabric of Scott and Gordon gesturing with forceful animation, the telltale grunt of the bell-ringing Scott had taken making him wince in sympathy. John opened his mouth to tell Virgil he was fine, that he should go start a fight with Big Brother instead, but was quickly cut off.

"Nope, you're mine. Gordon's got him."

"Gordon, switch."

Cheerfully, Gordon reached over long enough to tap John's knee to reassure him he was there — John had a feeling they'd all be doing so for a while — but argued, "And relinquish the opportunity to give instead of get? No way. The whole near-death experience thing has me feeling charitable."

John couldn't turn his head enough to see them more than peripherally, but he heard the sound of fabric meeting fabric and saw the way Virgil worked his tongue between his lips to hide his grin. Half a second later, fabric met fabric again then again until the sounds of Scott and Gordon alternating punches to each other's shoulders with more frequent and harder hits was a strange relief to John's ears. He couldn't stop a snicker of his own, only to have Gordon's voice bite down toward him.

"I'd keep my mouth shut if I were you, bucko. You're already on my list for your part in this morning's clandestine cluster as it is."

"How so?"

"You three set me up."

Scott groaned, which sent Gordon chuckling with self-congratulations. Whatever that meant, he must have got the result he was looking for. Something about it had Scott saying softly, "You okay?"

"Sense of humor intact, boss."

"That's not what I asked."

Gordon's face cast its own shadow, making everything about him dark and unforgiving. "I'm not
about to say anything that could come up later in court."

Feeling like he was intruding, John glanced back at a startled Virgil. "What about you? You okay?"

"You don't really want me to answer that, do you?"

Dad stormed in then, all hot air and determination. John saw him take a moment for himself, his worn eyes taking in each child's condition, one by one, until he remembered that he couldn't do anything about it anyway. He cleared his throat, which sounded like sandpaper, and asked the younger two, "Pre-flight?"

"The Concussion Twins needed a little extra coddling this afternoon. Give us two minutes," Gordon said. It was good to hear him sound cheerful, like he'd never made a single comment contrary, even if it was a lie. It was a lie for their dad, and John was all about lying to the man at the moment.

"Base from Thunderbird Three."

"Go ahead, Mister-mister Tracy."

"We should be fine, but I want you to keep a close monitor on us all the way down. We're short a booster, and we don't have the power or the equipment to run a full diagnostic for debris damage. We took a few hits in the debris field on the way up, and we had enough rockin' and rollin' up here that we can't know what's happened since we boarded 'Five."

"FAB."

They went through the usual flight checks, the harmony of routine nearly lulling John to sleep now that the worst of the danger was past (until they got groundside anyway). As the pain took more control than he wanted to let it, he listened lazily as Gordon and Virgil kept Brains busy with their back and forth, enough that Gordon actually sounded a little skittish about the flight himself. He wasn't even remotely surprised when Scott stepped in, his fingers more sure on his own console, his voice confident and back to where they all needed it to be. Knowing this was all them, especially now that Scott was in the mix, John felt that heavy space between dream and awake blanket around him. Who needed pre-flight alcohol when he had pre-flight concussion?

He wasn't quite out of it enough to not notice when their father's voice dropped like he was about to share a secret he didn't want overheard. "Brains?"

Equally solemn, Brains said, "Go a-ahead."

"You know where the weapons are."

"Yep." The strength of the reply, the stutter-free Abso-fuckin'-lutely of Brains's tone startled John. In that one word, a chilling understanding seemed to pass between the two fathers. It was Old West and bold, a drawling declaration that this Hood guy had screwed with the wrong family. But if that scared him, the cold fury in his father's voice was more than he'd ever expected.

"Take no chances. Lock it down and load up. Scan every single inch of the island; search the footage. We need to know how many made land with him and how many left with him. The kids are safe with Penny. Kyrano and Onaha are with you. You're safe to shoot first."

"Yes, sir."

A quick glance at Virgil and Gordon's heads turning toward each other, bug-eyed and stunned, was all John needed to see to know he wasn't the only one wondering if their father had been
bodysnatched while they slept back there. Yes, Dad had done his twenty in the military; he had more than a few marksmanship coins in the chest on his dresser. He'd seen his share of action, stuff that kept him awake at night with nightmares, but that had only contributed to his well-professed hatred of guns. The man didn't hunt, didn't take target practice, didn't even allow his young sons to play with plastic pistols. They'd all seen the stricken look on his face the day Scott had written home about weapons training. Jeff Tracy hated guns.

So unless Brains was supposed to arm them all with pea-shooters and sling shots, what in the world were guns doing on their island?

"I mean it, Brains. I want all three of you in one piece when we get home."

"We-we'll be here."

"They tried to kill my boys, Brains."

"We'll find them."

"FAB. Boys?"

His voice loud in the stunned silence of the cockpit, Gordon answered after a moment's hesitation, "Go for separation on my mark."

"Then get us the fuck out of here." On a snort from Scott, Dad added, "Yes, we all have free passes on the language today. Don't get used to it."

"Fuckin' A, Bubba!" Gordon cheered, eternally five years old. Man, it was a beautiful sound. John thought about asking — for one selfish, desperately needing to understand moment — to take one quick spin around 'Five so he could see his girl. Like a man needs to see his murdered wife in the morgue, to be able to truly see the hurt done to her because it's the only way to grasp how and why his whole world has just changed, John needed to see exactly what had been done to 'Five. He needed to see what had been done to him, to his family. He needed to know what this would cost them. Yeah, he was an itemizing fool, but knowing and seeing, well …

As much as he'd been hurting, he'd still been coherent enough to see the horror on all their faces when they'd come in. Of all of them, Gordon's over-expressive eyes had been the worst. The kid liked to think he was tough as nails, just as grown up as the rest of them, and had good control over things when they got rough, enough to let him have his levity in the face of so much disaster. They knew, though, whether he understood or not, those big eyes of his never stopped telling them what they needed to know. To John, Gordon had looked absolutely sick, and it couldn't have only been the ride up. Cornering his kid brother hadn't been an option, but he'd caught enough nervous glances between the rest of them to know. It was as bad as Gordon's eyes looked.

No, he couldn't bring himself to look out that window, not if it would make it worse for them. He and his girl had scared them enough for one day.

"Gordon, heat 'em up."

The vibrations started, slow but steady. On a good day, the burn through Earth's atmosphere was worse than a ten minute downside of the worst wood construction rollercoaster imaginable. The harnesses were cushioned as best they could be and still fulfill their purpose of keeping a body pressed into the seat to prevent injury, but that wasn't much comfort compared to the prospect of John's busted ribs trying to outdo the G-forces against the bars. Breathing through it could only do so much. It scattered, rattled, and rolled the pieces of thought in his head so that he wasn't entirely aware
of when the flames started to dance over the nose. Dad encouraged them to ride it out, but really, it was too much. Little lights danced in his eyes, then bigger ones, and whoa, white light white light holy fuck that —

Ow.

"C'mon, Johnny, up and at 'em."

Ow.

Ow ow.

Ow ow ow.

Okay, whoever was tapping his face had better quit it right now. He reached up to grab at the hand, too late to realize he'd used the wrong hand. Pain shot up through his arm to his dislocated shoulder, through his neck to his loused up head. He sucked in a breath between his teeth and held it, willing it to take the pain out with it. He felt a hand wrap around his wrist, fingers easily finding the pulse point and holding, obviously feeling the racket he could hear like a timpani in his ears. The 1812 Overture had nothing over his heartbeat right now.

"Hey, take it easy. You with me?"

John screwed open one eye to glare at Gordon. "If I say yes, will you go away?"

He must have been out long enough to worry them because Gordon didn't bother answering with anything more than a concerned eyebrow and a finger snapped pointedly in front of his face. Of course. John rolled his eyes upward (which, dumb move), mouthed Give me patience to the sky, but then let his brother satisfy their collective curiosity with properly following eyes. It wasn't like anyone would help him out of the harness unless he gave in anyway.

"What'd I miss?"

"You ready for this? The shrimp's in 'Four trying to raise a monorail car from the bottom of the river. Tin-Tin's actually in the water."

"Okay, now I know I died. This must be what Hell feels like."

Scott chuckled above him, obviously on his feet and feeling relatively okay. That, or he was just too dumb to remember that being the eldest didn't make him invincible and would pay in headache for pushing it too hard. "You wanna sit this one out?"

"Nope."

Apparently being an invincible idiot ran through the birth order.

Clenched teeth notwithstanding, John needed to be there. He turned his good wrist in Gordon's grip, grabbed hard to give him a chance to brace himself, and hauled his aching body out of the seat. "I call dibs on a — whoa — comfy seat on 'Two for the ride home, though." Scott opened his mouth to issue some sort of warning, but John interrupted, "I'll be fine. Let's get the runt before he trips into any more trouble."

Bending over the back of his chair and pointing — with the first voice that sounded truly like their father since they'd been so rudely awakened — Dad argued, "Not without that sling, you don't."
In less than an angry and strangely wild blink, the moment and the real Jeff Tracy were gone. John tried to see his father's face, but the man spun away, quick and decisive, clearly not wanting any of them to see whatever he was thinking. As he watched Dad shove too hard at the hatch and disappear through it, John could feel the others turn to him, one by one. Without looking, he knew the question on all their faces.

"It hasn't even been an hour, guys. Give him a bit. He'll be okay."

A thousand promises were loaded into Scott's single, soft command, meant for John's ears only. "Let me know if you need backup."

There was no real reason why things had shaken out the way they had, but as Scott had become his brothers' keeper, John had taken over with Dad after Mom. Maybe it was the hours of sitting with their father while they waited for news of Scott's life or lack thereof after he'd been shot down — John would never forgive Jed Barrett and his bleeding loyalty for giving Jeff the heads up on that one; they never should've known there was a problem at all — or maybe it was because of that time they'd been on the phone and had their conversation cut off by a mortar attack and not heard back from Scott for six days. Maybe it was simply that Scott had already compartmentalized himself into four separate but equally worrying pieces of brother that one more slice of his heart would've been too much. However it came out, they had their responsibilities. The Tracy Two had split their duties, and neither would say the other had it easier.

He and Scott also had a deal to never kid each other when it came to those responsibilities. If John said Dad would be okay, he meant it, because John counted on Scott to be honest with him, too. If Scott said he'd take care of their brothers — especially when John was tied up taking care of Dad — he meant it. They couldn't afford mistakes, and they couldn't be in five places at once. Something had to give.

"Same here," John agreed.

They weren't as stealthy as they thought, though, because Gordon reached between them and knocked their fists together. "Smother Twins powers activate!"

John cocked an eyebrow. Scott nodded. They reached up together and clowned Gordon on the back of his head, good and hard.

Gordon backed off, rubbing the back of his neck and glaring daggers at them both. "You know, I'm just saying, maybe you two should worry about how you're handling this yourselves before you go messing with how the rest of us are. John, that guy tried to kill you just to get to us, and that was before he even knew you were Dad's kid. I don't know about you, but I'm taking that damn personal right now."

"Gords," Scott started, but their brother took off before they could argue otherwise.

Quietly, Virgil stepped ahead of them, added "I'm with him", and skedaddled his scrawny little butt, too.

Scott's look to him said it all: this wasn't even close to over, not by a long shot.

The run to the river, all half block of it, was exhausting and rather awkward. Inwardly, John couldn't help but smile as he felt an already cooled-off Gordon hover, pacing himself at John's side and trying not to be obvious while he monitored the mobility of the sling. Virgil could run far faster than this, but he hung back with Dad and Scott. He'd be surprised if any of them noticed, but John could feel it: the pull to get to Alan was so overwhelming, but getting there together seemed so much more
Important.

That, or the whole near death thing had him waxing far too sentimental and his brain needed to cut it the heck out right now.

In the split second that the monorail car surfaced before 'Four, John wanted to throw up. Here they were, the five Tracys legally considered adults, waiting for the one who should still be a child to come up out of the water whole, and all John could think was that it was his fault. Dad would have listened to him if he'd said this was a bad idea. Alan would've been mad, sure, but he'd be alive, at home locked in the office with Brains (apparently with guns) and not in danger. But, no, John just had to sign off on it. He put his baby brother in 'One, put him in 'Four, put him in that water, and —

So this was what body-bending, gut-gnawing guilt felt like.

Way to be, Genius.

Jeff Tracy was a much braver man than he. Oh, yes.

But then Alan was running up the stairs, all grins and adrenaline and "Glad you could finally join us". It took everything John had not to burst out laughing. The barely restrained impulse behind his brother's eyes to run to each and every one of them and never let go was priceless.

Just as quickly, the moment was gone. Dad whisked Alan off to face his worst nightmare all over again, leaving Scott in charge of what John suddenly realized in the bright light of day was one sorry looking crew.

In full on Field Mode, Scott started pointing to them one by one. "Virgil, you're in 'Two. I need a systems check to make sure she can make the flight home. John, I want you with Virg — and before you say it, no, I don't think you're incapable at the moment, but you do look like you rode a snowball backwards into Hell, and the last thing we need to give the papers is more reason to speculate. I want you out of sight. Besides, Virgil's gonna need you. Gordon, you get started with the monorail evacuees. I'll be down after I talk to the park police. I want this wrapped up as quick as possible so we can get Dad and Alan and get home."

He ran a greasy hand through his matted hair, the unspoken plea, I just want to get you guys home, plain on his face.

Leave it to Gordon to take that look and destroy it with one swift punch to Scott's shoulder. It's all good grin on his face, Gordon said, "Dude, breathe. It's not like this is our first mission or anything."

With that, he hooked his thumb over his shoulder, tap-danced backwards toward the steps that would lead to the riverside, and saluted Scott with the biggest, face-splitting smile he had in his vast repertoire.

Taking that cue, John started walking backwards himself, nodded toward where Fermat dropped 'Two, and spun on his heel. Anything else that needed to be said between them they would handle back at home. Because they were going home, all of them. Besides, he figured Scott would give Virgil a quick run down on keeping an eye on him and all the blah-blah-smother-blah things to watch for that he wouldn't be in a place to do himself for the next hour or so until they got the heck out of Dodge. Scott was so damn predictable.

John couldn't help looking back at the crowd the park police was trying to keep back from the 'birds, wary of the solitary breakaway of curiosity. Suddenly, even the victims shadowed their operation with danger. The Hood could easily have agents-hitmen-whatever planted amongst the tourists to slow them down. It was maybe a hundred feet at best between the line and the open gangway into
'Two's loading bay. A mediocre runner could reach them in maybe ten seconds. Virgil was further away, which meant John and his dislocated shoulder and concussion would be the first line of defense.

Yeah, they'd tried that. His defense didn't seem to be enough now, did it?

He kept watch, though, both on the gangway and up in 'Two's cockpit. He rattled off the answers to Virgil's questions — not that he had any, really — always keeping his eyes on the crowd. Scott moved expertly through them, making John smile. It had been a long time since he'd had the pleasure of watching his brothers in action. Gordon, too, moved through them with such ease, his every man grin putting a terrified mother and child at ease as he helped them put some distance between themselves and what would have been a watery grave. The park police easily fell in line with Scott's direction, forgetting somehow that they were the ones with authority.

"John?"

"Hmm?"

"How long did you have?"

It was said with such ache that John didn't have to guess what Virgil meant. He rolled it over in his head, churning and twisting it in slow motion, and wondered if there'd been anything he could have done to keep the family from coming up there. If he'd only had enough time to call home, to tell them that he was okay, false alarm, whatever. He could feel his brother deliberately looking out the windscreen to give him the privacy necessary to answer him, to keep from either of them seeing the real fear behind the question.

Equally quiet, he answered, "Six seconds. I had six seconds."

Virgil hummed to himself, a snippet of tune, flipping out his fingers until he needed the next hand for a thumb. He ran through it multiple times until the hum became words. "Well, they're buildin' a gallows outside my."

"Hmm?"

"I was maybe half awake to Twenty-Five Minutes to Go when the alarm went off. That's how far I got in six seconds. That's what I was doing when he tried to kill you."

It took half a second to place the song and album, seeing the spines of the relic line of vinyl on Virgil's wall in their perfectly organized, alphabetized and classified system. (Virgil always argued that the vinyl sounded better, the way it was meant to be heard if you couldn't hear it live.) He saw the track listings on the back of different albums and settled for the obvious one, just in case. "At Folsom?"

"Yeah."

"The Americans are better." Whether that was true or not, John didn't know, but he'd heard Virgil say so once upon a time. He trusted his brother's taste in music most of the time. Virgil, he didn't appreciate the classics; he appreciated the greats. To Virgil, there was a huge distinction, and he made sure they all knew it. John maybe couldn't hear the difference, but every note said something to his brother, and that was all that mattered. Besides, Johnny Cash was damn cool.

"Would've been mood appropriate."

"Four or Five?"
"Four. Definitely Four."

"We'll keep it in mind for next time."

"I'll make you a copy." Virgil's voice sounded distracted. John wished he could see his brother's face, but he was afraid of what he might find there. "Hey, Johnny?"

"Yeah?"

"No next times, okay?"

John let his hand rest on Virgil's shoulder, as much for himself as for his brother. He squeezed once and then let himself fall back into his chair to stare out the same windscreen. 'One was in a quick descent on the other side of the river, though where exactly Dad set her down, he couldn't tell for sure. He thought of his father there, about to face The Hood, face to face, and wondered if he would have the same restraint he knew his father would show (even if Dad himself didn't know it yet). He glanced at the worn, hunched shoulders of his middle brother, thought of the man's hurt that lay on the kid's conscience and knew, without a doubt, that he wouldn't.

It was a good thing it was Dad going after the sonofabitch. Fuck him all to Hell six times over.

Clenching his fist enough to draw blood under his nails, he kept his calm, IR voice on and said, "You'll want to divert engine five. The out light trailed you all the way home from the rig yesterday, and I don't know if Brains got a chance to look it over yet this morning."

This time, Virgil actually turned around to regard him with cocked, curious eyebrows that clearly said You actually followed us all the way home?

Feeling the heat in his cheeks from the intense look, John pointedly glanced at the console and started singing in the worst possible Johnny Cash voice he could manage, full of Arkansas accent and shotgun and near-death quiver. "Well, they're buildin' a gallows outside my cell. And I've got twenty-five minutes to go. And the whole town's waitin' just to hear me yell — "

"John?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't sing."

(End Part Four)
"Thunderbird Two from Mobile — "

"Negative, Ghost Rider, the pattern is full. And if you ask me one more time, I'm gonna have command ground you for a week."

Virgil didn't bother to acknowledge the request in any other way, refusing to be distracted from his tap-dancing fingers. Hello, trying to work here! If he wouldn't feel so guilty thinking along the lines of I'm gonna kill him after the day they'd had, well, he'd be whipping out the threats at Scott left and right. Not that threatening the dork ever had much effect, mind you, but there would be threats. Threatening, evil threats. It was dangerous to deny the capacity with which Virgil could execute a threat.

"You don't even know what I was gonna ask."

"Wrap it up and get back here."

A growl churned the back of his throat, mics be damned, because whoever — whoever, meaning The Hood and his cohorts, because he refused to blame the kids on this one — had flown his 'bird had cocked up her systems but good. Some of the wiring in her guidance processor was fried, and that was the least of the problems. The little bit he'd flown her to retrieve Gordon's boat said they wouldn't exactly be limping home, but it wouldn't be a smooth ride either.

Scott's voice immediately took on That Tone — that quiet, big brother, I'm earnestly concerned, just look at my eyebrows, they're earnestly concerned tone. "What's going on?"

"The park police won't hold the press back forever. We're lucky they've given us this long. If we get out of this one without someone pinning the tail on the Tracy, it'll be a miracle."

"Two — "

Virgil glanced first to the sky — Hey, Mom, a little help here? — then over to John. He took in the slouching posture that protected his ribs, the way he held his head in hand by propped elbow, and the utter exhaustion that stuttered his breathing. He knew John would find a way to make him regret it, but he couldn't be bothered to care if it worked. "I mean it. I need you back here. If he does need us, he'll call. In the meantime, I've got an injured man sitting here next to me who needs your attention before they get back in case we need to take care of them. So hand off those people down there and get your asses back here."

He could see John opening his mouth to protest how fine he was, blah blah blah, but Virgil snapped his fingers at him to get his attention and shook his head. Trust me, he mouthed.

John thought about it for all of half a second before he nodded and shut his eyes again.

"Scale of one to ten, 'Two."

Okay, so maybe the grin was a little too triumphant, but c'mon! Damn, Scott was so easy sometimes.

John raised his head off his hand, flashed him four fingers, and then tipped his hand side to side, wishy-washy-like. Liar. Virgil did the math, compensated for stress of the day and John's desire to never be coddled pretty much ever, and factored in his own desire to get as many brothers in one central location as possible.
"That would be a steady six, Mobile Control. Seven, if I look at him cross-eyed."

"FAB. On our way. Mobile Control out."

After the tell-tale click of the mics going out, John said, "You didn't have to play it up that bad," although there wasn't much accusation behind it. Mostly, he sounded as pale and wiped as he looked, and as far as Virgil was concerned, a six wasn't an exaggeration at all.

"He needed something else to focus on. His head obviously isn't with the civilians. I don't think it would be unfair to say none of us really give a damn about some already rescued civvies right now. And since all they really needed to do was unload them and hand them over to the first responders, there's no need to keep them down there until Dad gets back. If something is wrong, I don't want to have to wait for them to get here first."

"Yeah, but now I'm the one who has to ward off — "

"You haven't been home in three months. It's your turn. Besides, as soon as he sees Alan, he'll be all over that like superglue on Dad's fingers when we let him in the kitchen. Relax." What Virgil didn't bother to add was the obvious: how could John take care of Dad if he didn't take care of himself first?

Ordinarily, John would've said something along the eloquent and brother-banter-approved lines of *I hate you*, but Virgil could tell he was feeling as itchy about their word choices as he was. So as John flipped him off and winked simultaneously, Virgil reached over to his brother's uninjured shoulder and clapped it lightly. Then he gave him the finger right back.

"You quoted *Top Gun* at him." John might as well have asked if Virgil was okay.

But they both knew the answer, and Virgil was too damn tired to lie. "You had six seconds."

"It was a good six seconds?"

"Yeah, right."

"I think you're underestimating Scott's capacity to be all over all of us at the same time." John pushed himself stiffly to his feet, his face flushing red until he was as straight as he could get and still protect his ribs. "But I'll be the man and take the hit first so you three can get a running head start."

"You're a god among us smaller men."

"Damn straight. You owe me, little brother."

"Good enough. Send Gordon up when they get here?"

He was about to watch his brother's descent through the hatch in case that six wasn't a seven or more, but their father's voice finally — *finally* — came over the mics, loud and clear and quite obviously alive. "Thunderbird Two from Thunderbird One."

"Go ahead, 'One."

"Thunderbird Four is secure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Heat 'em up. We'll touch down in three for a passenger exchange, head back over to secure The Mole, and then we're on the road. I want you boys in the air." The end of the order — *so you can't*
be boarded — hung nervously in the air. Virgil wanted to ask if they were okay, if there were problems, if that maniac was truly gone, but Dad didn't even bother to wait half a breath before he signed off with a clipped "Thunderbird One out."

"FAB."

Virgil spun his chair around to where John stood thoughtfully half in, half out of the hatch. "That sounded bad, right? He sounded bad."

Maybe it was the smile. Maybe it was the breath John took as he glanced behind him, away from Virgil. Maybe it was the overwhelming sense of We Are So Screwed, but John's "We'll be okay" did nothing to release the knots from Virgil's stomach at all. But then John was gone, leaving Virgil alone for the first time all day, and all he wanted to do was follow his big brother because alone did not feel okay in the slightest.

There was just something about being left for dead by a thoroughly unhinged megalomaniac hell-bent on your father's destruction that did something to a guy's teeth. It was so far from okay.

"Knock, knock," Gordon's voice said over the mics even as Virgil heard John open the bay doors to let their brothers in. If he was looking for a joke, Virgil wasn't about to give in. He thought about answering — Go away, no one's home — but didn't want to encourage him. It would be a long enough ride home as it was.

Virgil closed his eyes, heavy and relieved, when he saw 'One rising above the skyline across the Thames. Like the rest of them, 'One wasn't shining as bright as she could be, but she was whole. 'Five had taken the brunt of it, but even she would be okay with time. Maybe with a little TLC, some sleep, and a heck of a lot of therapy, they all would be.

Hmm … Sleep.

It wouldn't do any good to think about it, not when they still had so far to go, but his whole body felt so heavy. He'd give about anything to be able to sleep, safe and warm in his bed. Well, maybe not warm. Kicking off the covers would be nice. He couldn't believe he was alive to kick off the covers tonight.

He'd barely heard JR entertaining the prisoners when the alarm went off that morning. The others would've called the volume ear-splitting, but that was the way he liked it, especially when he slept; it drowned out the sounds of the ocean (now that was distracting) and let sleep do its work. If he couldn't feel the music vibrating his desk, it wasn't loud enough. Guys like Johnny Cash needed to be loud for their full effect. Guys high on coke who shoot their bad bitches down don't do it in easy-listening volumes.

And yet, there was no doubt that sleep wouldn't come without guilt for a while. It wasn't only Scott's nightmares he slept through last night. He still couldn't believe he was swinging from the gallows when John had had all of six seconds to let his life flash before his eyes. Behind his own, he could see his brother, quiet and about as musical as Ferris Bueller, maybe doing whatever it was he did up there first thing in the Tracy-Time morning, with only six seconds of warning that he never would see his brothers again. And then, John stopped and looked at him, dark and accusing.

"I had six seconds," he said, this time without any of the worried kindness he'd shown Virgil earlier. No, he pretty much sounded like he was about to relegate Virgil to the Ninth Circle of Hell for his crimes. "You were sleeping in when I died, you know. Some hero. What will you be doing when it's Gordon's turn to die, hmm? Or Scott's? You aren't one of the kids anymore. You were supposed to be one of us. You left me for six seconds."
"I didn't — I didn't know!"

"Well, I'm waiting for the pardon that'll set me free with nine more minutes to go, but this ain't the movies so forget about me," John sang, his throat gurgling around his fear as 'Five exploded around him. "And here I go-oh-oh-oh!"

Then Virgil was slapping away the cold hand on his forehead, following the arm length up to a too concerned face. He blinked hard and wide, trying to focus. "Gords?"

"You awake?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry." He scrubbed his hand down his face, the stubble of never getting a chance to shave that morning scratchy and uncomfortable under the grime of everything else. Swallowing and clearing his throat a few times as if he'd been asleep for hours, not minutes, he asked, "Everybody on board?"

"Scott's taking Fermat back with him in 'One, Dad's gonna take Tin-Tin with him in 'Three, and John and Alan are below. Lady P stayed behind to take care of things at the bank, I guess." Gordon waited a moment, but apparently he didn't get the reaction he wanted because he asked, "You want me to drive?"

"I got it."

Gordon's oddly expressive eyebrows screwed at him. He didn't even have to say anything, the little smartass.

"Eat me."

"Pleasure. If you change your mind?"

"I'm good."

Virgil had a feeling Gordon would be watching his back the entire way home anyway. He kinda loved the kid for that. It made him want to scream his lungs out in frustration — he was fine, damn it, and he'd be a lot more fine if people would stop looking at him like he wasn't fine — but he loved him.

Things got quiet then, peaceful, almost like this could be any ordinary rescue run, and stayed that way as they took off. Retrieving The Mole took a little creative driving, but Gordon got the job done so they were back in the air not ten minutes later. They made a show of sticking together the entire way out of London, close enough that they could see each other through cockpit windscreens. Whatever the press would say about them in the next few hours, they should be seen now as together. Whenever Scott's nose cone pulled out too far ahead of them, Virgil adjusted 'Two's speed accordingly with Dad following slightly behind. It would be a long trip home, but they needed to make it as one.

Barely southwest of England's coastline, Gordon blasted out a breath he'd obviously held for a while. "Dude, I need some kind of noise here. Would you at least say something?"

What was he supposed to say? I hope we can get home in time for dinner. Really? Or Gee, Gordo, I'm so glad we aren't dead because listening to you guys wheeze what should have been your last breaths was excruciating for me? Or maybe something along the lines of Hey, do you think any of us will ever sleep without both eyes open again? Maybe they could form a Tracy Family support group, you know, for the attempted murdered. Of course, they didn't know how many members they should be set up for yet, so Onaha shouldn't start with the catering list until they'd all recounted every single
lousy second of how one of Dad's good intentions had become the nightmares of them all.

But sure, Virgil would be happy to say something. If Gordon could only tell him what to say, he'd say it.

Then, because he was dumb like that, Virgil glanced over at Gordon and saw his little brother radiating small, so vulnerable, so in need of Scott or John, someone, anyone to give him even the most miniscule hint of normality that all the heat in his chest was carried away with one calming breath. With it being only them, no crowd to play to or brothers to have a stiff upper lip for, Gordon was the same little kid who'd tugged on their father's jacket sleeve at the funeral and asked if he could give Mommy his teddy to sleep with because Mommy was as afraid of the dark as he was.

Mom was so afraid of the dark, she'd had to sleep with the TV on.

Why people thought it was a good idea to tell small children that the dead were only sleeping and see, doesn't she look so peaceful and having sweet dreams, he would never know. Talk about scarring kids (and their big brothers) for life.

Mom had looked beautiful, though. Angelic, even. Maybe it was wishful thinking since he couldn't see the damage below the lid that had taken her away from them, but he thought she'd looked … well, not sleeping, but … Knowing now what a real disaster could do to a body, well, he knew Lucy's children had been spared a horror for a few years. Scott hadn't been able to bring himself to look at her, even once.

That something Virgil wanted-but-didn't-want to say was gone.

He swallowed hard and reached over far enough to drop his fist lightly on Gordon's thigh, letting it rest there. Whether it did any good, he didn't know, but if Scott had done it for him, it would be good enough until they were home and could peel off these flight suits and scrape the ick of near-death off his itchy, burning skin. He was about to pull his hand back, afraid of the taint of the day on his hands seeping into his brother — like it wasn't already there, right? — but Gordon's own fist closed on top of his, pinning him there. Whose comfort it was intended for, he didn't know, but Virgil couldn't quite bring himself to disregard the gift. Gordon's lips tightened into a thin, I don't have a clue smile as his fist came up and down once, twice, one last time before it fell away to the console in front of him.

"Yeah, talking's overrated."

Okay, so maybe he didn't have the words to make his brother feel better right now; who would when he didn't even know how to make himself feel better? Getting out of his head wouldn't be a bad idea, though. They all needed to. When he was ready, he'd do it up right (there was enough paint on the island in one form or another for this; there had to be), but until he could be alone, his thoughts had no business in his cockpit. Without looking away, Virgil let his fingers do some walking on his own console until he saw Gordon's face light up when the icon for 'Two's music library popped up in the corner of his screen. He forced a grin, something he thought might look genuine — or that Gordon thankfully pretended was genuine — and offered only one caveat: "Something loud enough nobody can think, okay?"

A sliver of mischief twinkled in Gordon's eyes. It wasn't anything to write home about, but it was a start. Reaching under the dash of his console, he produced the battered old Royals cap he kept stashed for luck (even if Dad would never let him wear it until they were clear of land until home). Fixing it on his head backwards, the grin he gave Virgil was more than worth it.

The cockpit flooded with the opening guitar strains of Sunshine of Your Love, and Virgil had to
wonder, if they were in a car right now, if his foot wouldn't be slamming down hard on the accelerator. For the hell of it, he gave 'Two a little extra gas. Close enough. He glanced down to his console and saw that Gordon had opened the channel between 'Two, 'Three, and 'One so that Grandpa Tracy's favorite song could guide them all home. Virgil grinned back at Gordon when he heard over the mics someone's hands — probably Dad's — drumming along with Ginger Baker's calculated chaos. Man, he wished he could crank a window or something, throw his arms up over his head and soak up the wind whipping around him to the speed of 'Two and her soundtrack. Grandpa always said this song belonged to a top-down convertible ignoring the posted speed limits on every hill a dusty country road had to offer.

For the first time all day, Virgil's pulse raced with the power of good music, good memories, that indescribable good of family and brothers and all the things right with his world. He knew it couldn't last, but for these last few minutes — up here in the air, in his 'bird, his family safe — it was everything. Gordon played DJ, kicking off with Kid Rock rambling in gibberish (perfectly produced sound, but seriously, what the hell was a bawitdaba?) and shooting his mouth off that he was a cowboy before he let Nazareth mess with a sonofabitch and Metallica's fuel burned hard, loose, and clean. He kept up a driving stream of fast, generally hard rock, loud rock. It wasn't until Gordon thumped his shoulder and offered a wicked, Check this out eyebrow wiggle that he realized the music had done its job and got them almost home. Then he looked back down at his console to see what was so funny.

Oh, holy hell.

Scotty would kill him as soon as they were on the ground. There was no song Scott hated more in the world, heaven, or hell.

It's your funeral, he mouthed as Gordon's finger hovered over the controls, ready to pull the trigger. Of course, his need to protect his younger brother from the wrath of Scott wasn't strong enough to keep him from winking at the kid. They could use the laugh.

"Thunderbirds One, Two from Thunderbird Three," Dad's voice interrupted. Geezus, he sounded tired. Granted, yes, they had to get their 'birds home one way or another, but Virgil had to wonder if Dad should've been 'Three's first choice pilot. They didn't have the video screens on, but Virgil knew the way his father probably wiped his hand down his face, worried and weary, and losing all energy now that day's end was in sight. "Boys, keep the mics on all through your approach. No shortcuts. We're all tired. I don't want any mistakes now that we're so close."

"FAB," Scott chimed in at the same time as both Gordon and Virgil. Do it, Virgil mouthed, all smiles and conspiracy, to Gordon. As if the kid needed encouragement or permission.

Kenny Loggins did his vile, greatly despised thing in the Danger Zone to synchronized groans over the sound system. Well, Dad groaned, but it sounded second thought, like he was forcing it in sympathy for Scott, because there was no mistaking the deep chested laugh in there, too. From down below, Alan wasn't even trying to hide it; no, he was full on embracing the laughter.

"Thunderbird Two from Thunderbird One."

Virgil had to lick his lips to grind out the grin (unsuccessfully) before he answered, "Go ahead."

"Smack him for me, would you?"

Just like that, the sympathy was gone and the lines between them were flooded with everyone
laughing but Scott. It sounded like Dad was maybe even singing along (badly). Alan definitely was. Dork.

"No can do, Thunderbird One. We're initiating approach and need both hands. You'll just have to do it yourself."

Gordon must've felt like taking it easy on the guy, though, because the music quickly became the theme from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Okay, maybe Virgil would have to rethink the whole letting anyone have control over the music but him thing. Still, it was worth the laugh when, damn, if Scotty didn't hate that song.

"Run, munchkin. That's all I'm gonna say."

Gordon's only response was to let the Beatles, in all their remastered glory, start chanting about love, love, love. Apparently, it's all you need. Well, that and a yellow submarine.

Virgil swiveled around in his chair, about to pay his last respects to his little brother — which, now that he'd thought it that way made his guts turn to ice water because phrases like that couldn't be funny again — but Alan beat him to it from the hatch. "He's gonna slaughter you, you know that."

"He's gotta catch me first." Gordon took his ball cap off his head and dropped it onto Alan's head, bringing the brim down low over his eyes. "You with me?"

Something crossed Alan's face, something dark Virgil had never seen, but then he gave him a face-splitting whopper of a grin so like the Old Alan that Gordon no doubt had his answer. To seal the deal, their fists knocked, catching their index fingers and yanking apart with a *pop*. Alan brought his released fist down on Virgil's shoulder, squeezed, and let go.

"Everything okay back there, kiddo?"

"Bored. John fell asleep somewhere between that screaming thing and whatever that Led Zeppelin was."

*Whatever that Zeppelin …?* Virgil bugged his eyes out of his head to the point he had to scale it back because it seeded a headache. "Heathen."

"Some of us actually listen to music from the twenty-first century, Old Fogy."

Virgil huffed. "That doesn't mean it's any good."

Gordon snorted. "That coming from a kid using the word 'fogy'."

Alan got quiet for a moment, his stare fixed out the windscreen at the clouds around them. He adjusted the cap to a better fit — now that he'd had another growth spurt and could wear it decently — and leaned against the side of Gordon's chair. He said something low and quiet to Gordon, but the music was too loud for Virgil to hear what it was. Something about what he said withered Gordon's face into smiling lips and puppy eyes. His hand went up to yank on the bill of the cap then up to the top of Alan's head, wobbling it back and forth.

Whatever was said, it wasn't meant for him. The "you, too, little brother" was all he needed to hear. Virgil forced himself to look away and give them their moment, whatever it was meant to be. He could hear the fabric of Gordon's flight suit *zztt*!ing around and a few fleshy smacks of some kind, all welcome to his ears.

"Dork." Alan took a deep breath like he needed to brace himself before he asked back at a normal
No hesitation, Virgil said, "Peachy." Or was that too little hesitation?

He glanced over to Gordon, who nodded and quickly seconded him with an enthusiastic "Rockin' and rollin', dude." For emphasis, he even turned the music up another notch.

"John looks like shit." There was a brief beat before Alan amended, "You all look like shit." There was a little something after, mumbled only so Alan himself could hear, but it had something to do with, what, mermaids? Whatever that meant. Little brothers were so weird.

Virgil wanted to comment on his littlest brother's appearance himself — the scratches on his face said he'd probably run through the jungle and picked a fight with every tree there, and there looked to be a bruise or two blossoming beautifully — but instead he snatched the cap off Alan's head and screwed it onto his own. He ducked this way and that under the "HEY!" until the kid rang his bell a little and got it back. When it was safely on Alan's head, Virgil jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"We should be landing in three minutes. You should make … sure John's … " But Alan wasn't listening. Virgil followed his gaze out the windscreen, but he didn't see anything out of the ordinary to match the wide-eyed look on his brother's face. "Alan?"

"It looks … it isn't as pretty as I remember. Does it look, I don't know; it isn't ugly, but it's somehow, I guess, darker than it used to be?"

Oh, Allie.

So that's what a broken heart feels like. That's what wanting to kill someone with your bare hands for taking your little brother's innocence feels like. That's what being helpless to fix any damn part of it feels like.

Fuckity fuck almighty fuck.

Alan must have felt his flinch because he backed away from between their chairs so quickly he tripped over his own feet. Gordon wordlessly caught him by the elbow until he could straighten himself out. The kid's face clouded over, reflecting the storm that threatened the horizon a few hours away. He shook his head, backing up some more until he turned into the hatch and disappeared before either Virgil or Gordon could say a word.

"That's … not good," Gordon managed.

"Nothing about any of this is good."

"Thunderbird Two from Thunderbird Three," Dad interrupted Gordon's retort. "Let's hear those systems checks."

"Yes, sir."

Virgil brought his 'bird in with her usual grace, although she stuttered here and there, crying out in pain from whatever lingering bruising she'd suffered at The Hood's hands. Gordon had to leap out of his seat at one point to take on a small fire that turned out to only be a few errant sparks that made 'Two's systems look a little overprotective. By the time Virgil had her situated in her silo, he was swearing a blue streak to rival anything Gordon could come up with.

Down in the sick bay, Alan sat next to a slightly green-looking John. He grinned up at Virgil, strangely hyper but visibly trying to calm his breathing, like he couldn't believe they were finally
home. Although why Virgil was surprised, he didn't know. Every time they had a nerve-racking trip home, he needed … Oh.

Oh!

Alan had just finished his first mission. Sanctioned or not, he'd completed a round trip, hold your ankles kind of mission and survived. Whole and relatively uninjured and together and wow.

Holy motherfucking wow.

Lost for words, Virgil simply reached over and yanked down hard on the brim of the baseball cap. He waited for Alan to pull it back up. There was a slightly hurt look in the kid's eyes, like that wasn't what he was looking for at all, until Virgil looked him up and down, hard. "I am so proud of you, you little shit."

Alan bit his lip but wisely didn't say anything back. The grin on his face was enough.

Then he took off running down the gangway, Gordon pushing by to chase him down. Virgil hooked his thumb at the only slightly joking sign next to the door — EXIT: No Running, No Jumping, No Skateboarding — and shook his head. "Some people's kids."

"You tell 'em," John said, entirely too serious, except for the half-cocked smile. "You wanna yell at them to get off your lawn, too?"

"Damn straight. I can't take them anywhere. So what do you say we get you out of here?"

"Absolutely. No offense to you or your 'bird, but the beds in this joint suck."

Virgil laughed. "That's the second time you've insulted her like that today, man. You're lucky I didn't leave your ass … parked …"

John stared at him, confused. "I didn't say anything about — Virgil?"

He should be listening. He knew he should, but he was a little distracted out the corner of his eye by the burnt angel wings of ash and char surrounding the floor of 'One's silo. Even in the diminished light, he could see the blackened metal and concrete standing out as evidence that someone else had been there. Only once had the floor of Scott's silo looked like that, and that was in the early days when they were still getting the hang of things. He'd forgotten to drop the flame duct doors and charred half the joint. Like any other lesson, Scott hadn't forgotten that one since. One of the ducts was dropped now, but the other two were still closed. 'One had fired on all cylinders.

Goldilocks's evil, bald-headed freak of a step-uncle really had been in their cottage, and the porridge had been far too hot. He wondered how the monster felt about their chairs.

"Hey, man, you look — "

"I'm okay," Virgil snapped too quickly, swallowing hard. He was. He was totally okay. Why didn't everyone see he was perfectly okay? First Gordon with his asking to drive and now John? It was a stain. They'd wash it away. He was just fucking fine.

John squeezed his elbow a little harder than necessary. Perceptive jerk. "C'mon, let's get it over with."

Two steps off the gangway, the chk-ssk-chk! of a shotgun pumping drew their heads up in unison to the scaffolding around the perimeter of the over-over-sized, three 'bird garage.
Well, damn.

On the scaffolding over 'Three's silo doors, Onaha stood with her weapon trained down at them with the same precision she wielded her chef's knife. Another click behind and above them on 'Two's scaffolding was Kyrano, not a sign of hesitation in his sight down his own barrel. Then, from the landing to the left of the individual tubes to Dad's office, Brains made his own appearance, his terrible eyesight obviously no hindrance to his ability to train loaded death at the family scrabbling backwards into a tiny stunned cluster.

"A-alan?"

"Yeah, Brains?"

Virgil had to hand it to the kid; he didn't sound the least bit worried about the weapons pointed at them or the paranoia that temporarily stayed their triggers. Good for him. Alan made his way to the front of the group so Brains could plainly see him. He even had his hands spread out to his sides, calm and peaceful. It was entirely possible they'd all seen too many Westerns over the years.

"You-you know what The Hh-wh-hood feels like." Virgil felt John's eyes slide to find his — Feels like? — but he couldn't look away from the barrel aimed right at his big brother's (obviously vulnerable, go for the weakest link to set your prey off balance) head. "Are you a-alone?"

"It's us, Brains. Just us. Fermat and I checked all the 'birds for stow-hitchhikers. Mister Tracy, he reads mm-minds. I n-n-need you to tell me something only ww-w-we would know without thu-thinking about it."

Dad stepped forward out of the bundle of his children, his arms spread peacefully wide as Alan had done. Yep, too many Westerns for the Tracy boys.

"My mother taught you how to handle that shotgun out in the north pasture of my parents' place. When it was over, you made me come out with you to dig the shells out of the trees. Mother said you were a good enough shot that Dad would be impressed, but then she reminded us both that we needed to know how to shoot so we would know we didn't have to. We're alone, my friend, I swear."

While the aura surrounding their father was fascinating to watch in that moment, Virgil couldn't help focusing on Brains. Of his many talents, lying wasn't one of them. If he felt something, it was all over his face. In this case, as Dad went on, Brains seemed to sag more and more until he deflated completely with relief.

"Bb-b-boys?"

"We're good, Brains."

Shotguns clunked to the scaffolding like the weight of them simply became too heavy for all of them. They remained in their protective, elevated positions, braced along the rails, even as the parents wielding them ran for the ladders to get down to the bay floor and their children.
The whole of the silo swirled in a chaotic jumble of color and limbs and shouts, something that had never greeted them after a rescue before. Virgil couldn't describe it, really; if he were to try to paint it, it would have no definable shape at all. Too much happened, too fast, too warm, too full. Mostly, there would be pockets of color, bright oranges and yellows and greens and blues, chunks of relief and love and family. Black spots would fill the empty spaces, though, their thoughts flickering on the canvas like lightning bugs in the night. Black, fearful, angry spaces.

Mostly, those black spaces would be his father's eyes. Because even as he was surrounded by all of his children, alive and whole, Virgil could see Dad's loss like black ichor overwhelming his eyes.

He thought he'd been afraid up there on 'Five. He thought he'd understood fear then, knowing he was about to die in what could only have been a nightmare because, really, who gets to die with all of their most wicked fears attacking them at once? Fire, violence, suffocation, surrounded helplessly by his family dying around him — all that was missing was the rushing wave of snow and he could've filled out the entire list of Top Five Ways Virgil Tracy Does Not Want To Die.

But now, seeing his father like this, a dark pillar in a sea of jubilation and Holy Hell We're All Still Alive, standing so alone and angry? Now Virgil was afraid. Now, above all else, he knew things couldn't possibly ever be the same.

But then Alan and Fermat broke away running from the group, laughing, with Scott close behind Alan's heels. The lift door slammed down between them, securing the smaller boys from Big Brother's red but not exactly threatening face. Alan even twittered his fingers at Scott, the little tease. Whatever it was Virgil missed, it must've been good.

At his side, John nudged his shoulder and crinkled his forehead to ask the question Virgil figured none of them could answer honestly the next few days, but John gratefully didn't say anything. Taking it as a cue, Virgil laughed, even though he wasn't so sure what he was laughing about, and let it fade out in time with everyone else's. Darting his eyes to make sure no one else had seen his distraction probably wasn't all that stealthy, but no one else seemed to notice.

When Scott turned around in his lift, shaking his head, Virgil finally saw why he was actually chasing the kids around. He took one look at all the green foam on the floor and decided he didn't even want to know.

Kyrano shook his head at the mess, but Dad put a hand on his shoulder. "Leave it alone for tonight. The boys can clean it up in the morning."

"Mister Tracy — "

"Please." Dad didn't wait for an answer, but he took Onaha by the hand and led her toward the lift that would end behind John's portrait. "Now, what can we do for you?"

"Order pizza?" Gordon snickered helpfully, ducking into his tube before anyone could catch him.

From the moment Virgil's own (rather sticky) lift door closed on him and started that too fast ascent, the more he wanted it to go back down, stop, take him anywhere but up. But no, the world didn't cooperate with him like that, not when he wanted it to, so the door slid open, revealing a jagged tear above him and pile of plaster on the floor in front of him. He felt his spine snap into the rail behind him. Furniture was overturned. Ropes lay in a coil next to the foot of the desk. And yup, that was blood on the plaster.

Nope. Not ready for this yet.
He absolutely had to get the almighty hell out of there.

There were a handful of useful excuses about why he had to go back — yeah, he totally forgot to put the, um, parking break on and left the keys in the ignition in his rush to get to bed, yeah — but he wasn't about to draw attention to himself. They needed to get John's head properly looked at, and Scott's. Dad, too. They were a mess, even more than the office. They needed to come first. He'd just go down and make sure he did whatever it was he'd say he was doing later and make his way up when he didn't feel like an elephant had taken up residence on his chest. No big deal.

Manipulating the controls on his lift, he told himself the gut-drop nausea was the same he got every time he rode his way down to his 'bird. Nope, it had nothing to do with the day they'd had at all. He was overtired, hadn't had anything to eat in nearly thirty hours, and still couldn't swallow away the adrenaline in the back of his throat that blasted him over and over throughout the day to keep him going those next few minutes. That was all it was.

Of course, his bed was this way …

But he'd left, um, something, that way …

Four hours ago, he should have been dead. Four hours ago, he was never going to see this beautiful piece of machinery again. And that didn't even compare to the idea that, four hours ago, he was never going to see his brothers again. He wasn't going to get to tell Alan that no, "don't you have homework to do" wasn't the best he could do. He wouldn't get to say so many things he knew didn't need to be said but should be said because everybody needs to hear those things now and then. Four hours ago, he wasn't going to see so many things that, while they were only things, it would break his heart to not have a piece of them one more time.

Four hours ago, this was all gone.

He didn't have anything in his stomach to throw up, but, boy, it sure tried. Good thing he'd made it as far as the sick bay, huh?

He cleaned up with a little more attention than his body really had the energy for, scrubbing away at the small metal diamonds on the floor even after the sour of his stomach was long gone and the waste bin was full of cleaning wipes. But then he found dried blood on the floor a few feet away from some rescue he wouldn't be able to pinpoint and had to get rid of that, too. He was already on his hands and knees anyway. Might as well get it all. And the vinyl of the cots needed a good scrubbing. They were always sanitary — he wouldn't dream of taking his family out on a rescue without having scoured things to as close to clean (Cleanliness is next to godliness, Grandma would say) as it could get — but a little extra effort wouldn't hurt.

By the time he arrived at the pilot seats, he lost count of how many packages of wipes he'd gone through. It couldn't be that many, though, not when his girl still felt so violated. He'd make it better. He'd make her gleam again, because he was never letting Alan back on board his machine thinking she looked dark again.

"Virgil?"

Ow.

Um, yeah, the dashboard was still above his head there.

"Sorry, man."

Virgil winced, his hand immediately chasing the sting in the back of his head while he slid (gingerly
this time) out from under the console, hands shoring his balance and propping him against the jean-clad leg behind him. He turned his head up to Scott but didn't quite manage to get his slap-happy eyes to coordinate enough to look at him. Besides, Virgil knew what was there. Scott's face was set, determined to get through the rest of the day without further injuries (good luck with that one if he was going around sneaking up on people), but his eyes would have that concerned *I'm Your Brother and You Will Tell Me What I Want To Hear* look they got after a job. They'd never tell him, but Scott Tracy was the dictionary definition of predictable (this was probably the wrong business for that, but oh, well). Any other day, that might be comforting; today it was another symptom of the *what the hell* they had limped through that made Virgil want to take his Mister Clean to every single surface he could get his hands on.

Instead, he smiled up at the man. Nope, nothing to see here, boss. "Hey, Scott. John."

The synchronized glances were rather amusing as they both catalogued his whole body for signs of trauma, obviously found nothing, and turned their attention back to the patiently waiting stare directed up at them. While John was satisfied and kept a good few steps back, Scott's eyes narrowed, his crow's feet ejecting their talons like he could actually see through Virgil's soul if he tore at it hard enough. Virgil wasn't entirely sure he couldn't.

"You shouldn't be out here."

"As soon as I get this mess cleaned up."

John glanced around the cockpit and shook his head. "Come inside. This can wait until tomorrow."

"I'm almost done. Shouldn't you be in the sick room?"

"Special dispensation. Shouldn't you be in the house?"

"Not until she's clean."

Scott shrugged, his arms flapping to say *Fine*, and then he twisted around until he found the packet of wipes on the console. He pulled a long string of them out before throwing the package at John. "Then let's get it done" was all Scott said before he took his wipes to the chair Virgil thought of as Gordon's. He wouldn't tell Scott so, but he'd already done that chair — twice. The notion that either John or Gordon spent any time in that chair before Virgil got to it made his skin crawl as it was. Another wipe down wouldn't hurt.

It was maybe five minutes of quiet, knuckle-scraping cleaning later that Scott finally (got bored) broke the silence. "How long are you planning to stay out here?"

"Where's Dad?" Virgil countered.

"On the phone with Lady P trying to convince her to come home. I don't think he's going to let anyone out of his sight for a while. Seriously, Virg, come inside. You're scaring him."

"Since when does she not want to be here?"

"Our lovely Lady is having a sit down with Lisa Lowe in," Scott glanced at his watch, rolling his eyes as he calculated the time difference, "about six hours. Tea and cannoli and an offer she can't refuse, if you get my drift."

"Speaking of food," John said, tapping his own wrist at Scott.

"Onaha made dinner. Please, Virgil? You've already been out here over an hour. It can wait."
And there it was. Twice, even. *Please.* Virgil wondered if Scott actually knew what kind of weapon that word was against his brothers because, really, he didn't use it all that often. Scott, like Dad, gave orders more than asked. Oh, he had his manners and all, but when he was only talking with them, when he wanted them to do something? *Please* wasn't a part of his vocabulary, not unless he truly meant it.

But this time? This time Virgil was a twenty-year-old kid who was … well, he was … he didn't know what he was, but he was *thisclose* to begging his brothers not to make him go in there. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Because this time, it was all different. This was their home. It had been the only truly safe place they'd had since Mom died. Even their 'birds hadn't had that element of safe to them, not when they'd already shed blood and seen death the way they had. Yes, home had escaped death, but it had been violated in a way he couldn't put words to.

He hadn't even seen it yet, but he knew. This time, it was worse than lingering nightmares and death. He wasn't scared. Not really. It must look like he was scared out of his mind. He'd think he was scared if he were Scott or John. It wasn't fear, though. He didn't know what it was, but it wasn't fear. He was angry. Oh, hell yes, he was angry. And if he was going to be any good to any of them, he had to get this out of his system out here where it couldn't hurt anyone. The house had enough hurt in it right now.

How many times over the last few months since Paris had Virgil calmed Scott's nightmares with the reassurance that he was home, that he was safe? How many times had they told each other Alan would be okay, that they could make things right with him again if they only got him home? How could Virgil ever in good conscience again tell his brothers that things would be all right because they were home?

There wasn't a word for what had been done to them.

There wasn't a word for what had been done to his ability to take care of his family — or his ability to let them take care of him.

Virgil wasn't sure how, but when John said "*Please?*" it came out sounding even worse than Scott's.

He wanted to beg them to ask him to storm any other castle. He'd do it, fearlessly, sword in hand and brave heart on his sleeve for all to see. He'd follow his brothers anywhere. Just not there. He wanted to scream at them that it was his turn, that he'd take care of everyone else when he'd had a chance to take care of himself because he was no good to them until he did. Why was an hour to scour away the scum of the day that much to ask?

Then John's hand was on his, staying the scrubbing. Virgil yanked his hand away as gently as possible and then let the wipe go back to erasing the scuzz of the day.

"*Virg? I don't think The Hood bothered with removing the facing of your control panel. There's nothing under there that wasn't there before today.*"

"*You don't know what he might have done,*" Virgil countered. "*We don't have a damn clue what he did.*"

Behind him, John whispered something to Scott. A second later, there was a pained groan that had Virgil's attention all too quickly. "*What?*

A series of turning corners on mouths and lifting eyebrows and wrinkled noses flew by so fast that
Virgil didn't have time to interpret whatever conversation The Two were having, but it came to a quick end when John rolled his eyes.

"Fine," Scott muttered and headed toward the hatch.

"Don't stay out here too much longer," John said, soft but supportive. "I'll only be able to keep that one," he jutted his chin toward a huffing Scott, "at bay for so long. Work it out and leave it out here. Yeah?"

"I'm almost done."

With nothing else to say, John kicked his toes lightly into Virgil's thigh to say goodbye on his way out, his good arm visibly having to exert a fair amount of force to get Scott out the door.

Three full trash bags later, Virgil thought he might — might — be ready to tackle the house. Sure, Kyrano and Onaha had probably been at it for a few hours, but Virgil was never above helping them out when he could. They were family, not servants. This was not their responsibility.

He gave 'Two a light pat on the hull on his way out. *Thanks for getting us home. Again.*

How wrong was it that he was pretty damn proud of himself for managing to take the entire ride up to Dad's office without puking this time? As the door slid open, he held his breath just in case. Then he spotted Gordon hopping off Dad's desk, obviously waiting for him.

"I'm under strict orders to keep you from cleaning anything except yourself the rest of the night. Into the shower with you." He leaned over and sniffed at Virgil's chest, which he until then hadn't realized was still clad in his flight suit. "Please. Before you kill us all."


Awkwardly, Gordon hooked his thumb over his shoulder and started walking backwards. "I'll be in my room when you're done." He didn't say why or what for, but it was good enough.

Virgil wasn't a big believer in the healing power of even an hour-long shower — that's what his piano was for — but he had to admit, as he stepped out of the steamy goodness, he felt a lot more grounded. The still somewhat warm plate someone left on his dresser led him even further along the road to Normal to the point where he felt his second (or was that his tenth by this point?) wind coming on. The fresh clothes were just short of a shot of caffeine. Sleep would be a long time coming.

Where all the other doors along the hall outside his room were closed, he found himself drawn to Gordon's open door. He leaned against the doorjamb and hugged his arms over his chest, watching Gordon's thumbs work miracles over the controller of the game (well, he assumed it was miraculous considering he, A, had no idea what game it was and, B, was too tired to focus his eyes enough to see any sort of score). On Gordon's bed, Alan lay splayed on his stomach with his head on the foot and feet trapping one of the pillows. He snored softly, the sound humid coming off his pillowed right arm. Neither of them had managed to get into anything but cargo shorts. Virgil guessed there was a clean shirt somewhere under the wet towels on the floor.

He really wished they would put their shirts on. Even in the dim light of the lowest setting the lights could be on, Virgil could see the bruising on both brothers' chests and arms. With a guilty pang, he realized Gordon hadn't been exaggerating every time he swore at them up on 'Five; he had several burns on his arms, already shiny with the progress of healing and burn cream. Alan's left side was one long bruise, which explained the stutter in his snore. His wrists showed the same rope burns that
the other kids and their parents had.

"If you're gonna stand sentry," Gordon's voice startled him, "There's a blanket in the top rack of the chest in that corner. Get it for Snoring Sally up there, would you?"

Virgil didn't say anything, but he did grab the light blanket and flung it out to release it from its folds. He wasn't sure why, but he was surprised to find it was actually Alan's quilt from Grandma Tracy. "Isn't it a little warm for this?"

Gordon didn't even glance away from his game, but he shrugged as much as the motion of his controller would allow. "He always has a little trouble adjusting the internal thermostat the first few nights back. He'll be shivering in no time, and he'll wake up bitching about how hot it is. Then he'll be in a jacket again before breakfast."

"I didn't know that."

The quiet, thoughtful tilt to his head exonerated Virgil, easily saying No reason you should. "Until Christmas, he would usually wander in here the first few nights and sit up with this thing." He held up the controller, finally finding a good place to pause the game and shake out his wrist. "By the end of the first round, he's usually cold and ends up sleeping the night away in here. I finally just kept that rattly old thing in here. Grandma made him a new one that he keeps at school anyway. He doesn't miss this one 'til he's home. Just don't cover his feet. He hates that."

Virgil did as directed, his hands breezy and light as he tucked his brother in for the first time in he couldn't remember how long before sitting down next to Gordon, shoulder to shoulder. He didn't say anything, concentrating instead on the game, which looked innocuous enough. Cartoonish cars zipping in and out of equally animated scenes that might be a Tuscan village. No violence whatsoever, anyway.

Still focused on his game, Gordon finally asked, "You feeling better?"

"As opposed to … ?"

"It took Dad an hour to realize you hadn't come in. He kinda freaked out."

"Ah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry about that. How bad?"

"The hole in the ceiling isn't the only plaster we'll be patching in his office. I give it twenty-four hours before there's a hole for each of us for one reason or another." Gordon took a deep breath and shook his head like he had gone off track and needed to steer himself back. "But what about you? You didn't say much on the way home."

"Honestly? My brain can't even process the question right now, let alone answer. Words are a little big at the moment. Graphs and pie charts might be better. Stick figures. You know the drill."

"I have a feeling there's gonna be a lot of that going around. Break out your crayons."

Virgil snorted. Talk about your understatements … "What about you?"

"Leaving the door open."

"Huh?"

Gordon didn't answer, but he had a smile on his face Virgil couldn't quite read. The cartoon car zipped onto a cliff's edge, clearly in danger of dropping straight down into the water below like Wile
E. Coyote when he ran out of road. Out of bounds, the little guy was saved by technology so that it bumped along and jerked the screen in a weird way, letting the driver know he needed to pull back onto the road. Gordon eased the controller around, bringing his cartoon vehicle back into the race. The zippy three-sixty turn it did was purely for fun. Even the character yelled a joyous "Whoo-hoo!" Little Brother wasn't trying to win.

Virgil let his head fall back against the mattress, his eyes closing out the flickering of the screen on the walls. The sun was gone now, leaving only the flood of security lights Virgil didn't even know they had. He wasn't sure which set of lights was brighter, but at the moment, neither felt natural. He let the sea breeze ghost over him, willing it to carry his worry away with it. It didn't hurt to remind himself one more time that they were home. They were safe. Gordon and Alan were right here, under his watchful eye. Nothing was going to happen to the little troublemakers again. Dad would be watching the rest of them, and Scott would catch any holes in the system. They were going to be so in each other's pockets, so cared for, that it would drive them all gloriously insane. It would be okay.

Again Gordon startled him, obviously more aware of his surroundings than his gaming betrayed. His voice was quiet, though, and maybe even a little secretive. "You saw the chair next to my door, right?" He thought about it but honestly didn't remember seeing it there. Taking his silence as answer enough, Gordon said, "Scott's got it in his crazy stupid moron head he's sitting guard duty tonight."

Well, that's just … um … huh?

He would say something along the lines of how ridiculous that was or laugh it off or something, but really, Gordon was completely serious. It wasn't all that ridiculous, and it definitely wasn't funny.

The truth was Virgil had no idea how any of them were going to handle this. Who would wake up screaming in the middle of the night? Who would finally blow up for no reason other than not having any other outlet for the frustration, the anger, the fear? Who would be the first to injure himself from running too hard or swimming too hard or simply punching out the wall because it was a better alternative to punching out a brother when they certainly couldn't punch out who they were really mad at?

More importantly — he stretched his aching fingers, knuckles cracking from too much hard scraping — who was he to say any of those reactions wasn't entirely acceptable?

If Scott felt like sleeping in a dining chair all night, why should they stop him? Hell, maybe they should be taking shifts. It wasn't like they didn't all have king-sized backaches anyway.

Stealing a glance toward the hallway, sure enough, Scott's long legs had appeared, crossed at the ankles in the hall. Why he hadn't bothered to say hello or just, you know, come into the room and hang out with them like a normal person, Virgil couldn't guess, but he wasn't about to poke at it either. He wondered if one of Brains's newfound shotguns was propped up against the wall.

If nothing else, it looked like Virgil was stuck in Gordon's room for the night. No way was he going to try to cross Scott now, not if he dozed off. Scott had the reflexes of a rattlesnake, even when startled awake.

"No sneaking out for beers tonight then. Suck." Nudging Gordon's shoulder with his own, he pointed at the controller Alan had discarded and wiggled his fingers with a little Gimme. "So how do I play this thing?"

Virgil wasn't sure why, but Gordon winced at the word "beers". He flicked his controller a little harder than usual, his movements becoming more and more snappish until he finally tossed his controller at the dresser. His hands came up to his hair, yanking hard enough that he'd probably come
away with a handful if he didn't cut it out.

"Gordon?"

The kid's head snapped up, eyes furious, determined, and heartbroken at the same time. "You know what? If I want a beer with my brothers, I'm gonna have a damn beer. None of that you're too young shit either. I know for a fact, between the three of them, you've had more than a few after some lousy rescues. Dad wouldn't care today."

"No," Virgil agreed slowly. "He probably wouldn't."

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you think I'm losing it. It was funny up there, but now that we're back home, I'm saying — "

"What was funny?"

That stopped Gordon half way pushing himself off the floor. He dropped back down and eyed Virgil enough that it was starting to feel creepy. "You told me I was too young to have a beer."

"I did?"

"And I said that you sucked for letting me die …"

This time it was Virgil's turn to flinch at the word "die" because, really, ow. All of a sudden, there it was, BAM!, imminent death and screaming lungs and oh, holy hell, he was too young for this shit. He'd forgotten that conversation. He'd forgotten the wilting look on their father's face when Gordon teased him, trying so hard to not show the slightest inkling of fear, even if they all heard it, whether he thought so or not. While oxygen deprivation had never been an issue for him, he knew it could do weird things to the head, but the idea that he'd quite possibly forgotten the last conversation he'd have with his brother before they died was twisted in this weird way. No, he wouldn't have been alive to remember that he'd forgotten, but still … He'd forgotten his last conversation with his brother when it should have mattered most. Like there wasn't enough cock-knockery about the last ten hours …

Together they finished Gordon's sentence, feeling ill. " … without ever having had a beer." Oh, man. He ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Wow. Yeah. Sorry. I guess I just kinda blanked on — you know what?"

Virgil was the big brother here, and if he wanted to share a beer with his kid brother after the lousy day they'd had, well, he was damn well gonna do whatever it took to get his brother that beer.

Gordon raised his eyebrows at his crooked grin, a strange combination of excited and grateful. Virgil knew without saying that Gordon knew exactly what he was thinking. He nodded his head toward the sloth on the bed. "What about him?"

"Nope." Virgil grinned wide. "Just you and me."

"How are we gonna get past the warden out there?" Before Virgil could answer, Gordon was pushing himself to his feet. "Screw him. There is a beer somewhere in this house with my name on it."

Virgil took a quick moment to tuck the blanket around Alan and ghost his hand over his brother's head. He wasn't sure why it was funny, but the thought that the kid would most likely be the only
one sleeping tonight amused him. Well, maybe not amused, but it seemed somehow fitting. Alan had
gone to the mat for them today. He deserved a good night's sleep — which he wasn't going to get if
Gordon had anything to say about it.

On the other side of the door, Gordon couldn't be bothered to keep his voice down. "You know
you're an idiot, right?"

Virgil got to the doorway in time to see Scott's front chair legs hit the floor, possibly as lost as he
was. "Hello, curve ball?"

"Yes, you, with your schemes and your Talk to him, Gordon, you're the only one he'll talk to and
sitting here like a damn prison guard. You. Are. A. Moron."

Scott's eyes flicked up to Virgil's, wide with questions Virgil had no clue whatsoever how to answer
because this clusterfuck of imminent breakdowns of little and big brothers of all sizes was hardly his
forte, but Gordon snapped his fingers in front of Scott's nose, demanding he keep his attention front
and center.

"You're our brother. That's it. Not our guard dog. Not our mother hen. You aren't Mom. You aren't
Dad. You are our brother. You're supposed to be on the same level as the rest of us, down here. This
putting yourself to a higher standard with this mythical sense of greater responsibility like you're
Superman or something is getting ridiculous. You are one of us. I'm pretty sure Mom had the c-
section scar to prove it. Now get your ass off that chair and come down and have a beer with us like
a brother would. Stop your damn scheming and sit with us because if you don't, one of us is going to
lose it. Virgil just asked me how to play a video game, for fuck's sake, and you're a lousy sheriff, and
I just want one fucking thing to be normal right now."

"Gords, breathe." Virgil reached out for his brother's shoulder, only to have it shrugged off.

"You breathe."

Scott got up out of his chair, hands raised nice and peaceful-like. "Gordon?"

"What?"

"Let's go for a walk." Scott nodded back into the bedroom. "Before you wake Alan."

"I don't want to go for a walk. I want a beer with my brothers. I am not gonna die without ever
having had a beer with my brothers." Gordon shook Scott's hand off and emphatically kicked the
chair over and then kicked it again for good measure because he was apparently just as mad at the
chair as he was every other piece of broken furniture in the house. He kicked it again, hard enough
that it scuffed the wall. He threw his arms up, bent at the elbow like he was guarding his face in the
boxing ring — which had Scott's back hugging the wall — and showed off his burnt arms for the
first time. "We've had a truly shitty day, and I want my brothers. If you can't be that for us right now,
that's fine. I get it, and I won't hold it against you. But either way, you are going to put that stupid
chair away."

As Gordon bent over and picked up the gun, Scott mouthed What was that? at Virgil. Like he was
supposed to know. Gordon thrust the shotgun at Scott, careful even in his temper to point it away
from anyone valuable.

"Give me the shells. Now." When Scott didn't move, he propped the weapon against their brother's
chest until he put his hands on it to keep it from falling as soon as Gordon let go. "I mean it."

"Do it," Virgil said. "The ones from your pocket, too."
When the shells were in Gordon's hand, he pocketed them for some special occasion. And just like that, he took in one long breath, the anger whooshing out with it. "All right," he said, calming himself. "Okay." He bent over at the waist, hands braced on his thighs, until he snapped back up with such a fragile smile on his face that Virgil thought nothing but sheer determination was going to hold it together. "Okay, so, that happened."

"Gords?"

"No, I'm not okay. And I'm pretty sure Virg here isn't anywhere near okay either. Don't ask us again."

"Virgil?"

Caught deer-in-headlights fashion, Virgil couldn't argue. Nope, he was nowhere near okay. He'd tried, but no. He wasn't exactly thrilled to be called out on it, not when he was trying so hard to be back in big brother mode, but it was there, constantly lingering. Not okay.

"I said he isn't fine," Gordon said for him. "And neither are you." He wiped his hand down his still-stubbled face, turning in a circle, only to be confronted by Scott and his damn puppy dog, let me fix it eyes. "Damn it. I can't go back in there like this. Onaha keeps a deck of cards under the bar for us, and there's no way I'm falling asleep right now. You're welcome to join us. Virg, let's go."

Without waiting to see if they were being followed, Tracy Three and Tracy Four headed into the darkness of the stairwell, elbow to elbow. Out of the corner of his eye, Virgil saw Gordon's mouth set, hard, but there was a twinkle in his eye. He knew, before Virgil even heard the soft footsteps catching up to them.

"I'll get John," Scott volunteered. "You get the booze."

FAB.

(End Chapter Five)
Scott and Johnny

Over the years, Scott had come to realize that the hardest thing about being the firstborn was learning to pick his battles. For instance, as Gordon and Virgil made their way down the hall with conspiratorial whispers between them, he was perfectly aware that it wouldn't do shit to call after them that he was, in fact, not a moron. Gordon wasn't in the mood to be argued with, and Scott's pride wasn't wounded enough for it to matter.

So he told them he'd catch up, deliberately putting a hint of Oh, wait, forgot something in his voice, and then waited until they were out of sight before he flipped them the bird instead.

One of the other lessons of being firstborn? Big Brother always gets the last word.

The pistol at the small of his back wholeheartedly agreed.

Rounding the corner, he moved, swift and silent, back through Gordon's room to check the bathroom and windows, taking extra caution with the tree cover. If he were to attempt to break in without passing by the open quarters (provided you could make land without being spotted now that Brains had ramped things up a hundred fold), Gordon's room was the way he'd do it. He'd like to think it was impossible to get this far, but considering the Devil himself had been in the sanctuary of their control room, well, it didn't seem too out of the realm to give it a second look. Besides, if he had to leave Alan sleeping in here alone, he'd be damn sure it was safe to do so first.

Not that he'd feel safe leaving any of them alone for the foreseeable ever, but hey, that was his neurosis, not anyone else's. Deal with it, Paranoia Boy. He was military and always would be, and the military was nothing if not paranoid (and cynical). He'd let Gordon think that made him a moron if he wanted, but at least Gordon would sleep safer for it — and that was worth everything.

Alan slept through the inspection without turning over once (but holy mother, could that kid snore). His face was pinched in pain — no surprise when, damn, that bruise looked awful — but after a few strokes of Scott's hand through his hair, he seemed to sink lower into the mattress. He had no illusions that things could be that easy or that he had the ability to take away what was coming to them with a wave of his hand, but if it got Alan through even the next few minutes, he'd take it.

The over-abundant spill of light across the hallway as he made his way to John's room was disconcerting — most definitely welcome, but disconcerting all the same. He didn't have much input in the security of the island when they first came out here, but he knew the state of the art lights were there. Not that he ever imagined they'd be needed for something like this, though. Searching for the dog after a storm, sure (especially Wally; the poor skittish thing had had a tendency to run after the first bolt of lightning, no matter how they'd chained him down), or maybe hunting down the patio furniture after a hurricane, something benign. Security was never meant to be needed out of fear, not in Paradise.

Scott didn't have it in his heart to hate people. Even after seeing some of the true ugly of the world, things of his worst nightmares, he couldn't hate people. For His Psychotic-ness? He'd make an exception and despise the man for putting this thousand watt spotlight of insecurity in the heads of the children and parents of Tracy Island.

Freshly showered and reclining against the headboard with book in hand, John didn't seem to notice the ice cold hate blasting off Scott like an arctic wind from the doorway. If anything, he was lost in his own little world. Although how he could be comfortable with that sling, Scott didn't know. He never could sleep with those things, even with all of the practice he had at it. With John, though,
those kinds of injuries were both common and badges of honor, like he could wave (theoretically) the injury in their faces to say he was just as tough as the rest of them. Scott couldn't help but smile lovingly. John Tracy was a badass motherfucker, oh hell yes. And he looked so damn small and kind and sweet, all the things he loved about his brother, in his pillow fort with a book in his lap while his big brother had a loaded gun with the safety off on his backside.

John laughed out loud at something in his book, a humorless spasm of a bark that didn't have the same ring to it that Scott loved about his brother's laugh. Nothing spontaneous or actually joyful came from it. It stabbed at Scott's heart, cold and wrong. How did Dad's dream go so wrong that even John's laugh didn't sound right?

Without looking up from his pages, John asked with a sneaky smile in one corner of his mouth, "Are you just gonna stand there and prop up the door, or did you want to come in?"

"Hey, be nice to the door." Scott caressed the door like it was his future second wife. "It's been hanging here on nothing but hinges all day. It's earned a rest."

"Has anyone told you lately how weird you are? Sit before you freak me out."

"You're," Scott tried to find the right comeback insult and failed spectacularly, "weird."

If John noticed Scott looking surreptitiously down the hall in either direction before flopping on the bed, he didn't say, instead leaving his nose firmly in his book. John's red-rimmed eyes skimmed over the pages of his half of a matched set of *Good Omens*, not really seeing what he was reading and certainly not concentrating enough to comprehend the words (even for a brilliant mind like John's, Gaiman did take *some* concentration). Even with the book half-cushioned in his lap, it seemed to vibrate with nervous energy under John's white knuckles and bouncing knee.

"Interesting choice."

"Nothing says *I nearly got my family flambéed today* like a good book about bratty eleven-year-olds nearly ending the world out of boredom." John sighed a *nevermind* almost too quiet for Scott to hear, but it seemed to ground him. "Funny," he amended. "I needed funny tonight."

"Anybody kind of funny or just your kind of funny?"

"Gordon would like it if he'd ever sit still long enough to read it. You, not so much."

"I have a sense of humor." And he'd thought *Good Omens* was damn funny, thank you very much.

John's "I know you do" came out sounding like Scott couldn't possibly know what a sense of humor was, let alone how to use it. He didn't even take his eyes off his book to say it, the little smart ass.

Too tired to do battle with John's brain — even John's brain on exhaustion and injury — Scott let it go. He made a mental note to punish the man for it later, but for now, he'd let it go. "You hangin' in okay?"

"I would love to sleep for the next twenty-four hours, but I think I'm all right? Maybe? I mean, here, everything's okay. We have time to take care of us for a change, instead of the rest of the world. I'm here; you guys are here. I can deal with that."

"Wow. That sounds vaguely … *healthy.*"

"Only one of us can be neurotic at a time." John leaned forward to see around and behind Scott, muttered something under his breath, and sat back, looking rather satisfied with himself. "Nice
If John expected him to blush or be even remotely embarrassed, Scott was sorry to disappoint — and no, damn it, he was not a moron. He was, however, perfectly happy to avoid that particular conversation. "What about Dad?"

John's face curled in on itself, unsure, like he smelled something sour in the uncertainty. "Iffy. Too locked up on the phone for me to tell. Every time I try to get him to stop long enough to get a reaction, he has another call to make. The Prime Minister is none too happy about the scorched grass in the Gardens, among other things. Even with The Hood in custody, I'm not so sure he's on our side on this one." He sighed and finally let his book fall to his lap, his finger slipping from the page since it didn't matter; he probably hadn't actually read any of it so much as grazed his favorite parts of the battered hardcover anyway. "He's canceled next week's board meeting. Derek was a little confused why Dad upped security without explaining anything. He even called in some extra security on Grandma, agents in the house, the full deal. When I left him, he was on hold with the White House. So he's either avoiding me or pretty much about to freak out if he runs out of things to do on his list."

"Well, considering Gordon and Virgil are both about to lose it, I say we sneak in his office, write a whole bunch of stuff on his list, drug his coffee, and hope he falls asleep on the couch until morning so we can double team him tomorrow."

John produced a brown pill bottle from next to his hip and tossed it at Scott's chest. "Go for it. Maybe then we can keep him from doing something stupid."

"Stupid how?"

"I'm not sure yet. He said something to me up on 'Five that — " John stopped, taking in a deep breath like he couldn't believe he was about to say what he was about to say. "He said he'd make sure I got to say goodbye."

"His head's in a dark place, maybe even worse than the one we're all in. The man almost lost all of his kids in one fell swoop today. If he wasn't thinking about scrapping the whole operation, I'd be worried about him."

"But what if that's what he's doing right now?"

"I know I wouldn't be okay with that, but I can't speak for you or the others. And we aren't him. We don't carry the weight he does, which I'd imagine got a whole lot heavier after today. What about you?"

"I definitely think some changes will have to be made for all our safeties, but otherwise? As soon as she's worthy, I'm back. I didn't see the damage, but knowing what we had going on in the control room, I'm guesstimating minimum four months before I'm up there. Anything I'm not okay with, I've got time to figure out. It's weird, actually. Apart from our future? I think I'm okay. I don't know. Maybe I'm too tired to know the difference. I think I'm tired. Aren't you tired? How are you not in a coma by now?"

"Maybe I should let you get some sleep then."

"Man, I couldn't sleep if I tried. Stay. Why Brains bothers to give me these caffeinated, half-assed codeine Tylenol things is beyond me. He knows it makes me jumpy. And restless. And chatty. Damn it. I told him ibuprofen was enough, but everybody seems to think I'm incapable of gauging my own pain tolerance today. I told Virgil it was a four, by the way."
It took Scott all of half a second to see what John was saying. He rocked back on his hands, marveling at Virgil's big brass ones. "Manipulative little shit."

"Never underestimate his ability to push your buttons."

"I don't have buttons."

"You have glaringly obvious, shockingly easy to manipulate buttons. And strings. And levers. Which Gordon seems perfectly happy to yank tonight, too. That was … interesting."

"You heard?"

"When Gordon shouts, everyone hears," John said wryly. "How bad is it?"

"Gordon wants beer. I'm pretty sure he's going to tell me at some point tonight that I set him up, too."

"He's not letting either of those go any time soon, is he?"

"There are worse parts of the day I guess he could be fixated on." Scott scrubbed the hard line of his jaw, the sound of his whiskers comforting in a strange way. It was amazing what he'd do for a little normal at the moment. "And here I'd thought dealing with Alan's temper tantrum this morning was the worst we'd be fielding today. Is it just me, or does that seem like years away already?"

"Ten minutes ago seems years away. Damn, I hate this stuff." Good Omens took a swan dive off the bed. Splat. "That's it! As soon as everyone's asleep, I'm raiding Brains's stash and throwing it all out."

"You need beer." Scott snorted. "One's not gonna hurt."

"Don't tell Virgil. He's vying for your job as it is."

"You need Big-Brother-controlled quantities of beer." Scott nodded toward the door, picking John's book up off the floor with both hands, tapping it gently on his knee, and setting it out of reach on the nightstand. "C'mon. It'll be a lot easier for me to hide the cleaning supplies if you can distract them."

"You're mean." John laughed. Scott stood and held his hand out to help John to his feet so he wouldn't have to push off with the slinged arm. John sighed the most melodramatic, ever suffering sigh in his repertoire. "If I must."

"You must. And I vote for a detour to the library to get the good stuff because I left the kids in charge of the beer run."

"You didn't," John groaned while Scott failed to not smirk at his pain. "You know Kyrano hides the good beer behind the three-two in case the kids get any ideas. It's bad enough I have caffeine. I am not drinking three-two beer."

"Nope. Better. The last time Dad was in Kentucky, Matt gave him a whole case of Woody Res." John tilted his head back as far as his dislocated shoulder would allow and mouthed something up to the sky that was most likely a thank you to their grandfather for giving Jeff Tracy excellent taste in bourbon. Scott seconded that with a grin up and then stretched his arm out toward the door with an after you swoop.

"Will I sound inordinately paranoid if I ask if we should check on Alan first? Where is he, anyway?"

"No more than the rest of us." Scott laughed and tapped his hand at his waistband. (Who, Scott?
Paranoid? Never. He preferred *thoughtfully reactive.* He had a feeling it would be a long time before they all weren't asking where Alan was. "He's in Gordon's room, half dead from — "

As soon as he said it, he knew. He *knew.*

What the hell was the matter with him? How could he say something like that? What was worse, he could see on John's all too perceptive face that he knew exactly what had stopped him. Scott's eyes closed off to the pitying turn of John's mouth as the strangled laugh left his throat. What an awful thing to say. Yeah, sure, it was only an expression. People said it all the time. People slept like the dead, they were dead tired, they were dead on their feet. It was nothing new. And yet, it was the worst word he could imagine right now.

"Oh, fuck me."

"It's okay."

Scott shook his head. No, this was pretty damn far from okay. He bent over at the waist, hands on his knees, trying to catch breath that seemed to need so much more work tonight than it should have. The bed was too close, the door was too far away, and why the hell did John not have his window open? How was anyone supposed to breathe in here if there was no air?

Breathing would be a good idea. He remembered how to do it; it was simply that his lungs didn't. He kept trying to tell his brain to tell his lungs what they needed to do — in and out, that's all there is to it, you worthless sacks of hot air — but somewhere between brain and electrical impulse the message wasn't getting through. He was never trusting *Schoolhouse Rock* again.

Damn, it hurt. Not like it had earlier when the air had slowly taken its sweet bippy time strangling him, giving his lungs a little time with each breath to soak in the feeling of imminent death.

Hyperventilating was different. He could feel the muscles in his fingers tightening, tingling from the fight. This was all him, and he knew it. Yes, he was perfectly aware that worrying made it worse. All he had to do was calm the hell down. It shouldn't be that hard.

That creepy feeling took over, like he'd stood up too fast and rabbit-holed his head in forty different directions, making his eyes try to pop out of their sockets. And thanks to that lovely imagery, he saw Alan, small and helpless, eyes bugging out of his head when The Hood pushed at his mind too hard, exploding the too-sensitive blood vessels and shattering and blood and Alan and, and, and … Damn it!

"Hey, calm down," he heard John commanding him somewhere off to his right.

He'd be happy to do that. Really, he would. But right there, behind his closed eyes, Gordon and Virgil weren't breathing either. No, they were screaming pillars of fire because Alan hadn't made it in time. He'd tried so damn hard to stay awake. He should've been the last to go, not the first. He should've been talking them through it, breathing them through it, giving them his very last breath. Screw what his body wanted. He should have had more control than that. He should have been … But Gordy, little Gordy, accused him with such hurt, frightened eyes — *You told me it was okay to follow you* — and not breathing because there was nothing to breathe, and damn, it was so hot.

The order was stronger this time, even though it sounded farther away. "No, Scott. Back this way, with me. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Slow and easy. Look at me."

He couldn't look. No way. Because if he looked, John would be there. He'd be there, and then he'd see those kids in Paris again, like he had every night in his dreams since, their burning, melting faces becoming John's like they did every night, and he'd had enough of watching John die in front of his
very eyes lately.

"Hey? You with me? It was only a word, man. C'mon. Breathe it out."

Scott managed to shake his head. Breathe? How was he supposed to breathe when it felt like the muscles around his ribs were turning inside out and being shoved down his throat with a side of Tabasco?

Realistically, he could tell himself he'd been through worse on his own. Being shot down when he wasn't where he was supposed to be — okay, he was supposed to be there because he was ordered there, but he wasn't supposed to be there — had been unbelievably cocked up. This time, he'd had his family around him. This time, as scared as he was for Alan and the rest of the family, he wasn't alone. This time he wasn't afraid of dying in a foreign country, of being discovered, his body mutilated beyond his father's recognition (whether that was before or after he died didn't matter). Besides, it was already over. He wasn't being hunted down, helpless with a broken leg, by unknown numbers with unknown weapons and unknown intentions. He was home, safe in John's room. This wasn't the desert. This wasn't space.

"Now, Scott. In and out. You do it all the time. You can do it now."

He needed space. That's all. Air and space.

"Damn it, if you don't cut it out right now, I'm gonna get Dad."

Oh, sure, the bully technique. Now he knew for sure he was scaring his little brother, and if that wasn't enough to make him lightheaded … Even the day of the worst panic attack Scott had ever had, John hadn't resorted to bullying. Okay, he needed to breathe. Scaring John was not an option. John needed him. John, up there, telling them with a heartbreaking, scratchy voice that he was losing all power, may day, and oh holy motherless son of a —

"Shit! Scott, c'mon. Back here."


Telling John to just shut up, on the other hand, sounded good. Was it really so hard to let him die right there in the doorway? Because that seemed to be what his lungs wanted him to do until he remembered, yeah, dying wasn't on his To Do list today. They'd tried that one already. Shutting up would be good, though. Damn it.

"Please, Scott. In and out. I won't go anywhere. Just, please?"

He couldn't put his thoughts — breaths — together with John standing over him like this. The wall of John kept the air away, so close but too far. He reached out anyway, catching John by the wrist to keep him from trying to sneak by into the hall. John took in a stiff, clearly mutinous breath — damn, he wished it was that easy — but he seemed to get the message.

Squeezing John's wrist to tell him he was still there too, that he only needed a second, Scott felt through the tingling in his own fingers to John's pulse. He pressed his fingers to it. It was a little fast, but hey, big brother probably scared the living daylights out of him so a little blood pressure heebiejeebie was understandable. It was also was why he had to get this stupid thing under control. He could do it. John's pulse was right there, whole and safe. He wasn't going anywhere. The kids were downstairs, whole and safe. But they needed Scott to be the same, whole and safe and back here on the ground with the rest of them.
"There you go. Think about slowing down. I'm right here."

Set the example. Breathe. In and out. He was scaring John; that was not an option. Get it together. Thump thump thump, steady, just like the pulse. In and out.

"Awesome. Keep doing that."

John didn't say anything more, but he stood back far enough to give him space and close enough to be there if Scott needed help. The concerned look Scott couldn't see around the dancing lights annoyed him no end; how was he supposed to get control of this when he could feel his brother looking at him like that? But then, if this had to happen, at least it happened around John. They'd been through this more than a few times, so he knew not to interfere — threats aside — unless Scott truly needed help.

"Can you get to the bed?"

He nodded too quickly, but Scott forced his feet to move. Of course. Now his body wanted to listen to his commands. Of course.

"How are the hands?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Scott shook his head and pulled his locked fists into his lap. They could wait.

They sat there, both shaking, breathing in and out, as the minutes came and went. John talked him down, slow and easy and hypnotic, like he had on countless occasions before. He could feel John being careful not to touch him, probably reminiscing (fondly?) about the black eye he'd accidentally taken from Scott the last time he'd come in too close too soon. Man, that had been a stupid day. He wished he could say today had only been stupid.

No, damn it. Today was done. They were home, they were safe, and they would get through this like everything else. This family didn't know how to quit anything — quite possibly even when it would serve their own good — and he wasn't about to be the first member of the family to say otherwise. He simply had to have a little chat with his lungs first and it would all be fine.

Tracys were always fine.

"So it's been awhile since one of those happened."

Without asking for permission this time, John took Scott's left hand and started the work of trying to uncurl the locked fist. Unable to accept the help but even less able to get away (John had one helluva grip when he wanted to), Scott stared angrily at a loose thread in the quilt, wondering why any of them bothered with having such warm bedding. It wasn't like they didn't all sleep with only sheets anyway, and they had no one to impress with matching bedding. Mom had always liked things neat and presentable — A place for everything and everything in its place — but the only visitors they had these days were Grandma and Penny and Parker, and they hardly could call family "visitors".

"Yeah," he managed. In and out, Tracy.

"I forgot how scary that could be."

Scott shrugged, wincing as it pulled at his ribs. "What can I say? Yay, breaking points, right?"

Darkness crowded John's eyebrows in the middle, casting a shadow in his eyes Scott couldn't remember the last time he'd seen. If the glare wasn't so sincere, he would've pulled away from it.
"Yours has never been that easy," John said, quietly spooked.

"Sure it is, if you know how to find it. I've been," he huffed shakily, "at it all day."

"You have a higher threshold than any of us."

"Not today." He shook his head and grunted against the sudden tingling, angry white in his hand as it gave up under John's pressure. His lungs listened to him this time, coming in deep and hard so he could blow it out with a blast of "I'm okay".

"Fuckin' A," John agreed, his chin bobbing solemnly under desperately straining lips as he tried to keep the sarcasm in and lost. "Tell me."

"He shot you down out of the sky today, John, not me."

"And I'm sure we'll get to that when I don't have codeine cocking up my brain." John backhanded Scott's knee, his face all lopsided eyebrow and just go with it. "Besides, this is purely selfish on my part. Who's gonna take care of me when all this finally hits me if you're a mess? Talk. You've been on a slow burn ever since we got back — and don't think I didn't notice. I'm the one who's supposed to. What did it?"

Scott couldn't bring himself to look at John. Not this time. "If I tell you this, little brother, you can't unhear it. I don't want this for you."

He flipped his hand up, two fingers (deliberately the wrong two, cutesy little jackass) up in a promising salute. "Never leaves the room. Now what happened?"

Tracy-brand stubborn planted itself firmly in John's corner as he sat there and didn't say a word. The longer the silence stretched, the heavier it became. It would wait, and John would, with his infinite patience, wait until Scott got it together enough to spill. And he would spill. John always did win the staring contests. Freak.

"I, um ... I think I was okay until we went for Virg, but then the, uh, bleach." Scott had to swallow around the ball in his throat, overpowered by the scent only from the memory. "The smell of the bleach mixed in with the ... ugh, nasty. You know he was sick, right? You smelled it?"

"I did. But that's hardly the first time you've come across that mix, not with what we do."

"Like you said, slow burn, I guess." Scott bent over a little, willing the ache in his chest to loosen even a smidge. "Damn, this hurts."

John's voice came back soothing but still probing, directing his attention back where he wanted it. "So the bleach, the sick, obviously the rest of the day, but what else? Give me a hint here."

"I can't. Johnny, I — "

"You can." Scott could feel his breaths staring to come quicker again, too quick, so that John reached out and clamped his forearm, hard and anchoring. "You can. If I have to guilt you, I will. The boys need you, but you are no good to them until you can put yourself back together. Now come on. In and out. What happened?"

He could do this. It was just like any other debrief, and he'd been doing them backwards and forwards for his entire adult life. Stick to the facts. All John needed right now was the facts.

"The call you heard Dad make about security for Grandma? It wasn't Derek, although that's probably
on his list. Do you remember, when we were little, a guy named Court Ryland?"

"Big guy, Apache pilot? Always brought Dad his homebrew when he came over. He was on his third marriage, I think, around then?"

"That's him. About fourteen years ago, he left the job and put together his own K&R security firm with a few of his buddies from Bragg. Since the day they were set up, Dad's had him on speed dial."

"That's good. Keep breathing," John said, almost hypnotically as he set to work on the other hand. "What does that have to do with you having a nutty?"

"I know you've never really forgiven Jed Barrett for the heads up when I went missing, but he gave Dad a call as soon as he knew I was down because that's flagged in my file. From there, Dad's first call was to Court. What I've been told, he had his people on the ground within twelve hours."

"Dad has a K&R group on speed dial?"

"Not speedy enough."

Scott stared solemnly back at his brother, begging him to understand something he couldn't possibly understand, but he desperately needed John to see anyway. He felt his own words drop into whispers, as if saying them even in the limited lamp light could manifest the memories right there in his brother's room, and he was too afraid to let them be real. But John was right: if this was going to work, if he was going to be able to take care of his brothers the way they needed him to in the hours, days, weeks to come, he needed someone on his side. John had been the only one he'd talked to in the days after; he'd know what to do to pull him back when he got too far, when he needed backup the most. So he willed his brother to hear him and make this as easy as possible because he sure as hell couldn't say it twice.

Something must have clicked, because John sat back. "What haven't you told me?"

"Did you know, some versions of SERE school, they make you sign a waiver saying they can break a small bone in your body during the prisoner camp part of the course?"

John only shook his head, his Adam's apple bobbing at the suggestion. Scott was fairly sure that was his reaction when he'd been popped with that little tidbit, too.

"I think the anticipation is worse than anything else. I didn't … They can teach you what berries to eat, how to capture and clean an animal, even how to withstand a beating. They can teach you to play with pain. All you need is name, rank, serial number. Basic POW stuff. Half my unit got sick when we went through. But it isn't real, not really. You're still safe in the hands of your commanding officers. It's not like they're actually going to kill you. Real fear isn't there. Hell, I still think they took it easy on me because half the command knew Dad."

Big breath. No turning back now.

"I assume it's a lot easier to teach you how to deal with all that stuff if you don't have instant name recognition and the guys with guns and axes to your head don't have high speed internet."

Still John didn't say anything, but the way his eyes narrowed, already angry, Scott knew he got it. Name, rank, and serial number were all his captors had needed to know exactly who and what and how much it was they had dropped from the sky.

In and out.
"Even I don't know everything that went on to get me out, but I know they refused to negotiate through channels, not when they had such a precious commodity in their grubby little hands. It was still classified a military op, even though Court had a big part in planning it. Dad insisted Court got to use his own people. Altogether, it still took ninety-some hours before … They kept me conscious for most of it. No shit, they took it pretty damn easy on us in training. After being thrown around by an avalanche, a broken leg isn't much, and that first day, I thought I could handle it. The first beating hurt like a sonofabitch, but it wasn't the worst thing I … But I …"

"I saw," John said, his voice tight but accommodating, almost like he was trying to give Scott an out, a chance to breathe. "Dad wouldn't let the others see you, not until you were awake and could reassure them yourself that you were okay, but Dad and I went in the room together. We both thought there had been a mistake, because there was no way you could look like that and not be dead. I saw."

"No, you didn't. You — That isn't what I mean. By the time I was back stateside, I'd had enough time to confirm and put myself together. One of Court's guys called Dad for me to make sure you were all okay. I'll tell you, People Magazine's got nothing on a terrorist cell looking to cash in on the Tracy name."

There was a sickly shine in John's eyes as he pulled his good arm around his waist, swearing under his breath. It was unfathomable, but he could see the gears grinding in John's head, coming to the conclusion he most wanted to avoid. He wished he could spare John the horror of this one secret he'd kept from him the last few years, but right now, it was all he had.

"With the press hounding all of you, following the boys at school the first day, I could tell Dad hadn't told them. I didn't know about you being with Dad the whole time — you weren't even supposed to be home — but I knew the boys didn't know. He told me later he didn't have anyone get the boys right away because he didn't want them to see him so scared without knowing what to be scared about, not after Mom and Grandpa. I saw it on Alan's face, though, when Ned Cook cornered him at the gate and asked him if he thought I was afraid and if he had anything to say to the terrorists who were going to kill his big brother."

John had stopped working his hand somewhere in there. Scott wished he had the strength in there to grip it back, but if he tethered himself back to John's room right now, he wouldn't get this out. He didn't let go entirely either.

"Man, they found everything. Family photos, Mom and Dad's wedding picture. The recordings from Dad's moonwalk where he made sure to say hi to you and me for the whole world to hear. They kept rewinding that one, turning up the audio so I could hear Dad laugh. They kept showing me the footage of us coming off the mountain with their bodies. They had it all."

It should've been a comfort those days. In its odd, sick, awful way, he knew it should have. If he had to die, at least he'd hear their voices one last time. Instead, he knew exactly what his captors were saying with the memories. If they could get to those, what else could they find? It wasn't like he'd live long enough to find out, though, was it?

"I tried to get out — took a guard out along the way even — but I never made it out of the building. Broken leg, you know? I, uh, I guess they weren't too happy about the prospect of losing a payday. But like you said, you saw the results of that part. I don't remember what they used or … I think I laughed at the one guy once. Blood and bleach …"

Hang in, Tracy. Almost done. You're goin' home.

"The, uh, the last thing I remember them showing me was Gordon's face on pause on the screen
before they shot it out, right between … They made sure to call the man they had standing in the background of the crowd so I could see in real time, you know, like the people behind home plate call their friends so they can see them during a broadcast? They were filming my reaction, and I could feel the axe at the back of my throat, I could, but all I saw was Gordon's face. One of them was less than ten feet away from Gords, and the bastard in the room with me had a gun to his head on the screen. It didn't matter if the guy there had one or not. I knew they could get you boys at any time, and there was nothing I could do about it. If Court's guys hadn't shown up right then, I don't know what I would have … well."

Scott purposefully ignored the errant tear that showed dark blue against the gray of John's sling.

"The Hood held a gun to your heads all day today. That sonofabitch stood with an axe to your throat and dared us to stop him. They trained me how to deal with the physical part of it, even some of the psychological stuff, but, … well. Do it to me, I can handle it. But when they threaten you? They don't have a manual for that."

Gordon could think he was a moron all he wanted. Scott would rather let him think that than ever have him think his big brother was weak. His training would get him through this part, as he imagined it was doing at least a little bit for their father, but somehow he didn't think that idea would sit well with Gordon. Or Virgil. The Hood had broken his heart today. For the second time in his life, he'd been completely helpless.

"Your head is busted up, and your arm's in a sling; Gordon's got burns all up and down his arms; Alan's got a bruise the size of a small island on his side. They tied up our family and locked them in a damn freezer to die while the rest of us … I swore to myself on that flight home that I would never let anything scare me like they did ever again. Today? This? Was even worse. This was never on my radar, ever."

Scott bent over, arms curling around his own middle, eyes closed and forehead on John's knee. Any other time, he wouldn't allow himself even this small moment of weakness in the presence of his brother. As silly as it sounded, because he knew damn well his brothers would never fault him for being human, he also understood that in many ways they needed him to be less than human. They needed Superman to get them through this, no matter what Gordon said, because they had no idea what it took for him to be that for them. Whatever his own grief, he needed to take care of them. It was the only thing that kept him from losing it. But if he was going to do that, he needed this one moment. Selfish as it was after what John had been through today, Scott needed him for this one moment. He didn't have to do anything but hear him, but still.

John's voice was soothing, quiet, as if he could stroke Scott's wounded soul with it. "We're all here. We're all okay."


Scott was surprised to hear a light, wry chuckle come from John's throat. Whether it was to hide something trying to get around his tonsils or something else, Scott didn't know, but the sound was welcome regardless. "You do realize this was the one thing that could've helped me help you with the panic attacks all these years, right? That if I'd known this part, so much of this could've been avoided?"

Scott remained bent over, making his voice sound muffled and weird, even to his own ears. "This isn't about me. I wouldn't have even told you, but after today, you needed to hear it. This is about you. The Hood did the same thing to you today. And to Dad. That bastard shot you out of the sky and put a gun to your head, just as sure as they did it to me. I'm supposed to know how to deal with it; you aren't. You need to know that I know exactly how you're feeling and that I'm available to you.
What you do with that knowledge is your choice, provided it stays between us, but it's up to you."

"That's not fair. He tried to kill you, too."

"And one day, when I don't have four brothers who need me to take care of them, I'll deal with that, but for right now, what matters is that you know that I know what's happening to you. You have nothing to feel guilty about. None of what happened to you today was your fault. I need you to hear that. I wasn't ready to put it like this earlier, but I am now. This is ugly and unfair, and I wish you didn't have to know, but if it's the only way you'll hear me, so be it. This is not your fault." Scott sat up then, focusing intently on John's stunned gaze. "You get me?"

He waited then, waited for John to truly get it. What happened four years ago (panic aside) had nothing to do with what had happened to them today. But if Scott could get through what he'd been through, if he could survive that with the knowledge that he had done nothing wrong, had done nothing to deserve the pain and horror he'd been through for no reason other than wearing that uniform, then John had to understand the same. He had to know the guilt he was feeling that they'd come to rescue him, that they had been turned against him and against Dad, was unacceptable. He could feel the fear, but the guilt would simply not be allowed.

It took a moment, but John did get it. He did it grudgingly, but he did it, grinning fondly at his big brother. "Talk about being a manipulative bastard."

"It's a talent, and you have buttons."

"I don't have buttons."

Scott shrugged because he had no desire to admit to defeat on that one. No, for the most part, John didn't have buttons, and it was infuriating most of the time for all of them. He wished Mom could have spared a little of that infinite patience on the rest of them. This house might be a little less chaotic. Instead, the inmates ruled the asylum. After what had just happened, Scott couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't the craziest of them all.

John squeezed gently at Scott's hands, taking each in turn and waiting for Scott to squeeze back to show he had control back. Oh, yeah, they'd done that far too many times. Scott did as asked, but John wasn't satisfied because he asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Okay enough for this. I had a thing, it's done, and now I just need to make sure the boys are okay. I need to prioritize, and that means you, the three of them, then Dad. I can't do it this time without you. I thought I could handle it myself, but … "

"I'm sure I already know the answer to this, but you know you don't have to treat us like a mission, right? We don't have to be handled or triaged or — "

"If I don't?" Scott bit his lip and felt his cheeks flush with embarrassed frustration. "If I don't give it order and protocol and … I need it, John. Some shrink would probably have a field day with that information, and I would gladly give them all the psychosis they could handle some other day, but I can't change it now. Call me Smother Hen, whatever you like, but taking care of the four of you is the only thing that got me through the last few years. This doesn't change that. I go through the door first. I take care of you. It's the rule, and it's gonna stay that way. If anything, it gets the boys feeling safer faster. And when they feel safer, I'll feel a whole helluva lot better."

"As long as you promise me you'll find me if something happens. I won't let you do this alone."

"Right back atcha, kid."
"Can I have one more question before I promise to drop it?"

"Has anyone been able to stop you from asking a question since the day you were born?"

John looked at him, so damn sincere, that Scott wanted to take it back. "What do you do when this happens and I'm not here?"

"This doesn't happen when you aren't here."

"Bullshit."

"I don't know. Try to get back to my room before anyone notices, I guess? I think Dad might know something, but he doesn't know what he knows."

"Promise me something?"

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"When all this is over, before I go back up there, we talk to Virgil together." Scott opened his mouth to protest, but John shook his head sharply, his lips pressed into a tight line, to cut it off. "He doesn't have to know everything — in fact, I'd prefer he didn't — but someone should know at least something. What if this happens out in the field? I mean, yeah, I'd be right there in your ear to talk you through it, but we can't always drop whatever we're doing either."

"Well, if we don't talk Dad down from whatever ledge he's on, that may be a moot point."

"Scott."

"What? Yes, okay, fine. We'll talk to Virgil. Satisfied?"

John's sly, conniving smile that Scott both loved and feared because it was so like Gordon's made its appearance. "I'll let you know. C'mon." John slapped Scott's thigh and got up, awkward in execution but confident in purpose. "You heard Gords. He wants a beer with his brothers, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't mean Alan."

Scott didn't mean to make that face. Really, he didn't, but it hit him so fast he didn't have time to pull it before John saw and immediately sobered. Scott wondered if he caught the guilty look, too.

"What did I miss?"

"Alan needs to be a part of this."

"Not at midnight, he doesn't. Not after today."

"Somehow?" Scott sighed. No, not somehow. Definitely. "Somehow I'm thinking Alan won't care about that part. I'll show you."

They walked through the house in companionable silence, shoulder to injured shoulder, never too far away. If John was as weirded out by the security as Scott was, he didn't say.

The case of bourbon was still where Scott left it, unopened and demanding to be stripped of a bottle. Its sole purpose in life was to be drunk, and damn it, he was nothing if not a man who understood that purposes were meant to be filled. Hey, Matt even had the bottles personalized. Cool. Dad couldn't fault him for taking this one. It actually had his name on it.

Downstairs, Virgil left his stereo on: The Rolling Stones, Aftermath, repeating for who knows how
long. Anyone else, that might not mean anything, but with Virgil, it was a thin veil hiding he was
damn ticked off at the world. Not that Scott blamed him in any way. If anything, he appreciated the
heads up on what Virgil might not be able to vocalize yet. Even if he didn't always agree with his
brother's taste in bands, he did love how the stereo was this short of being a mood ring.

Black all around tonight then. Yippee.

As they turned the corner near their father's office, Scott put the back of his hand to John's chest to
stop him before they could be seen. Low so that Dad couldn't hear them, he said, "Stand here a
minute and take a good look around. Don't say anything. Just look."

"I'm looking for … ?"

"Pretend you're seeing it for the first time. I'll explain after." John still gazed at him like he'd dived
into the emptied pool head first. "Just do it. C'mon."

John rolled his eyes, but he made a point of popping his eyes out to show he was looking. He
flattened himself back against the wall, though, when Dad's voice floated out to them, joking but
definitely tense in a way that only John and Scott would recognize.

"I'm going to remember you said that."

"I'm counting on it," a feminine voice pleasantly replied. "Anything you need. But on that note, I
have a Sit Room to talk down from wanting all your heads platterized on the Resolute desk by
morning. Take care of your team, Commander, and good luck."

Momentarily distracted from his mission, Scott couldn't help grinning. "Is that?" There was
something surreal about their father talking so casually with the President of the United States. How
many people could say their parents knew The President?

"Thank you, Madam President. I will. We'll be in touch."

Dad ended the call and palmed his face with both hands, elbows propped on the desk and breathing
heavy between his fingers. His hands were as steady as ever, but Scott could see the way his jaw
worked, the muscle in his left cheek twitching from stress and grinding teeth. Dad shook his head
once to himself, breathed out again, and let his hands fall. He scribbled something on the desk and
then turned back to the computer monitor in front of him.

Scott glanced at John, who had the same uneasy look on his own face that Scott felt gnawing
painfully at his gut. Maybe it was that they were still so young when they'd lost their mother, but
Scott had never seen anything put such an immediate, dark drag on their father's very being before.
Yes, they'd both stepped up and helped around the house, but being aware of the internal world of
your home is one thing; to be aware of the adult world and how it truly works is a different story at
sixteen. At sixteen, his father was invincible, strong, incapable of faltering even a step. Even in the
limited light, there was nothing invincible about his father now. Now, with his arched back and eyes
bruised purple, Jeff Tracy looked like a man with nothing left to give.

Seconds later, Grandma's voice startled both Scott and John. "Oh, sweetheart. Are you all right?"

"Hello, Mother." Even his strangled voice sounded like he had nothing left to give.

"Jeff, are you all right?"

"It's a long story. I'm sorry I didn't get to call you sooner. I … Are you safe?"
"Your friend Court is set up in the living room with four of his finest. He's seeing to this personally."

"He said he would. I'm sorry about the intrusion, but I didn't see any other options."

"Hush. I'm not worried about that. That boy got us our Scott back in one piece. He's welcome in my house any time. What I am worried about is you. What happened?"

"Mother, it's so messed up. Everything. I can't ... "

Scott had to fight not to put himself right at his father's side, to fill in the gap until the man could find his words again. The way John's shoulders bolted straight said he was near losing the same battle. Scott capped his hand on his brother's uninjured shoulder, staying and reassuring him at the same time. They both watched their father's profile as his shoulders sank even lower into his chair. One hand came up to pinch at his eyes.

Grandma, bless her, waited patiently for her son to clear the stress from his throat before she asked tenderly, "Are the boys all right?"

"No. Not even close. They're all trying so hard to show me they are, but ... Mom, I almost lost them all today."

"Then forget the beginning. Come home, Jeff. Bring the boys. Hiram, Kyrano, everyone. Bring the whole family. I can make room."

"Thank you. I wish we could, but if we come home now, I ... I'm afraid we would never be able to come back here. After today, I — "

Whatever Dad was, John had apparently heard enough. He pulled on Scott's elbow, drawing him away from the door and down the hall. It wasn't until they were around the corner that he said, "Let Grandma handle it for now."

Scott nodded. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing his grandma couldn't make better. They didn't come like Grandma Tracy anymore. She was the toughest broad ever to grace this world, bar none. You had to be tough to love a family like this one. She could take it. Part of him wished he could be there with her, if only to see her ordering around the experienced, battle-hardened men of Court's team for daring to put their feet on her coffee tables. Devil help the man who dared to track mud into her home. It could be fun.

"So what was I supposed to be looking for in the office?"

"You ready for this?" Scott filled John in on his conversation with Gordon that morning — was it really only that morning? — not sparing his guilty wound an extra layer of salt. He'd ached seeing the way Gordon cringed when he told him how Alan shed a nakedly awful light on how he felt about the mural, about IR, about it all. Seeing the hurt reflecting in John's eyes made it all the worse when he admitted, "Alan didn't even want to come home. Even before all of this, we only made it worse."

They reached Gordon's door to find Alan still sleeping soundly on the bed. Grandma's quilt had become a bundle on the floor, even though Alan's feet had burrowed under the pillow. The TV still flickered on him, making the zipping of his eyes under his eyelids seem almost violent. Scott could only hope that didn't also mean violent dreams. He couldn't stop himself. He wrapped the blanket back around the boy's shoulders, carding his hand through the untamed hair again. It worked the last time.

"I wonder how cool he thinks all of this is now," John whispered.
Scott had to wonder how cool any of them thought this was now. "Don't tell him you know, okay? I practically had to wrestle it out of Gordon as it was. Apparently there were pinky swears involved. Gordon's claiming bamboo shoots and torture if any of it is traced back to him."

"You're a total, tattle-telling douchenozzle. Check."

John's hand ghosted over the bruises on Alan's side, wincing with imagined pain. He breathed in and out a few times, steadying himself against something in his head that Scott couldn't reach. His lower lip bunched together as he sucked it between his teeth and bit down hard enough to draw blood.

"I've barely talked to him all week."

"You're still doing better than me," Scott confessed.

"This day sucks."

Scott held up his bottle. "Bacooze. Now. Before we wake him up. We at least owe him a full night's sleep."

"And maybe a cake?"

"Definitely."

The boys had their arms draped over each other at the pool's edge when they got down there, their heads together like they were plotting something. The way Gordon's laughter echoed around them, they were definitely plotting something. That, or they were already drunk.

As if he had eyes in the back of his head, Gordon called out cheerfully, "SCOTT! JOHN!"

"NORM!" John snorted.

Gordon startled, his eyebrow dipping low, and glanced around behind him in both directions. "Who's Norm?"

"Hell if I know. You've never noticed how Dad says that every time he walks into a room and people start yelling each other's names?"

"No," Gordon drawled, eyeing them both like they were the weirdest people on Earth. "Virgil?"

His feet in the water infinitely more interesting than the conversation, Virgil didn't bother to look up. "Nope."

"Well, he does, and he thinks it's funny."

Gordon reached into the pool and splashed some water up at them, which Scott reflexively kicked at as if there was something he could do about it. "So did you have to slay a dragon before you could rescue him from his tower or what?"

Scott glanced sideways at John, even though he knew it wasn't necessary. John had kept his secret for this long; he wouldn't break the silence now. The brush of John's uninjured shoulder against his was slight, ghostlike, but it did make his lungs jump to life again. Just in case either of the youngers were watching him, though, he made himself useful and retrieved John a bottle from the table.

"Codeine," John volunteered to twin grimaces of sympathy from Gordon and Virgil.

Scott saluted Gordon, tipping the lip of an uncapped longneck before he handed it down to John. "You're a man of few but eloquent words, Gords."

"I knewed Dad sent me to that there fancy school fur a reason." The dork even hitched the waistband of his shorts for emphasis.

He left them to fend for themselves with that one because there was no way he was keeping a straight face. He eyed the three different ice buckets of beer with both relish and awe. When he told the boys to get the booze, he didn't mean they should bring an entire liquor store out here. Not that tonight was the night for lectures on drinking responsibly and black bras and strappy high-heeled shoes or anything.

Deciding to wait on the bourbon until Gordon and Virgil finally conked out — Woody Res was a quiet, thoughtful man's drink, not a pool party where you never knew if Gordon would throw you in the deep kind of thing — Scott studied the selection the boys had come up with. Kyrano needed a new game plan because they found all the best stuff. That, or Scott would have to start hiding his Killian's in his room.

What the hell?

Scott swiped his thumb across the label, taking a smear of red with it. In the ice bucket with the Sam Adams, the red was even more obvious on the blue winter label. There was big fat drop of blood on the table, too.

"Uh, guys? What's with the blood?"

Lazily, Gordon said, "Oh, yeah, watch out for that. Dad and Onaha cleared a path from the bar to the table, but otherwise there's glass everywhere. We're gonna be finding it for the next year at least. Don't sit on the couch."

"Um, where is the couch?"

"Alan didn't want to talk about it" was all he said, slamming the lid on the subject good and tight.

Scott couldn't help his concerned glance up toward the second floor or his worry that Alan was up there all—

"Stop it," John ordered, not even bothering to look at Scott to see if he was right. He waited a beat and repeated, still not looking at him, "Stop it. He's fine, Scott. Get back here."

Gordon snickered.

John crossed his free arm over his chest as if that would be even remotely effective. "I'll tie you to this chair."

"You have one hand," Gordon pointed out.

"Gordon'll tie you to this chair."

Gordon's eyes glowed with evil glee.

Scott and his Killian's sat down. For now.

It wasn't long before Scott had no idea what in the almighty universe Gordon was yammering on about. It was the sweetest sound he could imagine. Virgil kept up a steady stream of cockeyed looks
at them all like he wanted to knock all their heads together just to see what would happen. John's commentary was limited, but in that half-drunk way he had when it was only the two of them during John's downtimes. If it weren't for the bloody footprint near the diving board, Scott would've relaxed completely.

The gallows humor had finally made its return an hour later when John laid back, his eyes closed. His voice came out strained around his arched neck, but he was obviously feeling pretty good. Whether that was the painkillers or the all of a third of a beer, Scott didn't know, but he didn't care as long as John was comfortable. He was seriously thinking of handing the man a nipple, though. "Well, Virg, I guess that puts you next."

"For?"

"Some lunatic shooting you down out of the sky."

"Hell, no! Nobody's taking my 'bird down."

"Someone take away John's codeine," Scott said at the same time Gordon snorted, "That fat lady'd never get back up."

Virgil reached over, flapping his wrists lazily around until he gave up and pouted, "Scotty? Smack Gordon for me."

"That would require I not agree with him. It's your turn."

"Scotty? Smack yourself for me."

"Sure, Virg. I'll get right on that," Scott said, rolling out of his chair to the tune of Gordon whistling some tune Scott couldn't name, but whatever it was, it was obviously loaded with sarcasm. He had to leap out of the way as Virgil swiped at his ankles.

Gordon followed him to the makeshift bar, wobbling a little as he tried to get through the maze of deck chairs. The impatient and strangely desperate pressure he put on Scott's elbow didn't match the goofy grin on his face. Out of one corner of his mouth, he whispered, "Walk with me."

Scott's buzz immediately went from happy to annoying fly in his ear, but he followed his brother to the real bar with a weird sense of déjà vu. If Gordon called third base, Scott was going to bed.

"You have to talk to Virgil."

"Do I have to do it in clandestine whispers?"

Up went Gordon's hand, clowning him up the back of the head. "Something's wrong with him, jackass."

The almost shy, whole-hearted declaration was both sobering and a relief. It made Scott feel sick that he was so happy to be needed, but it could restore the balance, he'd take it. Things could be normal again. Everything slid away then, his peripheral vision vanishing to leave only Gordon and his worry. He could do this. The reassurance in his own voice was clear and honest, and he couldn't have been more grateful to hear it. "Shoot."

"I don't think he actually remembers the last hour we were up there." Gordon's expression grew dark(er). "Not that that's necessarily bad in itself, but I'm — It's little things. Like he doesn't remember the beer. He keeps playing stuff off like he remembers, but he's … And he keeps going on about some six seconds? I don't know. He's off. I know I'm not exactly the poster child for healthy
reactions right now, but something isn't clicking."

"I'm on it, Gords. Promise."

"Is Johnny okay?" Gordon asked, nearly snapping Scott's neck with conversational whiplash. "You were gone a long time."

"He's fine. Hey? Don't worry, okay? We'll all come through. Nobody's gonna be left behind."

"I know." It didn't sound like he knew at all.

"You okay, kid?"

A huge sigh released the square of Gordon's shoulders like a balloon in his chest deflated. He turned back to the bar, holding his beer in front of his face from bent elbows. He ripped at the label a bit, tearing it into neat little strips. Scott waited patiently for him, even though the being patient part was damn near killing him. "Being held hostage and having to be rescued by your baby brother sucks."

"Yes, yes it does." A year's worth of rescues flashed through Scott's head, drawing a crooked smile from him. "You get used to it."

"But I'm okay. And ... you're not a moron. Well, you are a moron, but not — I know you're trying to — I know you are the way you are because you're trying to — Dad needs you. We need you. Fuckin' A! I'm gonna grow up to be a maudlin drunk, aren't I? What the hell is that about?"

Unable to let the poor kid hang there any longer — ego feeding aside — Scott wrapped an arm around Gordon's shoulders and shook him, laughing. "Go drink your beer before you hurt yourself."

The look of Oh, thank you for the graceful exit was beyond awesome. Gordon made to sock Scott in the gut, skipped away, and ducked under Scott's lazily swiping arm with a huge smile. "Yeah, boss!"

"What are you two scheming about over there?" John called.

Gordon popped his thumb over his shoulder at Scott with a wink. "It's only scheming when he does it."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Strategy," Scott hollered over Gordon's "Plotting".

"I don't even want to know."

"Booze, dude. You need more booze. Everything about this shitty day makes more sense with beer."

They fell into a peaceful quiet, which seemed to be the most relaxed Virgil had been since they'd made it home. Scott didn't miss Gordon sneaking glances at Virg, even if he kept up a steady stream of dirty, mischievous commentary along the way. John watched the sky as always, although it was harder to see with the purplish-white security lights gunking up the night sky. He never should've pointed out that the shooting stars they were so admiring were probably parts of Five's debris field hitting atmo.

"There's another one," Virgil said, slightly slurring on the rrr-s. "What do you think it was?"

Gordon followed the trajectory of the shooting star with the lip of his bottle. "Toilet seat."

"Be nice to my girl," John said, leaning into his seat with his eyes closed. "Besides, that side of her
wasn't hit. That was definitely something from my bedroom."

Scott watched Gordon's face go from thoroughly wide-eyed and shocked to comically mischievous before he finally shook his head, tight-lipped and obviously trying so very hard not to say something. "Nope," he said, the words warring with his teeth. That smile was going to come out, whether he wanted it to or not. "Can't say it. You left so many doors wide open on that one, I don't even know which one to exploit."

"Oh, no, I want to hear this one. I dare you. Insult my 'bird."

It was strange to think he was waiting with baited breath for Gordon to say it. Say anything, as long as it could make him smile. All of a sudden, the idea of Gordon reaching the point where he felt it was all right to joke, where he felt he was ready to let go enough to remember that their world hadn't ended today, seemed so crucial. It was unfair pressure to put on the kid, especially when he didn't even know how badly any of them needed him to be him, and yet, Scott had hope. Danger Zone-ing him — seriously, he despised that song — couldn't be all the kid had in him tonight.

He couldn't tell if Gordon was stalling or what, but he stood up, his teeth reflecting the security light in his wide grin. He backed up slowly, laughing, his arms spread wide in a dare right back.

Whatever the little shit had in mind, he didn't get the chance. A blur zipped by, obviously on a mission, until it found its target. Skin met skin, hard and angry, just before Gordon's arms windmilled to control his backward fall into the pool. As the water geysered up and over, drenching the innocent bystanders, Alan glared down at a sputtering but clearly amused Gordon.

"ASSHOLE!"

(End Chapter Six)
Scott's half full beer bottle hit the floor with a shattering punch of glass barely a millisecond after Gordon hit the water. Like they didn't have enough glass to clean up, right?

Man, John forgot Scott could move that fast. Zip! Whoosh! *Onomatopoeia!* With two swift, giant steps for all Tracy-kind, Big Brother's arms expertly circled Alan's heaving chest from behind, one hand flat over his too-big heart, the other slightly bending the kid's too-big head forward from behind his neck in a half-nelson. Scott would never hurt Alan, and the strain of his jaw said he was keeping it all tightly controlled, but John's shoulder twinged in sympathy anyway.

In case they didn't catch exactly how nuclear Alan was the first time, he screamed with non-concussion-friendly levels down at the water, "SONOFA — LET ME GO!"

Scott had to chicken dance his feet out of stomping range real quick. Little brothers really should come with a cup warning. At least his should have.

With that lovely thought, John figured someone should be on stand by to wrangle the other one, just in case this was the one and only time Gordon didn't want to find himself in water. He tried to angle himself to get out of the lounger, but his stupid sling got in the way. His hips twisted, alerting him to a fairly decent sized bruise forming there he hadn't noticed before because, well, duh. Impending death, annoyingly buzzy drugs, and better booze. The movement brought a galaxy of stars into his vision, not nearly as shiny as those he loved and a lot more painful, but if he could only get his arm to go this way and —

"Oh, no, you don't. You stay there."

"Uh, the fish? Drowning?"

"He's fine. You stay." Scott and his Big Brother Voice of Doom (copyright pending) put his bare foot on John's thigh to keep him down, digging his toes in good and hard in case John got any more bright ideas. He would've laughed if he weren't so focused on being as helpful as possible. Dad was covered for now, but Scott needed all the backup he could get, whether he thought so or not. As it was, Gordon was only a gallon short of drinking in the whole pool. But John stayed put, if only so Scott would turn off that voice. He had his hands full enough with Alan.

That voice (which John thought Scott stole from Dad, but possession was nine-tenths of the law, and Scott was fully possessed now) had sent lesser men scrambling with the *Yessirs* in record time more often than not. John just didn't get paid for it — except in color commentary and alcohol. Seriously, Matt Ryves knew his bourbon. All hail the Kentucky Bourbon Trail! Now, if only Scott would actually let him have some. Big brother controlled quantities, his ass …

The wince crinkling, still trying to get at Gordon, even with Scott chattering low nonsense in his ear. The wince crinkling Scott's eyes said the hollering was doing wonders for his own aching head. Sometimes, John wished like hell Mom (okay, technically, it was Dad's fault) had given them sisters. Quiet sisters. Sugar and spice and all things nice sisters. With inside voices. And a little less energy. All this bouncing around had him just short of puking.

Gordon finally made an appearance above deck, his finger and thumb grinding the chlorine in his eyes good and tight. He coughed a few times while John watched carefully to see if any water came up with it. Even with the shock to his system, Gordon had a somewhat amused expression on his face, like he was proud of Alan for standing up to him instead of letting him muss his hair without a
show of balls whatsoever. His eyes found Alan, though, and that smacked the look right off his face. Whatever he saw there, it got Gordon out of the water faster than John knew was possible.

His brothers seriously needed to slow down. Zip!

Virgil, too. Maybe they weren't seeing the same things — John couldn't be sure; everyone was zipping around half a second faster than he could keep up with — but Virg strategically placed himself between Alan and Gordon. Where Scott was still trying to soothe it away, Virgil was deceptively quiet with his one command. "Alan, cut it out."

Yeah, that didn't work either.

Alan snaked in Scott's grip, a rattler possessed. "YOU PROMISED ME! ASSHOLE!"

While everyone else watched Alan — his heart crunched and screamed again under the weight of knowing they all would be for some time to come — John wrenched his eyes away to focus on Gordon so that he was the only one who saw their other little brother's face simply melt into a surprised, unspoken Oh, Allie. It became something so pathetic, so hurt, so I'm Somebody's Big Brother Too that without anyone asking the question, John had a pretty good guess what the problem was. Soaked in water and guilt, Gordon hauled himself across the patio to stand right in front of the knot of arms and shouting.

Tapping his toes into Virgil's leg, John nodded his head to the side. Virgil raised his eyebrows with a You're kidding, right?, but he silently backed off closer to John's shoulder even as he kept his eyes trained on Alan.

That right there — Virgil's ability to trust them, even when his own gut said differently — was exactly why John picked Virgil to be his Scott backup, although, really, he probably didn't need to be worrying about that now. Scott was in his element now with an Alan and Gordon to take care of. Psychotic, money-grubbing terrorists, then or now, weren't exactly a priority.

Scott said something in Alan's ear, soft and gruff, that only made Alan struggle harder, turning Scott's restraining hands into flares of white knuckle and angry muscle — which, man, John wished Alan knew what kind of punishment he was actually doling out there, but Scott refused to yield to it. John had a feeling he'd be working the tension out of his hands again by dawn anyway.

The human hand has twenty-seven bones. When they got him back from the No Fly, Scott had broken (or had broken for him) all but three of them in his right hand. John had massaged the locked muscles in that hand more than the left. He'd lost count how many times, though. Some statistics even he couldn't bear to keep track of.

Scott never did say if they actually broke any of his fingers during his SERE exercise or not.

Sometimes, under that perfectly crafted guise of brother and friend, John forgot how seriously badass his big brother was. Captain Brass Balls needed to hike up his skirt right now, though, because the way his hands shook under the strain, he was about to lose his fight with their fourteen year old brother any second now. Wouldn't that just be the wet candle on the shit cake today?

Gordon charged, guilt and all, up to the rescue then, wrapped one hand around the back of Alan's sleep-mussed hair, and squeezed. His sopping forehead touched Alan's — which seemed to be equally as wet all on its own — and whispered something so quiet he doubted even Scott could hear with his head right next to Alan's ear. The muscled cords of his forearm pulsed when the grip strengthened, like Gordon was afraid Alan still didn't believe whatever he'd said, and he breathed one word. He waited, his usually plainly open face closed off like he was waiting for a killing
judgment, and held his breath.

Alan's whole body sagged a bit, exhausted, first toward Gordon and then back into Scott's chest. A set of whispers were exchanged, low enough that John, in his caffeinated codeine haze — damn, he hated this stuff — couldn't tell who was saying what. Alan shook his head, and Gordon offered him a tight grin. Scott tapped his flat hand on Alan's chest twice and released him with a tentative pause still within reach of giving the kid the choice to cry uncle or kiss the concrete patio, his choice. Alan played nice, though, his hands raised peacefully up and out at his shoulders.

Good boy.

It didn't stop him from trying to get the last word in, though. "Just … don't do that again," Alan said with a sandpapery scratch to his throat from screaming.

Gordon reached up to tap Alan's cheek twice, then the little smart ass saluted them both with one raised middle finger.

Alan laughed. "And the horse you rode in on, dickwad."

Seriously, would sisters have been too much to ask for?

Dancing away on the balls of his feet, Gordon seemed to be having the same thought John was as he sang (howled, warbled, whatever that was) at the stars they couldn't see because of the stupid security lights. "Sisters, sisters, there were never such devoted sisters."

John had to hide his grin behind the lip of his beer because he knew that look passing between Scott and Alan. He knew it and could do nothing but watch.

Scott offered him a What the hell? kind of wink, put his barely concealed gun in John's lap, and jumped in the water after Gordon, catching Alan around the waist on the way. If there was any water left in the pool, Virgil took care of it with a silent but deadly cannonball off the edge.

Some people's kids.

If they expected him to get their obviously delusional, wacky asses towels, they were so very screwed with their pants on. As heads started bobbing up to the surface, John coolly put his beer to his lips and turned his gaze back up to his stars and the fiery remains of his girl. He swore he could hear all the popping and cracking of her electronics still exploding and rebelling against her fate. He wished he could see her, just to know she was okay up there alone. He wasn't so sure he was okay Island-side alone.

Stupid beer. It made him sentimental. Scott had excellent taste, though. Sleepy taste.

He would never get over how different his sky seemed from down here. Softer, quieter (yes, he knew there was no sound, shut up), less Big Bang. But even with the shimmer of atmosphere and gravity, it was still his sky. Still his stars. The cosmos were still a thing of absolute wonder that never failed to hold his attention and wrap him in a sense of safety that he was so small. He was barely a blip in the idea of the world, exactly like every other little blip. His brothers, Dad, Mom, everything and everyone. Other people freaked about that idea, he knew. The thought they were here for such a short time only to make such a tiny ripple in the water that no one would feel it much beyond themselves was frightening; John could understand that. But John? He liked it. He liked the idea that he was as small and insignificant as everyone else. In the end, it made the pressure of being a Tracy, and in his own right, being The John Tracy, that much easier.

John liked how when he came home, he was nothing more than Scott's little brother, the other boys'
big brother. His beating into the carpet until he cried uncle was no different than the others'. He was Dad's son — not The Jeff Tracy's son. Standing at the slouching, not entirely respectful version of Tracy parade rest in front of the man's desk put a twist in his gut as much as it did the man's other sons. John was friend, brother, flesh and blood, a piece of the stars like every other molecule out there, in one way or another.

In so many ways, it was good to feel small.

Somewhere in the haze of small, he heard Scott's humid breath whisper in his ear. "Go to sleep, man. We'll all be here when you wake up." John registered the gentle tug of the beer bottle coming out of his hand and something plush covering him from the waist down.

Foggy Alan sounded foggy and amused. "What did you do to him?"

There was no answer that wasn't gibberish, but John didn't have the energy to correct it or defend Scott against the onslaught of curious little brother. He'd already defended him against the nightmares for a few hours. He didn't want to say it, but he had a feeling it was his turn. He wondered which terrorists he would dream of first.

He slurried Scott's name because opening his mouth was equally as hard as opening his eyes.

"I'm okay," Scott answered, patting his shoulder because Scott got him enough to know the question. Scott had good answers and good beer.

"You sure?"

"You already took care of the boogeymen for tonight." It didn't stop Scott from retrieving his gun, but that was hardly the point, right? "Promise. I'm okay."

"Oh, good." He couldn't focus on necessarily why Scott wouldn't be okay, but it was good he was okay. John worried when Scott wasn't okay. "Don't let Brains give me that stuff again, okay? So, so chatty. And nervous. And jittery. And chatty, chatty, chatty."

"Yeah, you are. Sleep, Johnny."

He wanted his beer back. That Tylenol stuff made him feel lousy, jumpy, but the beer, the beer would help him relax. He wanted to relax. He — "Hey, you tricked me."

Good beer.

Hazy Gordon had a hazy chuckle at John's expense in the hazy lounger next to his. "D'you ever wonder if he just sits up there and talks to himself like this all day?"

John waved a stupid, heavy hand at him and pouted with an exaggerated child's pout. "Not if Dad has his way."

Scott's voice was more insistent this time. "Sleep, Johnny."

"Uh huh."

"Now."

"Uh huh."

Alan laughed, dragging John's eyes back open so he could see him reaching over and plucking a lighter out of Virgil's hand without much of a fight. "Oh, no. No fire for you. I've been nearly
barbecued enough for one day, thank you."

Virgil snatched lazily at the flame thrower without any real intent until he froze, his hand in mid-snatch. A dreadful shake accented his question. "What do you mean, nearly barbecued?"

"Sleeping Beauty wakes," Alan said instead, clearly summoning John for a distraction. What in the world they were talking about, he didn't know, but he knew he should probably feel cheap and not just a little used.

He brought his watchless wrist to his once again lazily closed eyes and let it fall back down hipside. "Has it been a hundred years already?" he muttered, his tongue wound with cotton, good and tight. Cool. It went with the scarf of cotton wool around his head.

Bad beer.

"Alan," Scott, part bloodhound, demanded through his teeth. "Does that have anything to do with the mess at the bottom of Virg's lift?"

Alan's sudden silence and half-shrug were in no way convincing. If anything, it left John a little too cold.

"Alan?" Virgil prodded.

"Nah, that came before."

"Before what, exactly?"

Alan flopped back, misjudging the distance and dinging his head on the crossbar of John's lounger. Clang. Okay, okay, John's eyes were really open this time. Good grief. He used them to concentrate on Alan, who seemed a little dazed, like Hey, when did that thing get here? John let his hand ruffle through the kid's hair lightly until he was sure there wouldn't be a bump egging any time soon. He found a different one, though, one that had been there for a few hours at least. He glanced over Alan's head at Scott, who waited with deceptively cool patience.

Ow, he mouthed.

Scott's mouth turned, his lips going that much more colorless than they'd been most of the day. He absently rubbed at his wrists, which made John feel the rope burns inside his own flesh. Even without the fierce look returning to Scott's eyes, John knew they were thinking the same thing. What else hadn't Alan told them? Not that he'd exactly told them anything yet, but —

"Oh, for hell's sake, you two," Gordon spurted. "Somebody find their switch and turn it off already."

Startled, John's hand locked in Alan's hair while both he and Scott flashed their eyes over at Gordon. He lay sprawled on the concrete, a towel under his head, but he didn't bother to open his eyes at either of them. He was apparently counting on the tone of his incredibly annoyed voice to do the job for him. Somehow, it worked.

"What?" Scott asked.

"Don't you two ever get tired of it?"

"Huh?"

Gordon didn't answer right away. He flinched when Scott toed his ribs, but he still didn't open his
eyes or respond in any other way. Scott swiped his hand over his face, looking damn bone tired, like he couldn't believe how much this day simply would not fucking die.

When it came, Gordon's voice went shivering soft, barely containing something huge and terrible, something that should in no way be contained. John's vision was a little blurred, always was when Brains gave him stupid drugs, but that didn't stop him from seeing his kid brother's hands shake as he admitted, for Scott's ears only, "I think I need that walk now."

Without a word, Scott was on his feet. One hand readjusted the gun in his waistband to keep it from falling while the other hand squeezed Virgil's shoulder. Something he said in Virg's ear brought a relieved smile to their younger brother's face while Scott reached out to Gordon. They overbalanced so that Alan stuck his own hand out to Scott's hip to brace their fall. And then, with one wobbly grin of extreme gratitude and one scowl of I can't fix this that none of them were meant to see, they melted into the shadows toward the path that led down to the beach.

Scott's voice floated back to them with a careful reminder that Gordon was barefoot and needed to watch out for broken glass.

Gordon's "shut up" was accompanied by a slap somewhere fleshy and snappish.

Virgil called after them, "Play nice!"

He couldn't see them now, but John knew precisely how proficient Gordon could be with the sign language. It was probably creative, too, some anatomically impossible act with a howler monkey or something.

There are fifteen species of howler monkeys. They have a lifespan of fifteen to twenty years. If things kept up, that would probably be the anticipated lifespan of a Tracy male, too.

John never thought twenty-two could feel so old.

On the lounger next to him, Virgil and Alan exchanged worried glances. Alan especially looked freaked the hell out as he said more than asked, "He took the gun with him."

Without needing to ask or think about it, John warned them both out the side of straight-lined mouth, "Leave it alone."

"He's carrying a damn gun around," Virgil protested.

"I don't care. Leave him alone about it. Got me?"

Alan was quiet this time, concerned beyond adoring little brother curiosity. "He's not okay, is he?"

John raised one eyebrow. "Are you?"

"No."

"Well, there you go. None of us are, little brother. For now, let this one go. He'll be Scott again in no time."

Virgil wrapped his arms around his knees, something John hadn't seen him do in years. "Scott hates guns." His Adam's apple bobbed a little, like even the word 'guns' was distasteful to him, especially in the plural. "Dad hates guns."

John hated guns, too, but he wasn't about to say so, not right now. If anything, as soon as this show
was back on the road, he wanted them all carrying. This time the psycho got them at home. What if they were out in the field the next time someone decided that bright red cross of mercy didn't mean anything more than an opportunity to steal their unarmed technology for fuck all? Maybe it was borrowing trouble to even think it, but … It didn't mean he couldn't still hate the guns. He could hate everything about them. Until they kept someone safe.

But he couldn't say that. The emotional ledges they were standing on were precarious enough as is. Instead, he grinned, feeble as it was, and said, "Yeah, but the imagery of Grandma going all Calamity Jane on Brains is damn cool."

Virgil raised his beer, slapping at Alan's hand when the little sneak tried to steal it. "Grandma," he toasted.

"Calamity Grandma," John agreed, handing his bottle off to Alan to let him at it — only to snatch it right back. "Eh! A sip, kiddo."

"Ugh, that's awful," Alan spat not two seconds later.

Virgil snorted around his fist. "That's because Lillie Lightweight over there needs a nipple. That thing's been sitting there for three hours now."

"Then be my favorite brother and share yours before this experience ruins me on beer forever."

Why the hell not? passed over Virgil's face with a grin as he handed the bottle over without looking. He waited, his fingers counting down for John to see behind Alan's head — five, four, three, two, one, finger gun — when the kid did as they both expected and pulled a grimace so disgusted he probably never would be able to pull it back.

You keep looking like that and your face is gonna stay that way.

John had to wonder if any of them would have a genuine smile on their faces again after this.

"Yeah, that wasn't any better," Alan spat. "How do you guys drink this swill?"

"Talk to us again in ten years, and then we'll see."

"What's going on down here?"

All three of them jumped out of their skin, but John, being relatively immobile (stupid drugs, good beer, stupid sling), recovered faster than the others. He glanced up at their father with a half grin and a "Hey, Dad", but he quickly put his focus on Alan, who had gone from zero to milky white in less than a second. He glanced over Alan's head at Virgil, who had definitely seen it, too. While John reached his hand out to Alan's shoulder, Virgil brightened up and dramatically took his beer and hid it behind his back.

"Rite of passage," he said with a clear undertone of brother stuff and now go away.

An entire spiel was prepared in John's head about how, technically, he and Scott weren't doing anything wrong plying the youngers with alcohol since there weren't restrictions on private residences and they'd had a rough damn day and they weren't exactly on duty and yada yada shitty day, but it eluded him when Dad snatched a bottle of his own off the table. There went the last of the Killian's. Damn. He took a long pull from it, then handed it over to Alan, who stared at it with amazement before shaking his head.

"Rite of passage," he said with a clear undertone of brother stuff and now go away.

Dad only grinned. "You'll appreciate it when you're older." With a wink, he regarded Virgil and his
bottle. "You'll appreciate it when you're older."

"If you don't mind, I'll do some appreciating now."

"Hear, hear!" John reached over to confiscate a new beer. He'd never liked it warm. Alan was right; that one was pretty awful. He fumbled relatively one-handed with the bottle opener a few times until he huffed his clean hair out of his eyes.

"Gimme that," Virgil volunteered. "How you've ever managed to get past first base is beyond me."

John did a lousy job hiding his smirk with hot cheeks. Ah, memories, both misty and water colored. Actually, black and lacy. With matching panties that only barely covered everything in front and next to nothing in the back. With a little red satin bow at the … yeah. Her name wasn't Misty, though.

God bless Victoria and all her kinky, lacy secrets.

God bless whoever came up with the idea of big brothers.

Dad was a smart man. He didn't say anything, but the intent look he gave his beer was, well, intent. And far too amused.

Conversation took a decidedly weird turn then that John had no hope of navigating. For all the effort Alan put in on a daily basis to remind them he was in fact growing up, he was still very much sheltered about a great many things. At one point, Alan actually blurted out something to the effect of how in the world would Dad know? John knew it was weird to think of your parents, no matter how old or young they are, in any way knowing a body in the biblical sense and all, but the man did have five children. What exactly was Dad paying these philistines to teach their little brother, anyway?

Alan lost his beer privileges after that.

"John? You look like you need bed," Virgil said when the conversation fell into a nice, long lull full of more pieces of 'Five torpedoing the sky. There went a motherboard. "And lots of it."

"Then you're looking at me wrong." Rear panel on section three. "Try my good side."

"No one would blame you. What time did you go to bed last night?"

John immediately shot back a pointed "When did you?" without thinking about it.

"I slept in this morning" was barely a whisper. The stricken look that hit Virgil's eyes did John's heart in all over again. Damn. He wasn't supposed to put that on his brother like that. He still didn't care about those six seconds, not like Virgil did, but, well, Virgil did. Those six seconds were everything right now, and like everyone else under this reasonably demented roof, Virg needed something to control. Scott really had taken away his cleaning supplies, and that left John's body and mind and buttons to jab at until something, anything felt better. While he wasn't exactly a glutton for punishment, he would lay his buttons a little bareer if he had to.

He was still thinking about Virgil on that one, right?

He wondered how Scott's hands were faring. Alan was shivering a little bit over there. Virgil needed to stop biting his nails.

Attempting to smooth it over, John kicked his foot out at his brother's shoulder. "If I need sleep, you'll be the first to know. Deal? I'll even let you tuck me in."
Virgil kicked back. "Eat me."

"Pleasure."

Dad didn't say anything, but John could see him out of the corner of his eye, itching to tell them all it was time to sleep. He was still their father, after all, and while the idea of any of them falling asleep in his eyesight again within this lifetime may not be all that tantalizing for him, there was still basic biology to look at. His boys were smarting something awful, and sleep would have to happen sooner or later. He kept his mouth shut in a tight line, though. Good for him.

The silence hung on, waiting for Virgil's answer, until it grew into its own kind of monster, one that John imagined had glowing red eyes and a painfully awful stare. That was it, then. No matter what they said in the next few days, The Hood had won. Maybe not the war, but definitely the battle, because that sonofabitch would be breathing in every silence, in every awkward moment for who knew how long. The silence fed off them, even under Dad's handy-dandy security lights and watchful, protective glare. And then, by some odd, skinny little runt of a miracle, it was Alan who rescued them all again.

"I'm going for a walk," he announced and leapt from his chair.

For the first time in a few hours now, he moved at normal speeds. John almost felt like he could keep up with him. Yay for cat naps and beer!

He gave Virgil a quick Would you be okay if? double eyebrow. Virg jutted his chin toward the path opposite the one Gordon and Scott had taken, laid back, and closed his eyes with his still cool bottle settling on his bare ribcage. Good enough.

Permission granted, John called after Alan, "I'll go with you."

They left a quiet Virgil and a stunningly exhausted father behind with John able to feel their protective stares laser pointing at their backs. Even when they got far enough down the path, he was fairly sure Dad still watched after them. It tugged at his feet, like he should direct them to go back, knowing he was leaving both Dad and Virg vulnerable to too much unnecessary guilt, but then he felt Alan shiver beside him and knew he was where he was needed most at the moment.

Seriously, how Scott did this on a daily basis, splitting himself in so many directions at once, was beyond him.

Maybe fifteen minutes later, the dark was skittering along the footpath when Alan confessed, so young and soft and eloquent, what John had been unable to put into words until then. "Everybody's weird."

"Give it time, man. Everybody's tired."

"No, I mean …"

Alan bent over and picked up a humidity-warped mango tree twig that had fallen who knows how long ago. The sound of it slapping progressively harder as they walked along had John reaching into his brother's hand to yank the switch away before Alan could do any damage to himself. He'd been damaged enough today.

His footfalls became heavier, like he replaced punishing his hand with punishing his bare toes. John knew he should've made the kid put shoes on before they left.

A bat flew overhead, probably to plant a new mango tree to replace the one that donated Alan's
personal weapon of choice.

"What do you mean?"

"Gordon told you, didn't he?"


"Yeah. Uh huh."

"Alan."

"It doesn't matter."

"Tell me anyway." John moved around behind his brother so he could use his good hand to pull the kid back in step with him by the waistband of his not quite dry shorts. His hand stayed at the small of Alan's back, not exerting any pressure, but hopefully there in whatever way Alan might need it at the moment anyway. "C'mon, man. You used to talk to me."

Alan snorted. It wasn't a pleasant sound at all, sharp, broken shards of something it hurt to hear. "Gordon said the same thing to me this morning."

"He can be smart when he wants to be."

"Too smart."

"Smarter than you wanted him to be this morning, I take it?"

His breath stuttered a bit, on the verge of something that might've been tears or a good hard knuckle sandwich into the nearest available mouth, but after a few jitters, he took control of it. His knuckles instead tackled his eyes, first right then left. "Damn, man. I left him — no, I practically chased him off the beach this morning. I know he was trying to — What if that had been it? What if the last thing I ever said to him was 'go away'? I told Virgil to screw off when he tried to talk to me last night. Hell, I didn't even talk to Scott. I threw a tantrum, and it nearly — and all because I was dumb enough to think I could … " His eyes were big and wide now, focused terrifyingly on the sling on John's arm. "I brought this on us."

Oh, damn. Damn it. Damn it damn it motherfucking damn it. With a silent beat of his heart he knew Scott would hear, John promised him he had absolutely let go of his guilt now. Because if his sounded anything like Alan's, which he would not let happen, it really was as ridiculous as Scott had made it sound. It was trite and did tend to go against his experience, but sometimes bad things did simply happen. It wasn't anyone's fault. He could exclude idiots tossing their lit cigarettes in ditches and safety valves improperly handled on oil rigs and all kinds of things that put his brothers' lives at risk all the time. This? Was nobody's fault. Sometimes bad things, bad people, megalomaniacal fruitcakes, just happen.

"We don't know for sure how he found us yet. Even if it was you and Fermat in 'One, which I highly doubt it was, it was an innocent mistake. He wanted to find us, no matter what. He was going to hunt Dad down, however long it took. Men like that, they find a way. That's why they're crazy."

"But if I hadn't made Dad so mad, he would've had time to see it was a trap. Dad would've — "

"I didn't even know when it hit, and I had every terabit of 'Five's tech behind me. Before that sonofabitch marched Kyrano and Onaha and Brains across the screen the way he did, we didn't
know it wasn't a simple meteor. Until then, if anything, Dad was more focused, safer, because he
could be relieved that you weren't up there with me. You being safe gave him the ability to focus on
getting to me. I can't regret that. Can you?"

"But if I … Gordon? What if what I … I screwed up so bad."

John's hand moved up to Alan's shoulder and squeezed reassuringly hard, although which of them he
was trying to reassure was up for lengthy debate. He was still here. Alan was still here. "I don't know
what all you and Gordon had to say to each other this morning. All I know is there was a
conversation."


"So I've heard," John laughed. "Repeatedly. With an anvil to my head, concussed or no. I don't think
Scott will be able to use Gordon for his conniving nature for a while to come."

"Did you know?"

"I did. I thought it was a better plan than what Scott was suggesting, anyway. As for exactly what
was said, no." Truth, it truly was in the eye of the beholder.

Somehow, Alan looked relieved at that. His left cheek sunk in like he was biting at the little ball of
scar tissue in the corner that builds up from a lifetime of putting too much in your mouth and biting
down too hard. He was incredibly relieved. That, or he didn't want John to know something that was
said. Either way, he wasn't about to pry it out of the kid.

"If you'd like to tell me, I'll be all ears. But if you don't, I'm going to tell you what I think Gordon
would say about this. What happened between the two of you this morning doesn't change how you
felt about Gordon. You said the same kind of thing you say any given day, just like we all do. We
have all questioned whether or not you are getting close to being ready for the responsibility of IR.
Don't think we haven't talked about it. But in no way, ever, even with this weird version of you that's
been hanging around lately, have we ever questioned your love for us. Had things gone wrong
today, we still wouldn't. You can't doubt that. We're all gonna have doubts about things here, but not
once did we or will we doubt you. You, your person, our little brother, are never something we
doubt. He did this to us, not you. You need to remember that. And if you don't, don't think I won't
rip off this sling and kick your scrawny ass."

"You couldn't kick your own ass," Alan said automatically with a throaty, wet whisper.

"Fine. Virgil will kick your ass."

Alan got quiet then, but for the first time in John couldn't remember how long, it was a thoughtful
silence instead of the petulant, Why won't you let me grow up silence he'd become accustomed to.
After a bit, he mumbled something John couldn't quite hear. He must have been struggling, because
when he spoke up again, his voice had a quiver to it that John would do just about anything to erase.

"There was this crazy moment where … Brains screamed at Dad and everything went quiet. But it
was weird quiet. I couldn't hear anything, but it was so loud in my head, like if someone didn't say
something, my head would explode from the pressure of it. None of you were saying anything, but I
could see you floating around up there. I knew for sure we were too late. I couldn't close my eyes,
but I wanted to so damn bad. I got this sick," he rolled his hand in a frenzied, gurgly circle in front of
his stomach, like he was feeling the same awful sensation now, "ugh. And I knew then. Gordon was
right. I wasn't ready. Because being one of you means being responsible enough to accept everything
that goes with it. It means being ready to accept losing one of you and being able to do what needs to
be done anyway. And I couldn't do it. If you hadn't woken up, I'm not so sure I wouldn't be right behind you. I'm not ready."

Gripping Alan harder than he probably should have, John closed his eyes. Yes, the idea that something could go horribly wrong was part of the whole package, but that Alan would narrow it down to such a bleak focus, that he thought they didn't think him ready because of that? No. That was too much.

"I saw those portraits on the wall for the first time for what they really are: a ticking time bomb of the next storm, the next earthquake, the next Hood being better than you. I'm not ready to be up there on that wall, and I don't think I want any of you up there either. I don't think I got it before, but — "

"That isn't even close to — "

"You guys can't do this to me again. I know that sounds selfish after the day you've had, but you can't do that again. You have to wake up."

"We did. You realize that, right? We're here?"

Alan looked at him like he was the dumbest damn thing on the planet. Inwardly, John shrugged. Maybe he was. But obviously he was missing something in here a lot more important than only the conversation Alan had had with Gordon because there's no way Gordon would put these kinds of thoughts in his brother's head deliberately. For one, John knew good and well how Gordon felt about what they did (and this wasn't it), but he also knew Gordon would never be that cruel. Something wasn't right.

"I told Gordon today I hate that mural, the one when Dad's office is doing the cover up thing. I've hated that stupid thing, probably more than I should admit, from the first time I saw it. I've hated it so hard. But now? Now I think I hate the other ones more. I hate what those pictures mean. And I hate that they're … You guys are still kids, too. Scott's barely twenty-five, but he's already killed one career for this. If you weren't so brainy and got through school so fast, you would only be graduating this year. You shouldn't even be out in the real world yet. And Virg, he should be in college right now, not drinking with the rest of you trying to forget how you all almost died today. Gords shouldn't … he wasn't even old enough to vote until a few months ago. This is crazy. We aren't … I almost lost you all today. And I was up there on the hoversled when I lost Tin-Tin and Fermat. I turned down and saw them when they were surrounded, and I knew it was my fault because I didn't listen, just like I never listen, and Fermat tried to tell me, and it was — "

"Whoa. Al, breathe. Run on sentences are no good on a concussion, or any other occasion, but you know what I mean. Slow down. What are you talking about? What happened to Tin-Tin and Fermat?"

But Alan separated himself, hugging his arms around his bare chest, more in shadow than out, where John with his one good arm couldn't reach. "I got them caught. Dad told us to go wait for Lady P, and I didn't listen. I got them caught because I was trying too hard to be … Gordon was right. I'm not ready. And we're all still kids. I'm not the only one who should still be in school. You're all too damn young. We're kids, and we haven't lived enough, and I refuse to go out fried in Scott's damn exhaust ducts. I'm fourteen years old, and I don't want to die like that. Please, John, I don't want you to die. I don't … "

John closed the gap between them so fast he must have left the onomatopoeia hanging in the air behind him. His good hand gripped Alan hard by the hair, pushing his head down onto John's good shoulder. "Nobody's dying, you hear me? Not you, not any of us. We're okay."
It was a dark whisper, but John knew as soon as the words came out he'd been cooking on it for a long time, whether he'd already forgiven Gordon or not. "I woke up alone."

Excuses did the world's fastest Irish jig in his head. He and Scott had checked on him before coming down. They were all trying to do what was best for everyone at once. It hadn't occurred to them that waking up alone would be whatever it was behind Alan's eyes now. But he didn't say any of them, because saying it wouldn't change anything. It couldn't take away that bright moment of terror for Alan any more than John could take away Scott's boogeymen or Virgil's six seconds or whatever Gordon might be clinging to. What was the point?

That toilet plunger taking the fiery way out across his sky didn't have any answers for him either.

Which was why it came as such a surprise when Alan himself came to the rescue, asking, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"If it wasn't for IR, what do you think you'd be doing right now?"

John felt his stomach clench. Good question. Let's see what Dad decides to do first, huh?

"I mean, I know you'd probably have found a way to be up there anyway, but did you ever want to do anything else?"

The sound of their footfalls over dead leaves was the only thing interrupting the nighttime musical of jungle animals and insects as John tried to think of an answer. The future answer wouldn't do them any good, but he'd like to give Alan an honest answer. He'd earned it today. It took awhile — the stars had been there in his vision for so long now that it was hard to remember much before them — but when he heard in his head his brothers falling asleep this afternoon, their childhoods bringing them comfort, his head filled with the sweetness of Virgil's lullaby. "A rancher," John said with a small smile. "I think I would've wanted to be a rancher. Maybe in Montana or somewhere up there. Big sky, stars, open space as far as I can see."

"Some things don't change, huh?"

"That's one way of looking at it, yeah. What about you, little brother? Who do you think you want to be?"

And then, because Alan didn't know how to walk on his own two feet any better at fourteen than he did at four, the night was cut open with a jerk of air and Alan choking on an escaping breath.

John's arms — both of them — swung out on instinct, reaching out as they did every time one of his siblings got too close to the fire on the stove or gravity directed a nosedive at the concrete sidewalk. He liked to tell himself he'd be the same with any other human being, but he knew that wasn't exactly true. His aid for everyone else came because he thought about it, because he wanted more than anything to be a good person, to earn Mom and Grandpa's sacrifice for him and the others. But with his brothers, he didn't think about it. Arms flew out because everything about him told him to. Who needed a conscience when you had a body hollering You're the big brother, so do something, jackass for you?

His shoulder screamed in agony because that's what shoulders do when they're dislocated and not supposed to be moved because, hello, dislocated shoulder. It should've been self-explanatory there, genius. The pain was enough to put him off balance, so instead of catching Alan as he did the thing you aren't supposed to do and braced his arms to cushion his own fall, John doubled over with a
grimace.

Stupid sling. Stupid arm.

Fucking Hood.

Through gritted teeth, he called into the dark, "Okay, Al?"

Alan's voice responded immediately, flooded with something that sounded like disgust. Or fear. Or maybe a little of both. Yet, it sounded completely calm, too. There was no tremble as he crabwalked backwards back into the flat of the path and said — no, ordered — "Get Dad."

In the limited light, John tried to find Alan's eyes. The kid could hide many, many things — how none of them had ever caught on with the whole mural thing was beyond him — but physical pain was not one of them. Instead he found a dark numbness which explained nothing at all.

He followed Alan's line of sight to the usually obvious cause of any person planting themselves face first in island dirt — Alan's shoelaces — until he saw the kid hadn't bothered to put anything on his feet. He opened his mouth, rather Scott-like, to lecture his brother about the dangers of walking through the jungle, even the well-worn paths they all knew backwards and blindfolded, until he saw that the lack of shoelaces to trip on didn't matter.

The line of four, six, eight combat boots perfectly lined up, spaced and identical like motorcycles between ramps for an Evil Kneivel stunt run did the job just fine.

"Johnny, get Dad."

Without taking his eyes off the bodies, John stretched his hand down to Alan and pulled him up by the back of his neck. He bodily put himself between his littlest brother and the execution line, all but covering his eyes. His good hand turned Alan by the shoulder on the path back up to the house, even as he couldn't tear his own eyes away. "You go. I'll stay."

"You're the gimp, not me."

He glared, the Do not mess with me right now hopefully billboard sized on his face. He was not, would not, could not in any way leave his kid brother with a quartet of dead bodies. He kicked with his sandaled toes at one boot, skipped one, and went for the next until he had given each of them a good shake, just in case.

"Run. Tell Scott, on second thought, we may need that gun after all."

"Come with me. You shouldn't be — I don't — just come with me."

The plea — because that's what it was, a plea — was so un-Alan-like, so plain and needy, John couldn't say no. Maybe it was the last twenty or so hours playing with them, or the concussion, or even the lack of the moonlight's ability to filter through any bullshit at all, but whatever it was, there was no way John could simply tell the kid that he had lived on this island half his life and could find his own way back, damn it. Because, yeah, he didn't necessarily want Alan to be out here, alone, in the dark. Certainly not when there were four obviously dead, motionless, soulless bodies.

The idea of their island defiled, first by a lunatic, and now by said lunatic's murderous tendencies, did not sit well in John's gut. That Alan would have to see that was even worse.

"Okay, kiddo," he said softly around a surprise pocket of bile. "Okay."
It made his heart ache to see how that made Alan's posture droop with relief. He'd been more prepared for a fight than John realized. He thought of Alan screaming at Gordon, at his visceral push, and realized that he had no idea whatsoever what his brother was thinking. Leaving Alan alone, letting him wake up alone, hadn't seemed like such a big deal at the time. But now? The anger, so panicked and almost animalistic, made a lot more sense. They'd almost left him completely alone today, for however long The Hood would have let him live. They'd left him alone.

John promised them both, swearing on Mom's star, that he'd make an effort to be as noisy as possible the next few days. Loud and obnoxious. Frat boy loud. He could do it.

He totally could.

He still made Alan walk in front of him the whole way back to the house, though.

(End Chapter Seven)
Two words: How. Many.

In those two clipped words, Alan caught a slivered glimpse of exactly how powerful scary his father could be. Hide the cannoli and fishing poles, people, because Michael Corleone had nothing on the bristling rage of Jeff Tracy.

No, seriously, whatever covert, dark hole authority had The Hood should let him run. Ten second head start. Dad would enjoy it. A lot.

He had to give it to John, though. He didn't flinch (not like Alan did) at the ice in their father's voice. If anything, his posture straightened around his sling and his chin found its rightful, proud place. As far as Alan knew, John hadn't even considered the military, but he sure looked the part when he answered, "Four. Two bullets each, from what I could tell in the dark, head and heart. Someone in that crew knew what they were doing."

Dad turned and walked off two paces, his eyes to sky like he would take some help from just about anywhere, then came back with his arms crossed over his chest and feet slightly apart. "Which would explain why Brains's thermal scan of the island didn't show anything. We were only looking for live bodies."

Of course not, because that would mean thinking about what had really gone on today. It would mean imagining possibilities when the day had been dark enough. Scott always said it was the *What Ifs* that would kill you.

Also? Gross. Alan was suddenly so damn glad he couldn't see the bodies' faces. Ugh.

Dad's chin dipped to his chest, muttering a few *damns* and *all rights* until his voice came back on mission. "That's four. When The Hood announced himself to us, how many do you remember seeing?"

Virgil immediately fired off, "Five: The Hood, the big guy, the woman, two others holding Kyrano and Onaha." Alan could only wish to hold up like that under Dad's fiery gaze, so professional, cool, not the least bit unsure. Virgil didn't even blink.

John's face scrunched up with wry apology as he thumbed his eyebrow. "I couldn't say for sure. The red head had three heads when I saw her. There were two of each of you there for a while."

Alan knew he should listen to what the rest of them were saying — ducking around the war zone wreckage of F-bombs falling out of the skies like Blitzed London — but he had no energy left. He'd been jet-lagged to begin with, had barely slept from what now seemed such a minor tiff, and had pretty much limped his way through the suckiest day of his life. His tenth wind had been exhausted freaking out on Gordon when he woke up alone, sick in his certainty they were all dead in fiery explosions and DIY pantry cryogenics. He simply had nothing left.

It was sad to think of all the conversations Brains would miss out on with Ted Williams a hundred years from now. Curse Lady P and her bra.

If he weren't so tired, he'd giggle like a kindergarten girl kissing her first boy. What were they all still doing up anyway? Screw the beer. It didn't taste good, anyway. Hello, sleepy sillies!

Maybe there was something to Gordon's theory about him still needing another growth spurt to be
able to handle their lives because Alan sure as hell did not feel fourteen. He wasn't so sure he ever would again. He didn't have enough energy to get that far. Maybe four, with his fire truck and teddy, never to leave the safety of playing at Dad's feet again; that sounded real good. Good age.

Wow. He … wow. He did used to do that, didn't he? Dad let him play in the office, even sit on his feet, as long as he didn't mind Dad's toes digging into his sides to tickle him at random intervals. The others were all at school, so for the first time, Alan had completely alone time with Dad. He'd been busy, sure, but he'd been there, always reassuring Alan of his presence, popping his head under the desk with him whenever there was a break in calls or paperwork long enough for a climb up the engine ladder. Dad's head would just appear and grin. Love you, Allie. You're my big helper, you know that? The other boys are helping where they can, but you … You are such a big help for me right now, just being here. You can't even imagine…

He couldn't believe he forgot that.

Out of the corner of his eye, the jungle path Alan and John had taken seemed to move on its own accord, creepy as all slasher flick hell, to the sounds of straining, slapping tree branches, pounding feet, and heavy breathing. Scott and Gordon both hollered for Dad as they cleared the trees, their shouts not quite in synch, which bothered Alan more than it probably should. Everything was off tonight. Especially them.

Gordon staggered a little, but Scott caught his arm around his shoulders to keep him on his … Aw, man. Gordon didn't have shoes on. No wonder his face screwed up in pain with every step. He couldn't possibly have anything left in him either, but somehow he still ran.

If Gordon could push on through it, so could Alan.

Rolling himself off the lounger around his screaming ribs and bruised back, Alan stumbled the first few steps, but he managed to meet Scott and Gordon down by the hammock. He didn't say anything as he turned and took Gordon's other arm and wrapped it around his own shoulders. Scott's eyes moved pointedly to his ribs, but Alan shook his head. He could do this. His brothers did this all the time.

He was the one who wanted to be a Thunderbird, right?

It took some work to get Gordon across the patio, enough so he didn't even try to hide a pained hiss as they eased him down onto the lounger. He gave Scott an All yours, boss jerk of his chin before he gingerly picked his feet up off the pavement. Blood pooled just under the thin layer of skin at the balls of his feet, ready to spurt or bruise with the right amount of pressure. Alan was pretty sure the others were talking about the bodies — he wasn't crazy; they were really there, and Scott definitely wasn't happy Alan knew they were there — but he was too busy trying to tear his eyes away from the ripped skin of his brother's feet. Ears and eyes together were a little too much right now.

And because he was so eloquent with that whole foot and mouth disease thing, he said, "That looks like it sucks." Um, at least he said it quiet enough for only Gordon to hear?

"Sucks scuzzy pond water through a moldy bamboo straw," Gordon agreed through clenched teeth. A few more F-rated artillery shells hit the deck.

Alan didn't touch his brother's feet, but he cocked his head to the side to get a look at the gashes. What he could see through the jungle filth, it didn't look like there was anything stuck in there, but to be safe, he took the ice bucket of beer that had followed Scott over to the table during John's nap. He took Virgil's discarded shirt off the back of the lounger, twisted a section of it into a manageable size, and dipped the cloth into the melted, filtered water. He gave Gordon a look, asking for permission.
"Go for it."

An entire neighborhood was downed somewhere in the world by Gordon's mouth. Alan couldn't exactly disagree.

"Almost done."

"FAB," Gordon breathed when Alan switched to the other foot.

"Am I doing it wrong?"

"Nope, kiddo, you're fine. Just hurry up."

"You don't look fine."

"Onaha could make pickles from my fine, cucumber-cool ass." Alan didn't miss his knuckles going white around the metal bar of the lounger, squeezing the life out of it until he could say what he wanted to say without screaming his lungs out. The grin that replaced the grimace was honest, if pained. "Looks like I'll actually be around more this break than you thought, huh?"

Alan's hand stilled, his heart clenching. He could get used to that idea, really used to it. "All that and a bowl of Cheetos?"

"Damn straight."

"You, uh …" Alan wished the stupid security lights — seriously, when did Dad put those retina burners in there? — would spontaneously explode from over-wattage or something because he didn't want Gordon to see his face. Yeah, he wanted someone to want him to be home, wanted someone to give a damn he was there, but not quite so … No words, nothing so blatant anyway. "Somebody besides me should look at these. What the hell did you do to yourself, anyway?"

Scott apparently didn't have the same problem with watching and listening at the same time because, even as he kept his eyes on Dad, the corner of his mouth said too calmly down to Alan, "He lost a kickboxing match with a rock after four rounds and ran the entire path up."

"Six rounds."

Alan knew Gordon had a temper to rival both his and Scott's when he was pushed to it. Hell, they all did, but he'd never seen Gordon's turned on himself. He was too practical for that. Then again, he didn't usually see Gordon trying so hard to keep things from him either. The way he and Scott took off walking, the way he steered the conversation for Virgil's sake when they were on the way home from London, the music, the beer. Alan wouldn't dream of denying anyone their method of dealing with what they'd all been through the last twenty-four hours (and more), but this?

Gordon was right. Alan didn't hear this house at night at all.

So he grinned — not with as much wattage as these friggin' spot lights, but enough to light a small stage — and gave Gordon's feet a pointed look. "This big, tough rock, did it have its hands tied behind its back, too?"

Gordon stared at Alan for a minute, long enough to make Alan wonder if he had something on his face, but before he could say anything, Gordon looked away. He reached up and yanked on the waistband of John's shorts. John bent over to let Gordon say something quiet to him, listened, and
noded.

"Five?" John asked.


Whatever they were betting on, they rock-paper-scissored their way out of it. John's scissors cut Gordon's paper in neat slices, punctuated (celebrated) with the flick he gave Gordon's ear. "I'll do what I can," John added.

"I'll owe you." Gordon cuffed Alan lightly on the back of his head and jacked one thumb up into the air. "Let's go."

"Even my two year lapsed Red Cross training says you're dumb."

Gordon ignored him with a Fine, I'll do it myself jerk of his shoulders. Alan watched him, willing himself not to take pity on the idiot. If Gordon wanted to put himself through more pain, well, it was his own fault. How he thought he would get any — okay, yeah, Alan couldn't watch this exercise in moronitude any longer. His hand was on Gordon's elbow before the guy was even all the way to his feet.

"Where to, tough guy?"

They limped, gimped, and wimped their way up to Gordon's room. They didn't exactly laugh because there wasn't anything to laugh about when Gordon's feet were so torn up (even if it was self-inflicted, the moron), but it was still a nice silence. There wasn't nearly the pressure bearing down on them the way it had on the beach. Maybe if they eased into it this time — no ambush, some sleep, no maniacs with henchmen and shifty eyes — they could do it right.

Alan would keep his mermaid on standby, though, just in case.

Gordon sent Alan to his bathroom for supplies, which, wow. The guy had an entire pharmacy in there. He wondered if Dad knew what kind of pain his kids were in if one of them kept this kind of stash away from the sick room. By the time he came back out, Gordon was on the bed, half zoned.

"You're quiet."

Or maybe not quite half zoned.

"I guess." Alan tried to ignore the way Gordon's eyebrow swung up, even with his eyes closed, surprised he didn't get a defensive answer. "It's been a long day, man."

Was a bed that much to ask?

"Sit," Gordon commanded, pointing at the bed.

Hell, no. No bed. If Alan sat on that bed, he was never getting back up.

Oh, pretty pillow. Red. Alan liked red. He'd drooled all over the pillow.

He'd woken up alone on that pillow.

No, Alan took a seat on the floor where he could get at his brother's torn feet instead. Still unsure of his hands compared to anyone else's, Alan took his time cleaning up the cuts. If a single particle of dirt was left in there, he didn't want to be the one responsible for it. It meant a lot of hissing and growling from Gordon, but they both got through it with minimal threats. By the time Alan procured
some socks to cover the anti-biotic cream, Gordon was even letting his fists unclench.

Alan flopped on the bed, finally at rope's end, so he wasn't sure if it was meant to be a distraction or what when Gordon said in between pulling socks, "I meant what I said this morning, you know."

"You want to be a mind reader?"

"Sadly, Onaha put the kibosh on that, but no, that's not what I meant." Gordon took his time and eased the other sock on while he waited for Alan to answer with the requisite follow up question, but when he didn't get the response he wanted, he lightly smacked the back of his hand into Alan's biceps. "Look at me. Even more after today, I'm telling you, when Dad says you're ready, you're gonna be so fucking awesome. You hear me? You did great today, kiddo."

Alan wanted to kick himself so hard. What the hell was his problem, anyway? Here he was, getting exactly what he wanted. He wanted them to be as proud of him as he was of them. He wanted to be on their level again. He had it now, had it all, and what did he want to do? Bawl like a two year old whose Mom was leaving him at the door to daycare. He was proud of himself, though. He didn't cry — shake, hell yes, to he point he was barely this side of rippling apart, but he did not cry.

It wasn't enough, though, was it? Gordon could still see. "What's wrong?"

"I … I just wanted you to come home."

Gordon regarded him, quiet and a little off foot. "That's all we want from you, too."

"I'm trying."

Gordon wiggled his socked toes. "Take your time. It's a long break."

Alan couldn't help it. He sniffed. "Looks like you're getting that talk you wanted this morning."

"We don't talk," Gordon reminded him. "Too many questions. I like trouble."

Neither of them had to say it. Somewhere on this island were their brothers. Somewhere on this island were brothers who needed to be kept on their toes, and it was the Terrible Two's job to do it.

Alan stood and held his hand out to help Gordon to his feet. "Are we good?"

"Fuckin' A, bubba!"

"FA — Wait a …" Alan stopped. He'd heard them say it a thousand times. He'd said it a few times himself, even though it felt awkward to say it when he wasn't one of them yet. He and Fermat had been so excited to actually say it to Brains today, like they were really part of things. And never once … No way.

Gordon grinned at him. He got it.

"FAB? Seriously?"

Gordon only laughed.

"And Dad approved it?"

"That might," Gordon's eyes went devilish, "have been one of those things Johnny and Scott did without consulting him, and by the time he figured it out, it was too late."
"That's … awesome!"

"Just don't let Scott know you figured it out. It's kind of a little thing of his on the first mission, like a graduation kind of thing. He gets a kick out of it."

Alan zipped his thumb and index finger across his lips.

"That's my boy. C'mon. We better get down to the office before Dad freaks out."

"How much longer do you think he's gonna keep this up tonight?"

"The man's a machine when he gets like this, so unless we take away his caffeine and drug him, he'll still be at it another twelve hours from now. I'll try to finagle you some couch time, though."

"I'm not tired." If Gordon wasn't going to sleep, neither was Alan.

Gordon didn't argue, but he did gingerly set off for the door. He moved a little easier than he did on the way up to his room, but it still looked like it hurt like hell. It made Alan wonder what exactly he and Scott talked about before they stumbled on the bodies. The rock didn't deserve that punishment, Gordon didn't deserve that punishment, and he doubted it had done Scott any good either.

By the time they got to the office, Gordon's face was flushed red with effort and matched the fiery blush on Scott's cheeks. Alan eased Gordon down onto the sofa next to a ridiculously still John, who shook his head at Gordon's questioning shrug. Virgil's finger went to his lips, too, in case they didn't get the hint.

"What I don't get is why leave the bodies at all?" Scott snapped. "He had to have assumed we weren't coming home. Why would he leave them there to stink up his own backyard?"

"He wanted me to find them," Alan volunteered quietly. Virgil kicked the back of his thigh good and hard.

Both Scott and Dad startled, caught unaware of Alan standing behind them. Dad turned around slowly, eyes closed, weary, while his jaw tightened hard enough for the crack of teeth to be heard by the next island over. Two strong breaths passed before he put his hand on Alan's shoulder and squeezed, the contact warmer than his greeting had been only the day before. Alan reached up and wrapped his fingers around his father's wrist. He knew his grip was warmer, too.

One more breath, and Dad opened his eyes. The rage was still there, bristling in its cage, but he had a visible handle on it now. Whether it was for his own sanity or for his boys, Alan didn't know, but he was grateful for it. He never wanted to see his father so furious again, and yet, he knew it was unavoidable.

What's the fun of torturing International Rescue and her crew if you only do a little physical damage, right?

"You don't know that," Scott flat out denied. His face, ears, and neck all went thermal, but Alan couldn't tell for sure if it was at him for saying it or The Hood for doing it. But Scott knew damn well he was right. No one would be dumb enough to do something like that to a fourteen year old kid, certainly not Scott Tracy's fourteen year old brother, right? Right?

Alan knew what he was about to say would sound crazy arrogant, but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing with the company he was in. They all had to overachieve at something, right? He met Scott's eyes head on. "I beat him in the silo. I was able to walk away, even with him in my head. I got us out of the silo. We screwed up his plans when we got to you at the satellite station. He wanted me to
Something so dark passed over Scott's face that Alan took a step back. John stepped up behind him to say something in Scott's ear to make him breathe again. For the first time, Alan got why John was the one Dad put up in 'Five. It wasn't the stars. It was John. Ever since he'd gotten his family back, he'd seen John moving from one brother to another, always with something to say meant only for them, and pulling them back, even Dad. John heard something in each of them. His own stormy look said he didn't like what he was hearing now at all.

"In any case," Dad said, clearing his throat, "we need to know what else The Hood may have left behind. If any of you need bed now, speak up."

No one said a word.

Dad took a moment to process, then issued, "Right. Scott, you're with me. I want to do a full walking tour of all the paths. Bodies, trip wires, anything. The rest of you, in teams. Go through the security footage again from the second they made land. There has to be something the scan missed."

"I'll go, too," Gordon volunteered. "There isn't enough room for all four of us anyway."

Dad didn't bother to stare down Gordon's challenge. He was going to win anyway. That's why he's the dad. Alan almost felt sorry for them both. "Lock the door behind us."

They watched Dad and Scott leave, even as Gordon's jaw flapped with wordless arguments that they were as injured as everyone else. Alan had a feeling the protests would be about as welcome as John's quiet suggestion Alan lay down and try to catch some sleep until they got back. Which was not at all.

Defiantly, Alan sat down behind the monitor on the left hand side of the desk, leaned back in the chair, and put his hands on the keyboard. "How do I pull up the feed?"

"I've got it." Gordon rolled his eyes and stabbed his index finger toward the corner. "Couch. Go."

"Gords."

"It isn't gonna kill you to rest up a little."

Everyone froze, hands midway to keyboards. Whoa. Dead quiet had a whole new meaning now.

"Nothing to get worked up about, guys," John said after a bit, trying to come to an awkward rescue. "Al, where do you want to start?"

"The beach, maybe half an hour before Thunderbird Three launched. Brains said they had scramblers like he'd never seen, but I want to see if the cameras picked up anything visually before they made land. Gordon and I were on the north end, right off the outcrop."

"Then let's see these bastards," John said. His fingers zipped over the keys without him looking at them, bringing up a set of four security feeds all featuring the north end of the island on Alan's screen. "Gordon?"

"I'll take the west."

"Virgil?"

"I'll take the couch. Wake me in an hour if they aren't back."
Alan ignored Gordon's *See, that wasn't so hard, was it?* eyebrows. "Start at 0819, Johnny."

From the time they were old enough to wield a pair of gardening sheers without using them as a weapon against each other, they were expected to help out with things around the house. Mow the lawn, do up the dishes, not wash whites with dark blue jeans; if they could manage anything on the list, they had a chore to do. Dad wanted them appreciative that they were *people,* not the spoiled princes the tabloids had a tendency to make them out to be. For the most part, it was a good plan — as long as they didn't talk about the time Scott and John set the bar by using the sheers near the laundry lines in the backyard during Captain Hook and Peter Pan's epic battle for little Gordon and Alan's kidnapped Indian asses.

*It's all fun and games until somebody swashbuckles Grandma's favorite flannel sheets, people.*

In that tradition, Alan had come, over the last few trips home, to love helping Kyrano out with the gardens. He wasn't socially suicidal enough to tell anyone at school, but working with the plants was soothing in a way for him like doing math (shudder, shiver, yawn) was for Fermat. To take in the different species of flora on the island, to cultivate their lives and nurse them back to health in their sicknesses was his way of balancing the losses in their lives, like it was karma by osmosis or something.

Thirty-two minutes into their security search, Alan wished he could be out in the gardens. Anywhere but Dad's office. Anywhere but here. All the promises he'd made to himself, all the begging and bargaining — *please, if you'll bring them home safe, I'll make it all up to them, I'll fix it all, we'll never fight again, I swear* — seemed a little premature now. Yeah, he wanted them home safe. He wouldn't trade them for anything. But at the same time, if he didn't get away from them in an all new land speed record time, he couldn't be held responsible for their temporary deaths all over Dad's already bloody floor.

In other words, if one more person asked him if he wanted to lay down, there would be consequences. Painful, noisy, Gordon-inspired consequences at three in the morning for the next week. He had one word for the definitely not sleeping Virgil and that damned concerned bent to his mouth: air horn.

Okay, no, he couldn't count. Two words. But hey, semantics. Maths. Whatevers. There was no such thing as a math brain at four in the morning. Alan was tired and miserable, and if his head didn't stop pounding here pretty soon, he would say more than two words he'd regret — just as soon as he could talk around the never-ending, jaw-popping yawns.

Alan didn't want to know whose blood that was on the floor next to the desk.

There wasn't a lot of it, but it was enough to know it was definitely blood. Not that Alan had crime show level experience with blood or anything, but his brothers had been injured enough over the last two years or so that he recognized it dried on the floor. He should've noticed it before. He'd been so wrapped up in saving everyone — gotta make Dad proud, after all — that he hadn't taken the time to actually be a leader like Scott and Virgil were, like Dad was. He'd simply steamed on ahead, not taking the time to assess his slapped-together team. Had that one guy, the big one, hurt Lady P when he carried her into the freezer? How much had The Hood jacked up Parker's mind, really? Were Fermat and Tin-Tin injured when he lost them from the hover sled? Or had this come from before? Had Brains been hurt while Alan was busy traipsing around the island, not listening to orders and endangering his family?

Those bodies out there in the jungle, did they meet their end here in Dad's office?

He couldn't remember seeing them after they took Fermat and Tin-Tin. Were they dead because
Alan got away? Had he done this?

Too much blood. Too red. Alan hated red. Too much. Too much of everything.

Seriously, Dad and Scott needed to get back here now because Alan couldn't stand being locked up in there one more minute.

"You wanna help me get rid of that?"

Virgil's voice next to Alan's shoulder was so quiet, it startled him — like had him jumping out of his skin kind of spooked. His brother's hand darting out to steady him only made it worse. Alan had to make a quarter turn as he stepped away, putting his hands between himself and the body it took a moment to realize was not attacking him. He heaved in a few heavy breaths, his head repeating over and over, *It's only Virgil, it's only Virgil, it's only Virgil. And you're a moron.*

Waiting patiently, Virgil kept his hands to himself and stepped back snail slow, one step at a time, until he was out of arm's reach. Like with the others, Alan didn't get them any more than they got him these days, but he watched his brother's eyes looking him up and down the way he would assess a stranger. He supposed, if Virgil thought he couldn't help the kid he knew was his brother, he'd help the next best thing until he could figure it out. So he didn't touch, didn't demand, didn't say a word. Alan forgot sometimes exactly how perceptive Virgil could be.

Alan rubbed the back of his neck nervously, using the pressure to keep his hands from shaking within eyesight. "Damn, Virg."

Virgil shrugged but didn't apologize. There really wasn't anything to apologize for, and Virgil was one of those people who didn't do apology tics. If he said it, he meant it. He did nod at a sudsy bucket by the couch. Alan pinched his eyes; he didn't even realize Virgil had left the room.

"Yeah," he said, yawning. "Might as well. If I don't find something to do, I'll fall asleep standing up."

"There's a couch right there, kiddo."

"Everybody needs to freakin' stop with the mothering right now! I live on my own nine months out of the year. I can set my own bedtime, thank you very much." He didn't mean to sound so harsh. Really, he didn't. "Sorry."

Virgil didn't say anything, but he dropped a sopping sponge into Alan's hand.

"Virg."

"We're all tired, Al. Don't sweat it."

Together they tackled overturning the furniture and sweeping up the area between the desk, the sofa, and window. Every so often, Alan would steal a glance at Virgil to watch him work. Scott had been more than a little frustrated at Virgil's sudden need to clean everything, but Alan didn't see anything wrong with it. Virgil looked completely in control to him. Okay, so maybe he was this side of getting the varnish off some spots on the floor, but it was cleaner than it was before.

Best of all, there was no talking. John and Gordon were quietly comparing notes now and then, but he and Virgil, it was peaceful. Just the occasional squeak of the sponges, the drip of squeezed out water, the thud of the bucket being moved from one spot to another. It was almost hypnotic. Chaos free. Short sentences and not a lot of thought about anything.
Alan could get used that.

"Motherless son of a — "

Or not.

The crystal paperweight Dad kept on the desk — another piece of Mom — shattered on the floor, pieces skibbling under the sofa, the desk, and off in directions they probably would still be finding them a year from now. John swore again, this time not bothering to censor himself.

"The fuckity fuckall?"

Wait. John?

Alan glanced up at them, but the multiple monitors of the Command and Control desk obscured any good look he could get. John's good hand gripped the corner of the desk white-knuckled, and underneath the desk, Gordon's ripped toes were curled. Whatever they were looking at, it couldn't be good, but that was pretty much the entire day, wasn't it?

Gordon threw his head back, arching his neck to get a crick out of it. It stretched his voice as he croaked, "That's it. We're all going to bed and starting yesterday over. Johnny, there's a missile coming your way. Watch your scrawny spaceman ass."

John waved a shaky hand around with a whoosh! "Consider the lamp rubbed."

"And," Gordon drawled, his eyes back on the screen, "I lost 'em again."

"They're good," John agreed, almost too solemnly. "Who are those guys?"

Alan didn't want to know the answer. He thought of Dad and Scott down there now, probably standing over the four bodies, cops on the scene, and wanted to be sick. Whoever they were, those guys had names. They had friends and family. However they got here, decent guys or deluded dumbasses, there was someone waiting somewhere for them. Had The Hood crawled in their thoughts, too, taunted them before the bullets smashed their brains into Humpty Dumpty pieces?

If John hadn't been there, Alan probably would've kicked them. It wasn't pretty, but he wanted to so badly. And now his father had to figure out what to do with them.

How was Dad supposed to be respectful of four men who'd come to murder his children?

He should clean up the mess from Mom's crystal. There wouldn't be any way to put it back together, but he couldn't be responsible for the pieces laying about to hurt anyone else either. Tin-Tin loved that kind of thing; maybe she could find a way to do something with the pieces to make something out of them. Or Virgil, he might be able to do something special with them to keep Mom with them in another way. She would like that.

Over by the couch, by the desk, under the mask, so many broken pieces.

For one brief nanosecond, his mind went to someplace poetic and sentimental, but as soon as it got there, it made a U-turn for No Man's Land. Man, he was too tired for deep thoughts.

More swearing ensued from Gordon while Alan followed Virgil to tackle the bloody plaster dust on the floor over by the lift tubes. There was something kind of evilly comforting knowing that the little bit of blood there was most likely from the big guy who tried to pull Fermat down through the ceiling. Any of his blood spilled served him right.
"What are you grinning about?"

Alan was grinning, wasn't he? It didn't taste like a good one. "You don't wanna know."

"I wouldn't have asked if — "

Kneeling over, John's hand squeezed Virgil's shoulder as he said something quiet into his ear. Virgil did one of those eyebrow dances of What the hell? and they switched places. Absently, Alan reached up and helped John down, broken old man that he was with the sling, and waited for him to get his legs under him. John didn't reach for the bucket, but he didn't stop Alan from busying himself right away.

The water in the bucket was really, really pink. The sponge, not so much.

"Al?"

"Hmm?"

"I … " Alan finally let himself look at John, just in time to see something pass over his face that was, quite honestly, scary as all git out. He couldn't say what it was, but it was not John. Whatever he'd meant to say, John coughed and steered himself away from the darkness. The resulting grin was lazy and exhausted, but Alan could still see the black buried under there. "You never answered me. If Dad doesn't scrap the operation and you have a choice, if you don't choose IR, what do you want to do?"

"Shack up with you in Montana?" Alan laughed as John's wrinkled nose said he definitely wasn't a fan of that idea. "Honestly? No clue. I have to pick a school first, I guess, but I'm leaning toward MIT. Even then, I'll probably change my major a couple times, then chuck it all and go off to Hollywood or something. They'll let me blow stuff up, right?"

Alan waited for a stab to his self-deprecating joke, but it didn't come. John seemed truly interested, which only made the conversation feel even weirder. His GPA was not something he wanted to talk about. Even gods slept at this unholy hour.

"MIT? Don't tell Scott that, or you'll come home this summer to find Yale paraphernalia all over your room."

"Maybe Harvard?"

John groaned, unwilling to even touch that rivalry. "How are your grades?"

"You really want to talk about my grades?"

"Would you rather I ask you about what that psycho said to you in 'One's silo that made you think — "

"School's boring," Alan cut in immediately. No, he didn't want to talk about that. He had a feeling Brains might say something to Dad about it at some point — there was no way The Hood got Brains to activate Command without doing something like that — or maybe Parker and Lady P once Dad saw that footage, but it was really something only they would understand. The icky feeling of him being in his head, of sifting through memories and thoughts, shredding them in his unclean mental fingers, was enough to make Alan sick. If his mind was a library as John imagined, Alan's library now looked like the basement of the one in Ghostbusters, slimed and tipped over. His own hands would never feel clean again. So no, there was no talking about that. School. School was good. "I don't know. I don't really have to work at it. Ask Fermat. I get caught doodling a lot."
The sponge stopped doing lazy circles in the plaster. It was only making more of a mess anyway. He needed a broom. Onaha hid them from him and Gordon once upon a time — brooms don't truly fly, even if you take a running start off the patio — but that was a long time ago. She wouldn't still hold that grudge, would she?

Virgil's quiet string of curses (something involving an anatomically impossible act with a chainsaw and a sock monkey) was nearly drowned out by his fist taking out one of Dad's monitors. Alan didn't look up, but John did. He could practically feel the flying eyebrows and frowning conversation behind his back, but when John's attention was back on Alan, he was still warm and attentive.

"I think Dad's spent a lot of money on all of us to doodle," he said.

In the background, Gordon said, "Uh, Virg, I think something might be wrong with your monitor."

John muttered, "And he wonders why I don't let him touch anything on my girl."


Whatever comeback John had in mind was cut off by Virgil jerking to his feet. He ran his hands through his hair, clearly frustrated, and turned around to toe Alan's knee. "Walk with me."

"Dad said — "

"John can eye-in-the-sky us if he wants. You … " Virgil stopped, his throat catching on whatever thought he meant to say next. Alan hid his cringe the best he could. He seemed to be bringing that reaction out in people a lot these days. When Virgil had his words back, he stuffed his hands into the back pockets of his shorts, nervous, but his eyes met Alan's steadily. "I need to get out of here."

"Sure."

Gordon didn't look up from the pieces of Virgil's monitor as he asked, "Virg?"

"If we don't come back, we fell asleep."

John accepted Virgil's hand up then used his good arm to dust his knees off. "Where?"

"My room."

"Lock the door?"

"FAB."

When the office door slid shut behind them, Virgil glanced down the hallway in both directions like he couldn't remember which way to go to his own bedroom. He ended up deciding to take the long way, but Alan didn't say anything. Clearly distracted, Virgil glanced at him. "Do you want to stop off at your room first? Gordon says you get cold easily when you get home?"

Okay, that was weird. He didn't remember ever telling Gordon that, and he certainly didn't mean to mention it. It was simply one more thing for someone to baby him for. Why did Gordon have to go off and mention that? "I'm good."

"Good."

"Yeah."

And then Virgil stopped, middle of the hallway, with no warning whatsoever. "Is any of that yours
back there?"

The air ticked away the seconds, uncomfortable and worried, as it took Alan awhile to figure out what the that was. "Oh! No, no. No, I wasn't ever in the office, not until The Hood was gone." As he started them walking again, he couldn't help rubbing his raw wrists anyway. He wished he'd nicked a shirt from Gordon's room. Long sleeves were good.

A hesitantly relieved sigh said that was good, but Virgil didn't put it to actual words. There was an entire list of people he had to check with on that one before his relief would be complete. His fist spasmed at his hip, open and closed, open and closed, in time with his steps. "Somewhere else?"

"Not for lack of trying, but I'm okay." Especially after downing four ibuprofen from Gordon's stash.

"Your — "

Rather than play Twenty Questions That Avoid The Real One, they might as well get it over with. "You obviously saw something on the security footage. That was why you and John switched places, right? What is it?"

"The exhaust ducts." Virgil's hand ran over his hair, smoothing it away from his exhausted eyes. There wasn't much humor at all in his voice when he added, "Nice aim, by the way."

Alan groaned. Of course that was it. Why couldn't it have been something cool, like … like … No, he'd screwed up that one, too. About the only one he didn't screw up was getting the monorail out, and he'd had help then. All the things he'd tried to do on his own, one way or another, someone got hurt or nearly drowned or their brains melted. "Scott's gonna kill me, isn't he?"

"For?"

"Gunking up the trap doors. Honestly, I had no idea I was gonna break them, and then when we went to go to London, all these alarms went off. I don't know exactly what's wrong, but … It scared the bejesus out of us, though. Sorry about your lift, too, by the way."

"Why?"

"You saw the mess. It's gonna take me a month to — "

"Nobody's worried about that. I can't believe you … " Alan ducked his head to the side when he saw Virgil's eyes pop wide, but one yank on his elbow and Alan's attention landed smack center on Virgil's entirely stunned expression. "What you said earlier, about being barbecued, you … " Make that a sick expression. "You weren't joking."

"Maybe a little. We hit the water before I saw fire, but I was the first one out. Still have my eyebrows, anyway."

"What else haven't you told us?"

"Right now? Don't wanna talk about it."

And because his brothers never took None of your beeswax for an answer, Virgil pushed, "Had we talked to you by then?"

"Virgil."

"I need to know."
Alan didn't have time to realize they'd stopped oh-so-conveniently in front of Virgil's bedroom until his brother's hand snaked out and gave him the gentlest possible shove through. Older, trained, and just plain more determined apparently, Virgil filled the doorway the way Scott would have if he'd been the one to conduct the interrogation. Alan had found himself under Scott's similar crossed armed pressure enough to know Virgil was dug in now. There would be no getting past that door until Virgil was damn good and ready.

"Have a seat." It wasn't a request.

And Alan wasn't a criminal. "Shouldn't you be wearing a red pointy hat if you're gonna do the whole Inquisition thing?"

"Things can be fixed. Messes can be cleaned."

Alan had to force himself not to counter with a frustrated Not all messes.

"You know, I know this doesn't change the last few months. This doesn't change the fact that twenty-four hours ago, I tore through half a sketchbook because I couldn't draw you right. I look at you these days, and half the time I don't know what I'm seeing. We had problems to sort out before we got shanghaied in space. Those problems won't just go away. What happened today isn't an eraser. It can't be."

What little fight was left in either of them seeped into the spaces between them, too exhausted to care any more than they did.

"I know." And Alan did know, without any bitterness or blame. That mural was still on the wall. When he went back to school, he'd still be leaving his family behind where he'd be separate and alone with Intrepid Reporter Barbie his only honest contact with his family's other life. Stuff like that doesn't go away, even when you have a psycho executing his minions and burying them in your yard like a dog buries bones for you to find.

He dropped onto the bed, trying to ignore the cool call of the neglected bedding. He couldn't look at Virgil, but it was hard to miss the man's shadow relax a little, too.

That hangnail on his left thumb was really getting annoying. So was the click-hush of the needle on the stereo bumping along the inner track, the length of the record long played out.

The bed dipped next to him, far enough away to give him space but close enough to be there. Virgil's voice was surprisingly strong, confident, in comparison to Alan's. Where Alan knew he sounded young and maybe a little lost, Virgil knew what he wanted to say, almost like he'd rehearsed it.

"We've missed you. I know you don't think so, but we have. I have."

"Eh. You'll be sick of me by the time I go back to school."

Virgil grinned, the first toothy one Alan had seen from him since he got back, and reached up to
squeeze the scruff of Alan's neck hard enough to force him to bend over. "You kiddin' me? I'm sick of you now, you little worm."

"I hate you, too, asshole."

"That's better." Virgil's hand came down on Alan's thigh with a friendly clap before he pushed himself back to his feet. "It's too quiet in here. It's been a while: what do you want to hear?"

Virgil was handing over control of his stereo? And he'd let Gordon do it in 'Two? Something was seriously wrong with his brother. And yet, if Scott had already tried, and John and Gordon, then there wasn't anything Alan could do. He could sit there. He could not say anything. He could …

He could sit there.

"Something I'm not gonna hear in the dorms," he suggested.

Album found, Virgil pulled it reverently from the sleeve. He was one of those people who insisted music was always better on vinyl (something about sound compression and the experience that Alan never really listened to any more than the rest of them did), so to see his selection come from the minimal CD section was a surprise.

They both startled when the rattle of audience response and music slammed from the speakers at first, louder than either of them expected. It was a good jump, though, a laugh they both needed. It took Virgil a moment to find the remote where it had fallen under his bed, but Alan didn't mind. It gave him a minute to listen to the smooth, bluesy tear plucks of the guitar.

"Nice," he offered. He didn't really know how to talk music with his brother, not on the same level Virgil probably needed to able to talk music. But he knew what he liked, and he knew what spoke to him. This made him feel sad and warm at the same time. It was something he could sleep to as easily as he could dance to it with the right (mermaid) girl someday.

"It's Kenny Wayne Shepherd." Virgil brought the volume down to a more conversation-friendly level and sat on the floor with his head next to Alan's knees. Alan let his back fall to the bed, feet still dangling off the edge, and flung his arm over his eyes. Virgil was close enough for his shoulder to nudge Alan's thigh. "Not bad, huh? For a guy who doesn't read music, he makes some beautiful stuff."

"Like you."

Virgil let the comment pass, like Alan knew he would, and said, "His technique gets better with every album, but I like the first one. It's raw. Honest. It's hard to sound as honest when you're too good."

Crying guitar swept over him, then Virgil fudged with the remote and the music broke into something a little more upbeat, road trip, rain driving on the windscreen kind of lazy.

"What's this one?"

"Aberdeen."

"We should all take a road trip sometime, like after I graduate. This makes me want to take a road trip."

"You really think we can all of us stand to be in one car together long enough for a road trip?"
"I think we should try."

Alan could hear the smile on Virgil's face, like he meant it when he thought about it. "Maybe we should."

Music filled the room, driving and, yeah, a little amazing to listen to. Virgil was right. For a guy who couldn't read music, he knew how to make it beautiful. Just like Alan's brother. "Do you ever think of playing guitar like that?" he asked.

"Sometimes. There are things you can do with a Stratocaster you can't do with a Steinway, but vice-versa. I don't know. Different things go into them, I think."

"Like with the art?"

"Kind of. I can do things with a pencil I can't do with a brush, yeah."

"Can I see what you did last night?"

"I don't know."

"I know you don't like anyone to see something unfinished, but … You said you couldn't get it right last night. I want to see why."

He didn't actually expect Virgil to give in. The best he'd hoped for was to be told to go to bed or something. That Virgil directed him to the bin by the desk was almost stunning. He took several crumpled balls out and glanced hesitantly at his brother, who kept his head leaned back on the bed, eyes closed and as far away from Alan's critical gaze as they could be.

Alan realized as soon as the first ball splayed out for him exactly how much he'd taken his brother's talent for granted. He knew Virgil was an artist, but he forgot how good at it he was. Alan was a doodler; nothing he could imagine doing could compare with this. The detail popped, almost like a 3D rendering instead of pencil and paper scratchings. It made Alan's face come alive in his hands.

Virgil was right, though. There was something incredibly off about it, but it wasn't the artist. It was the subject. Because Alan saw someone with his face, with his features, and none of himself behind them.

It wasn't only the mirror that lied, then.

"No, Virg, I think you got it pretty much right."

"Just listen to the music, brat."

Alan let the ball sail into his brother's head. He totally deserved it.

Climbing up onto the head of the bed, their heads sank into the pillows with synchronized sighs. Alan finally gave in to the shivers like he always did until Virgil snagged him an old Denver sweatshirt out of the closet with a grin. It was a contribution to the college wars, he said, because there was no way any brother of his was going to MIT. When the CD was over, Virgil handed over the remote and waved a hand toward his selection on the wall.

"Whatever you want — except Johnny Cash."

"No prison music. Got it."

Virgil yawned behind him as Alan stared at the rows and rows of music. "I don't think I can keep my
eyes open anymore, man."

"What helps you sleep these days?"

"You pick. The louder the better."

Zipping his fingers along the spines of envelopes, he found one he recognized only because he remembered Virgil playing the song for him every day for a month when Alan was in his hobbit phase. Good enough. He cranked the volume back to about where it had been, loud enough so that when Virgil muttered half asleep to him, he didn't hear it right away.

"Huh?"

"If something happens, don't let me sleep through it, okay?"

He didn't stay awake long enough to get Alan's answer, which was okay, because Alan fell asleep before he could give him one anyway.

(End Chapter Eight)
Virgil and Gordon

Metallica. Shit.

Ray Charles. Shit.

Chopin. Shit.

BB King. Shit on a Triscuit.

Sinatra. Deep fried hammered moose shit.

Dude, even the Stones. Shit on a shingle.

All of it shit.

Virgil stabbed the power button, tossed the stereo remote to the tangled foot of the bed, and flopped backwards with the pillow wrapped over his face. Yes, he realized it was only the first night, and yes, he realized that the nightmares would probably get worse before they'd get better (which was his pattern, after all), but this was ridiculous. Two hours of sleep did not a coherent Tracy make. Well, not this Tracy anyway.

He must have been tossing and turning pretty good because Alan was nowhere to be found except in the form of a sticky note on the lamp shade next to his bed: Go back to sleep! — A. Underneath was a stick figure of Virgil (he assumed; it was a stick) laying under a cartoon bubble of Zzzzs and a Stick Alan standing over him with a pillow ready to strangle him if he didn't go to sleep. It was stellar advice, really. Too bad it was a wish he could not grant. The sleep gods seemed to have other plans.

His own head wasn't helping things any. Every time he shut his eyes, he saw the five of them in Hell (or a close approximation of one). They were separated on five separate outcroppings of lava rock, close enough they could almost reach each other, but still too far to get to one another without falling to a really hot, painful death. He could hear Scott screaming at them all to hold on, that he'd get to them if they could only hold on a little longer, but Virgil could see what Scott couldn't, that John's head wasn't even attached anymore. You can't listen and guide if you don't have a head, you know? Gordon pressed flat against the rocks, trying desperately to get away from the fireballs flying at him every time Virgil tried to pull one lever or push a button or yank a wire to fix things and get them out of there. He only had to find the right sequence, but every time he found one that didn't hurt Gordon, the next one burned his brother even more. (Was there such a thing as hundredth degree burns?) And Alan, damn … The Hood stood over Alan, laughing, lording, blaming him for it all. If Mom hadn't saved him, Mom would have stopped Dad from ever becoming the man who built IR. None of this would have happened. But Virgil kept pulling the next wire and next knob and next doohickey because he had to fix it and get them out of there. If only the control panel in front of him wasn't so dirty, if only The Hood hadn't yanked out a nest of wires that could've been the ones that could fix it all …

So yeah, no closing the eyes. That was bad.

Sunrise sucked. Yes, dawn of the new day, they've all survived, all that hippy dippy Sunshine Day stuff. He could get behind that, of course. It wasn't about that. But the idea of morning, of seeing the damage for real now, in the true light of day instead of bluish ugly security lights and exhaustion was the last thing he wanted to face. He couldn't clean light away any more than he could wash the shadows. His room didn't have a speck of dust as it was.
The way the shadows inched across his ceiling, though, warning that he would have to face the day sooner or later, made the room feel increasingly claustrophobic to the point where he had to get out right the hell now. He didn't bother to change into PT gear, but merely slipped into his sneakers and took off down the hall before he could change his mind. He'd make it up to Alan for all his effort later.

He wound his way down the trail to the south beach. None of the others seemed to like that one, but he loved the view. (Yeah, yeah, it's nothing but water wherever you look, but still.) He found the sand packed harder there, and if he couldn't run on a good old fashioned concrete sidewalk, he'd take the most solid sand he could find. His knees appreciated it, anyway. He worked them hard, along with his ankles and legs and arms and everything in between.

The nearly hour-long run didn't do anything for him other than make him wonder if being a zombie was contagious. Not that he'd run into any zombies lately that he'd been aware of, but, man …

He just could not wake up.

He couldn't sleep.

He couldn't close his eyes.

Couldn't think about closing his eyes.

Couldn't think.

Thinking was overrated anyway.

Hmm … brains … yum.

By the time he cooled down on the walk back up, sneaked back into the house unseen, and cursed Hypnos to Hades and back and back and back, Virgil knew he wasn't going to get a damn thing accomplished today.

Someone had been in his room while he was out. Whether they'd been looking for the solace of music or the quiet of his company or what, he couldn't tell for sure, but the music was back on. He set the player to random and cranked it so the shower tiles would vibrate while he tried to wash some of the lingering dirt of anger and hurt and guilt and nightmare away. A weeping guitar of Hallelujah was as cold as the water at first until it warmed up to let him get off with the promise to call after only if she says he can. The music was on his side today.

A pair of jeans shrugged onto him rather than him having the awareness of putting them on by himself. His white t-shirt was simply the easiest thing for him to grab since his undershirts were in the same drawer as his jeans. The only reason he put shoes on was the thought of all the glass still littering the floor, the furniture, the everything. There was no reason to add blood to the mix.

Scott still had his bleach hidden somewhere, the jerk.

Virgil wasn't sure what he expected, but this time when he walked through the halls looking for signs of life he realized how quiet things were. There was no Alan running from one end of the house to the other, screaming his lungs out in tantrum or fear because Gordon was hot on his heels. Gordon hadn't laid a trap for Scott to run innocently into (no matter how he liked to think he was prepared for the little sneak). Dad wasn't threatening anyone with letting Grandma loose with her wooden spoon. It was eerie at best.

He'd never understood it — and he'd totally deny it if anyone suggested otherwise — but somewhere
between the stairs that led up to the suite Kyrano held and Dad's office, Virgil felt that tug he got sometimes, this time drawing him toward the patio. It wasn't a definite, but he just knew Scott would be there — and he'd have coffee.

Following that easy feeling brought him to the open kitchen, John, and yep, Scott. Aware that he probably should announce his presence, he called, "I take it you finally spiked Dad's coffee?"

He didn't bother to ask why either of his brothers was awake, what they were doing, or why in the world John was laying on the island countertop like it was a bunk in the middle of Scott's old basic training barracks. John simply raised his good arm straight in the air with a jerk and dropped it, the gimpy man's salute, hello, or fuck off, Virgil couldn't tell which. Scott magically produced an unbroken mug from under John's shoulder blades and poured what smelled like incredibly strong coffee into it just in time to pass it to Virgil as he snuck around behind them. It couldn't have been more choreographed if they'd tried.

Without a trace of guilt, John volunteered, "He was gonna drive even me crazy here pretty soon if we didn't lock him up somewhere. I threatened him with either Scott knocking him out or Gordon breaking out the knock-knock jokes, his choice."

"You're an evil genius. Truly."

Over the rim of his coffee cup, which looked like one of the ceramic lemmings that had made a run for it and instead taken a death plunge from the counter and lost a limb, Scott turned on his usual *I'm not lecturing or anything* voice. "Running isn't sleeping."

Virgil shrugged. What else was he going to do? He wasn't going to lie, though, either. "Are you guys as weirded out as I am?"

Maybe it was that the caffeine hadn't had a chance to work yet, but the heaviness wasn't going away. It was everywhere, incredibly strange and unsettling. Like coming home from two weeks of vacation, where you know everything should be exactly as you left it two weeks ago, and yet, it all feels different. The air, the atmosphere, all of it. There's no real reason, but it feels different. They'd been away from the island all of ten hours at most, and yet, they might as well have been gone a lifetime.

Scott took a hissing slurp from his own cup before he got to asking, "About?"

"Everything."

Scott scowled. "That's way too existential on two hours of sleep. Next question?"

"What's the meaning of life?" Virgil saw the smart ass answer cross Scott's face before he said it and chimed with him, "Twelve."

John eyed them both. "You two need to get out more."

Synchronized snorting. Next step, boyband. They should take the act on the road.

Virgil grabbed a banana from the bowl, which had somehow managed to remain standing, pointed it at John with narrowed eyes to dare him to even think about joining in on the lecture, and peeled it. A sharp yank of a bite was his invitation to them both to carry on with whatever they'd been talking about before he came out. He didn't wait for the requisite demands that he go back to bed and get his crabby ass up on the other side of it right the hell now.

Caffeine, blessed nectar of the gods, hurt a little going down, a ball in his chest he could feel from the
back of his throat all the way down past his sternum when he didn't quite swallow right. It was an acceptable price if it could make him feel even a tinge more human in a minute or two. (Hmm … brains … ) Until then, the coffee curled in his stomach, doing nothing for the odd feeling of cold and warm at the same time or the way his eyes wanted to bulge out of his head as he tried to keep from blinking too long. Seriously? This whole daylight before noon thing was overrated.

Someone had been stopped in the middle of sweeping up some of the glass wall, but at least the couch was back where it belonged. The pile taunted Virgil out the corner of his eye from under the coffee table. The vase that had been there was one Grandma made in a glass blowing class a couple years ago. Man, was she gonna be ticked. John's copy of *Good Omens* had taken its place, along with a bowl full of more glass chunks sprinkled in like decorative potpourri and dried (dead) flowers. Virgil wasn't so sure that was an omen he wanted to get into right now.

No one had cleaned up the empties from last night — not exactly. Mom's crystal tumblers had built a pyramid to honor the booze gods with a plastic stir stick/beer bottle label flag standing proud from the top. A barricade of brown bottles protected the pyramid while lemon slices lay in the dried moat in between like sickly alligators drunk on tequila. Architecturally it had some issues, but from a *Just how drunk do you have to be?* perspective, it was a marvel to behold. Right up there with the Solo cup Parthenon over Christmas. Clearly, someone had too much time on their hands.

Kinda like Scott with his dishtowel snapping into Virgil's lower back. "Don't even think about it. It's a work of fraternity art, not a mess for you to clean up. Leave it."

"I wasn't gonna do anything."

The silence said *yeah, uh-huh* for Scott — John, too, probably.

Virgil begged his youngest brother to forgive him even as he used him in a cheap distraction. "Tell me Alan finally made his way back to his room. He was gone when I woke up."

"Still wandering." John took the bait, rolling his eyes upward and behind Scott. "With Brains and Fermat now. I think Dad's getting worried that they're all hiding out, like maybe they're thinking they shouldn't be here."

"Like this is a family thing," Scott added sourly.

"That's … " Virgil glanced between them, confused. "Sure, I can't really see Kyrano getting blasted with us poolside in the middle of the night or anything, but I figured that was a parents-versus-kids thing, not a separate families thing. Since when aren't we all one family?"

"This makes it different. Maybe not for us, but for them."

Scott's shrug said he didn't agree with it any more than Virgil or John. He was right, though. As much as it sucked to say so, the others had to be allowed to think whatever they wanted, even if there was no way of knowing what that thinking was. Their families, their kids had been put in mortal danger because of who the Tracys were. No one, not even Dad, had the right to tell Brains or Kyrano and Onaha how they should feel about that.

Virgil set his cup down a bit harder than he intended. His inner fourteen-year-old spouted off that it wasn't fair, that it sucks, it spews gravel, and any of a thousand things he could only imagine might be going through Alan's head right now. "Do we know what's going on up there?"

"Kyrano is keeping pretty close to the ladies, and the little bit I saw Brains while you were out? He's beating himself up pretty good right now."
"Why? He didn't — "

John didn't bother to open his eyes, but if he did, they would be awfully damn accusatory as he lectured, "You don't think everyone around here, ahem, is being a tad bit irrational with the blame game shit?"

Scott snorted.

John pointed a finger in Scott's direction. "You have no room to talk, Marshall Earp." The finger swung over in Virgil's direction. "And you, if you have enough caffeine in you by now to know better, you'll keep your trap shut too, Cinderellie." He turned his finger down on himself. "You, as you were."

"Like you're the picture of mental health?"

One eye finally opened on Virgil, slightly amused but so very serious. "I spend a good chunk of my days in, as Gordon so endearingly puts it, a glorified tin can talking to myself and my computer with nothing better to do than Peeping Tom other people's conversations and surf for porn. The rest of the time I'm surrounded by you assholes. I'm as mentally fit as I'm gonna get."

Behind his head, Scott held up five fingers and sliced them off at the knees, shaking his head ruefully and mouthing Five hours, tops. Because he was both psychic and just plain knew Scott, John swung his arm behind him, reaching out to smack their brother until his shoulder reminded him, Hey moron, don't do that. The look of sheer pain that overtook his face immediately reflected in Scott's as he stepped into striking range and put his hands under John's shoulders to help him sit up. It didn't stop him from having a smartass comment about it, but he did look a smidge guilty.

"That's what you get for taking a swing, man."

Whatever John had to say about it, it came out as a low grumble that may or may not have utilized the more colorful words of Dad's vocabulary in several anatomically impossible combinations. Scott's quiet plea that he suck it up and get himself looked at only ratcheted the swearing another notch until Virgil didn't even recognize the words anymore.

"Take the chatty pills at least? Something?"

John swallowed, blinked, and shook his head. "I got it. Gonna be sore for a couple days, but I got it. Can we please talk about something else?" His hand waved loosely around. "Go find Gordon and get on his case or something."

Scott crossed his arms over his chest, staking his ground. "I don't get on Gordon's case. I don't get on anyone's case."

"I think Alan would disagree with that one."

"Alan's fourteen. He disagrees with everyone on principle."

A little stunned — okay, a lot stunned — to hear Scott put it so bluntly (don't you have homework to do or something?), Virgil clawed the back of his neck, chasing away the heat of secondhand embarrassment. Whether it was for Alan or Scott, he wasn't entirely sure. The last thing he wanted was to start something, but he wasn't exactly wild about falling into the usual patterns so soon after everything. A thousand arguments colored his heart: it was only yesterday that that would've felt true; but Alan had already shown more maturity in the last twenty-four hours than he had in the entire last year; it wasn't being spiteful considering they all thought Scott to be overbearing; they had all been fourteen once, and it had never been pretty for any of them. After yesterday, no, that didn't
fit. Alan wasn't exactly ready for a big brother sponsored trip to Vegas or anything — they hadn't even taken Gordon yet — but he deserved a little more credit than that. Virgil wasn't so sure he could've handled something like this as well at fourteen, anyway.

John beat him to the punch with a quiet reprimand. "You do realize that's why we're in trouble with him in the first place."

Scott ran both hands through his hair, pacing away from the counter and back. "You mean that problem didn't just magically," he planed and crashed his hand over their heads, "whoosh? Well, shit."

Virgil straddled a stool, carefully putting John between him and Scott. He'd take his buffers where he could get them, even one laid up with injury. "You should know, he thinks you're mad at him for the mess in 'One's silo, among other things."

"After everything they went through, that's what he's worried about?"

"I don't know about you, but after everything we went through, I'd rather think about what he and the other kids did than us. He's doing pretty much the same thing —" Scott tried to hide it behind a swallow, but Virgil saw that reflexive crunching of molars. He wasn't sure if he was annoyed or worried or ready to throw in the towel until he got a full night's sleep, but his snappish "What? What don't I know now?" was a good start.

"How much did he tell you?"

"Nothing. We listened to some music and went to sleep. I figured he needed some time to not think, you know?"

"Let's just say you killed your monitor before you got to some of the good stuff," John said.

"Trying to barbecue the kids with 'One's exhaust wasn't the best part?"

Virgil listened to the Cliff Notes version of terrorizing temperature extremes, tawdry tales of Dad's humanity, and telepathic tortures (oh my!) with as clear a controlled, out-in-the-field head as he could manage. All the while, it was hard to listen to it without looking for something to strangle or the hallway back to the sanctuary of his room, either one. The music was there — the filter. Something loud enough he wouldn't have to think. Alan had done a good job with the blues and Shepherd, but it wasn't enough, not with this knowledge. He really needed to expand Alan's musical horizons if he was going to be a part of the team one day.

"Alan didn't tell you anything at all?" John asked when Scott dropped the bomb about what went down in the bank's vaults.

"He wanted the music." While Virgil had been the one to drag Alan to his room, it was true. They should know that. Maybe they didn't even realize it themselves, but Virgil did. The music might be pounding loud enough to break through the sound-proofing of his quarters sometimes, but it was quiet all the same. He listened when they needed him to — Scott, especially — but his room was where they all came at one point or another to get away. Why they thought Alan to be any different surprised him in a weird way when, really, he hadn't even thought it himself.

Don't you have homework to do or something?

Things can be fixed. Messes can be cleaned.

It was a start. Ready, set, go.
Scott was so going to kill him, but Virgil said, "He's okay. A lot more than I think any of us are expecting. He's a lot tougher than we're giving him credit for. All the kids are."

Now, if only he could say the same about the rest of them.

"Still," Scott started.

Virgil reached over, took the towel away from Scott, and snapped it at him. "No. No 'still'. This stops here. You did the same thing with Gordon when we started talking about letting him train and start being part of the team. I don't even have to ask if you did the same thing about me. At some point you're gonna have to realize we are all equals in this situation, especially because Dad won't until you do."

Scott snatched the towel back and tossed it into the sink with a scowl and a little more whip than was necessary. "Well, before we worry about what I'm gonna do with Alan and IR, we need to know whether or not there even is an IR anymore, or at least if we're gonna have any part in it."

Virgil's cup stopped half way to his mouth to protest that he wasn't even thinking about IR in this right now when he caught his brothers exchanging glances that less than clandestinely said they were sharing a brain again. They really needed to stop doing that. No wonder Gordon hated it when Virgil and Scott did it. It made a guy paranoid, you know? "What?"

"How do you feel about college?" Scott grumbled at the same time John said tiredly, "Knock it off. Let's not worry until we know there's something to worry about."

Scott leaned back against the countertop, bracing his hands next to either hip. There was a strange silence as he studied John, head cocked oh so thoughtfully. He might as well have the concerned eyebrows going. "That's not what you were saying last night."

"I had booze and head injury last night."

"Did he say something to you?"

"Wait," Virgil interrupted. "Is this about what Dad said to you on 'Five'?"

John shrugged as much as anyone with a sling and a cranky collarbone can shrug. When that seemed to cause him a tinge of pain (but it looked like less than it did last night), he tipped his chin in Scott's direction. "Fifty bucks says there's a Glock under your pillow, even if it isn't in your shorts anymore."

Virgil did his best to hide the cringe he felt shake his spine. Not for the first time, all he could think was How in the world did Dad's dream get so colossally jacked up?, but it was followed by that same scathing, sarcastic Well, duh! that always came with it. But answering that question meant saying things out loud that weren't ready to be vocalized yet, if ever. Instead, he had to wonder how long Scott would wander their — that's right, their — island armed, or how long John would manage to stay so damn calm, or how Gordon was going to walk around on those cut up feet today. He wondered when Scott would let him have his bleach back. But hey, one question at a time, right?

"What if we leave Dad out of it?"

Scott's eyes narrowed and John's ears perked, but both were too surprised to say anything.

"Forget the money side of it. Take Dad out of the equation completely for a minute. Take what we
went through yesterday and think about tomorrow, next week, next year. There's no guarantee something like yesterday won't happen again. We have enough experience under our belts right now to know what we're up against out there. What do you guys want to do? Or maybe we have to wonder what we all need to do?"

Virgil didn't wait to see what either of them did. They'd follow if they felt like it. John might have got that look he got on his face sometimes, the one he got when he remembered how much he appreciated having someone a little more quiet and thoughtful on his side of things like he got with Virgil when it counted. Scott might have taken on that surprised look he always seemed to get whenever one of them said something he wasn't expecting, something more mature than he was willing to give them credit for at the moment because Big Brother knows everything and they are merely wannabes. Who knows? Maybe they both looked like they thought he'd finally lost it. He didn't care. He had to get out of there before they could see his own face. He had a pretty good idea what they wanted, and the last thing he wanted was for them to know he had no damn clue.

What was it they said about lawyers? They never ask a question in court they don't already know the answer to? That law show rerun guy, what's his name, McCoy, would've made a better lawyer than Virgil any day of the week, and he only played one on TV. Still, pending career choice and all … Yeah, probably not.

The air didn't seem quite so weighty by the pool. No trees or walls kept the lingering questions in. The sun couldn't quite burn out the glare of the security lights no one had bothered to extinguish (or felt too paranoid to let off duty quite yet). Virgil closed his eyes and tilted his face up toward the sun anyway, letting it warm the chill. It really was amazing how the morning could feel so warm when he'd spent the night feeling so cold.

Colors swirled behind his eyelids as shadows of whatever flew between him and the sun, too bright in some spots for him to dwell there too long, too dark to dare to look in others, and always moving too fast for him to do much more than follow them away like smoke words from Alice's Wonderland Caterpillar.

A (really fucking cold) pop can tapped the back of his neck twice before he accepted it without opening his eyes to see which of them brought it. He quietly offered a simple nod as thanks, hoping it was enough. John's clap on his lower back said it was.

The slappy footfalls on the concrete said they'd both joined him and were getting themselves situated for the long haul because Scott wouldn't let it go until he was satisfied. Lovely. He took in a sip of caffeine that tasted an awful lot like You're a moron with a sugar substitute of You know damn well they aren't gonna let this go. He should be grateful for the effort and deal with it. If he'd put it to Gordon or Alan, they would've walked it off and maybe never even mention it again (probably after telling him he was far too thinky and should shut up before he got too smart for his own good), but Scott and John? There would be analysis, charts, maybe even stick figure storyboards before they chewed the bits down to an answer. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he had an answer for the questions himself, but really? He had no cosmic damn clue what was supposed to come next.

"If we're gonna do this, we have to make some changes," Scott said around a slurp of coffee. "And we do it together. I don't care what Dad says. This dictatorship just became a democracy, whether he likes it or not."

"Good luck with that one," John snickered.

"I have my ways with him."

"Such as?"
"Let's just say I have a couple long-standing deal-breakers with Dad, and he knows it. I get what I want or I walk. I guess that all depends on what we want then."

He didn't know why, but Virgil had this mental image of a ten-year-old Scott throwing one of his purportedly epic temper tantrums, except dressed in his adult IR uniform so all bunched up around his knees and elbows, a big boy dressing up in Daddy's clothes. He saw his shrimpy big brother all red in the face, screaming at their father that if he didn't get to watch his cartoons, he absolutely would not take Thunderbird One out of the garage to wash her. While it was amusing — he might have to sketch it later, for shits and giggles — that was hardly the way to get anything out of their father. The man ran his boardroom the way a BUD/S instructor runs Hell Week: brutal and meant to get only the top of the top results. More than a few grown men had walked out of Jeff Tracy's boardroom afraid to ever return unless they had the results he was looking for. As a father, he wasn't a scary guy at all. As a boss? Oh, hell yeah.

John pretty much thought the same thing because he couldn't stop himself from laughing in Scott's face.

"Hey, he owes me after yesterday. If I have to bust his balls about it to keep the rest of you safe," Scott's face bunched up, disgusted and tough like Robert DeNiro about to go nuclear with a baseball bat, "I don't care. It wouldn't be the first time."

"No," There was something about the way Virgil could've sworn he saw colors, black and furious, coming off his brother that wasn't Scott that made him look to the cement for cover. He shook his head slowly and twisted his can tight between both hands. "No. No, you're right. We do it together or not at all, and that includes dealing with Dad."

"The question, then, is what we want. Fuck all if I know what that is yet, but … "

John sighed. "Gordon needs to be part of this conversation before we decide anything."

"He's finishing up his scan of that sub before he goes down to see what he can salvage for scrap."

"And Alan." Ignoring the surprised looks on his brothers' faces, Virgil could hardly believe he was saying so himself, but he also knew it was right. Before either of them could argue with him, he said, "It's about his future, too, no matter how he decides. We can't take the option away from him. If Dad does, it's one thing, but we can't."

"I'm not sure how I feel about Alan carrying a gun right now," Scott cringed. So much for that brilliant plan, huh?

"This isn't about the right now for him. That's way down the road." Virgil reached over and slapped the back of Scott's unprotected head. "But now that you mention it, really? Guns?"

Scott reached for the hot area from the slap, but apparently didn't want to give Virgil the satisfaction because he quickly got up out of his lounger and started to pace instead.

John asked, "Scott?"

"It isn't only the guns. It's everything security. I think we need to consider someone staying here from now on. A lot of what happened yesterday could've been avoided if we hadn't all automatically made the flight up to 'Five. Not that you could've paid me to stay behind, and I'm sure Dad would say the same thing, but the kids and Brains, none of them should have been left here alone. We almost orphaned Alan yesterday because we didn't plan ahead."

John looked at him in awe, already putting the pieces together. "You want to bench Dad?"
"Not bench necessarily, but he can run things from here. We already have you up in 'Five, sure, so it's not like he's bodily needed in command, but if he's here … I don't know. I guess I can't help thinking it wouldn't hurt to have a second wave back here." He weighted his hands, palms up, up and down like scales. "Mistakes, fresh eyes; someone a little more prepared for defense without computers here, extra body in the field right off the bat."

Virgil inwards cringed. "Brains didn't look the least bit incapable of protecting the island pointing that shotgun at us."

"He shouldn't have had to."

"None of us should have. Nice try to change the topic, by the way." Virgil kicked out at Scott's thigh but missed. "Seriously. Guns? Alan and guns? Any of us besides you and Dad with guns?"

"Abso-fuckin'-lutely."

"You honestly think any of this could have gone differently if you'd had a gun on you yesterday?"

Scott's jaw worked back and forth, grinding the answer away between his molars. His shoulders tightened, and his toes curled as he rocked back on his heels, hot and itching for an escape. There was something oddly defiant about the way he tensed, like he was both embarrassed and would defend his choice to the very end.

Next to him, John ran his hand over his hair, his eyes shifting between them. Virgil screwed his eyes back, questioning and concerned, but John mouthed Wait at him. When nervous habits were the only answer Scott offered, John said quietly and a little deliberately, if Virgil was reading the tone right, "That's less about yesterday than other stuff."

"Don't," Scott warned.

"That sounds vaguely ominous." So did the drawn out bug serenade coming from the jungle since neither of them said anything to cover it up. Virgil felt that twinge he got sometimes in the back of his head. When all they did was stare at each other, that twinge became a sharp spark of So Not Good. "Forget I said 'vague'."

"If you truly think carrying is a good idea for everyone in the field, you need to give him the reason," John said a little more forcefully. "I can't always be there. I can tell him if you want, but he deserves to know." Scott still didn't move. "We had a deal, man."

"You … you better do it," Scott said, sitting down to study his laced fingers between his knees like he was on some really, really good drugs.

Fifteen minutes or so of hell later, Virgil swore to Mom, Grandpa, and any deity that might be out there listening that he would never give Scott grief about his attachment to his gun ever again. His overprotectiveness was still totally on the table, but the guns? Nope. He had too much respect for the man for that.

It wasn't much, but Virgil finally got what he'd been waiting for. For the first time in all of this, Scott looked a lot older than he should. Gordon and Virgil had practically made waiting for it a game, particularly after the more difficult jobs. He'd seen some of the horrors they'd witnessed take years from Scott's life — and wasn't it always the good ones at the beginning instead of the crotchety old ones at the end? — that only a good long week of solitude down on the beach could recover, but even the light jobs usually left a crease or two around his eyes. It was too early to tell what kind of effect the last twenty-four hours would have on him. Still, if he was only now getting around to the
exhaustion that punished his eyes, maybe he needed to give the man a little more credit.

And then the prick had to go and ruin it all by trying to change the subject to Virgil. "Your turn. Spill." Jackass.

"About?"

Scott latched on to the evasion with a full set of teeth, catching a tiger by the tail that gave him something else to do. "You aren't exactly you right now either. You seem to think you are, but I gotta tell you, man … None of us can tell when you're gonna explode on us, and frankly, I wish you would explode because at least then we'd have a clue what's going on. When even John and I can't tell?" He tipped his head to the side ruefully, his face finishing the unasked What's going on with you? for him.

"I'm fine."

"Then why did Gordon come to me last night about you? Gordon."

"Because Gordon would rather think we're all the basket cases and he's perfectly normal instead of dealing with the fact that — "

Scott smacked his thigh with a strict Hey, I'm talking here so shut up and listen. "He says you don't remember the last hour we were up there."

John sat up at that. "Wait, what?" Terrific. Let's all gang up on the supposed amnesiac now.

Scott plowed ahead. "He says you keep getting the details muddled and don't remember entire conversations. You're running around here like you're a reincarnate Mr. Clean." He stopped for a moment, blinking hard and swallowing around his Adam's apple like it decided to take a random detour into his mouth. The cough to get rid of it sounded more choked than oncoming cold, but after a good gag he recovered. "You killed your monitor over something you saw on the security tapes."

"I checked with Gordon," John offered because he had to be so damn helpful. "He said it looked like The Hood and Alan in 'One's silo."

Messes can be cleaned. "Like you don't want to kill something after the things he said." Things can be replaced.

"That's not the point."

"I'm fine. Nothing a Lost Weekend won't cure."

"You had Paint It Black on during your shower when we got back."

"It's the Stones."

"You only listen to that song when you're ticked off at the world and want to wring somebody's neck."

This whole I don't want to deal with yesterday for myself so I'm gonna gang up on whoever is closest thing was getting (only getting?) old. Yes, Virgil realized he was equally as guilty as the others for it, and yes, it was probably doing them all more good than they were willing to let on, but he definitely did not want to be the one in the spotlight right now. Didn't Gordon need cream on those burns or his feet right about now? Maybe if they took John to see Brains they could get that itchy sling off him? Hell, couldn't they all use about twenty hours straight of sleep? There had to be
something better to do than pick on his (guilty, never clean, I wasn't ready for IR at all) brain.

One look at John's face — the one that should be a safe haven — said they were in it for the long haul. "Virg, I talked to Dad after you left. He told me to leave you alone on this one. More like warned, actually. What the hell is going on?"

Virgil didn't know if he wanted to kiss his father for sticking up for him or find the man right now and kill him for deliberately setting his two eldest bloodhounds on him. Never let it be said his father wasn't a sneaky sonofabitch.

Pinch the nose. Deep breath. Cannonball!

"I saw him."

"Saw who?"

"The Hood. In the mines. Dad isn't the one who left him there. I am."


Both men bleached of all color. Well, maybe except the blue of oxygen deprivation around their lips and purple of many sleepless nights to come around their eyes. John sank back into the lounger, his mouth fishing for air that probably wasn't going to come without a good shock to the system to make him breathe again. Scott's head dropped painfully low, supported only by his hands reaching into his hair to grip it good and hard. Virgil could hear him breathing — seriously, John needed to breathe over there — shaking wows of disappointment that couldn't possibly compare to the horror Virgil himself was living.

Did he know how to silence a room or what? For his next trick, he would make an entire room disappear while leaving only the priceless place settings and flowers on the table!

It was John who surprisingly recovered first, enough to ask, "Wow, really? Are you sure?"

"I didn't think so at first, but then he told Dad who he was and I knew. Yeah. It was him."

"That can't be right," Scott argued.

"Why? Because it's easier to think this guy tried to kill us because Dad messed up instead of me?"

"That's not what I — "

"I'm the one who saw him. I saw him and thought there was no way he could be alive. There was enough blood everywhere that he should have been dead. It was dark, and there was a hefty wall of debris between us and him. It would've taken us at least an hour to get through to him, but then, Scott, you called in with that pocket of survivors you found over in the back end of the grid. I didn't tell Dad about The Hood. If nothing else, we could get those other people out of there, you know? I didn't see anyone else with him, and he wasn't moving. His eyes were open, but he didn't see me. I ... I made the call that he was gone. I did. Dad didn't do it. This is on me."

"We've all had to make that kind of call. You did what you were supposed to do."

"And I was wrong. Some hero, huh? I wasn't supposed to be one of the kids anymore. I was supposed to be one of you. I looked down that passage for all of six seconds, and I blew it."

John cursed under his breath.
"So, what, we're supposed to now go back over every single job we've ever done and hope no one else got left behind with a hard on for revenge because we assessed a situation and saved the most people we could? Correct me if I'm wrong, John, but we hadn't pulled anyone alive from the rubble in almost thirty-four hours, yes?" Scott didn't wait for John to nod, although Virgil saw it. "It wasn't an unreasonable call."

"It doesn't matter how long," Virgil started only to have Scott smack his knee. "Let me finish."

"No, you let me finish," Scott barked. "If I hadn't found that pocket, Dad and I had already decided we were pulling everyone out. We weren't going to leave yet, but we were pulling everyone in for a break. This is not your doing."

"It was my fault for clearing that passage. You're all dead if it hadn't been for the kids because I blew that call."

"And it was Dad's fault for agreeing."

Damn it. Because the mix wasn't mixy enough without Gordon in it, of course the cosmos had to send him to witness Virgil's mea culpa, too. He didn't bother to wonder how long the little eavesdropper had been standing there behind them. It didn't matter. Gordon heard enough to think he could jump in with the second chorus of It's not your fault and It was only your second job and You're human and all the stupid excuses Virgil secretly gave himself alone in the dark until he realized none of them were acceptable excuses when people's lives were involved. It just happened that this time theirs were the lives involved. Excuses, excmushes.

He felt Scott and John look up at the strangely sober voice, though. Let them. Go ahead. They could all gang up on him if they wanted. He wondered if it would take longer than six seconds. The slap on the backside of his head said Gordon had every intention of talking as long as he damned well pleased.

"It was, dumbass, and avoiding eye contact isn't going to change that. Dad agreed. And it's Scott's fault for finding that last pocket of survivors on the other side of the mine." Gordon's palm shot out to the side — Stop! In the Name of Love! — in Scott's general direction, but he kept talking over whatever their brother had to say about it. "And it's John's fault for doing whatever the hell it is he actually does up there in that rust bucket of his. It was my fault for backing up Brains over the maps back here when he said there were no other viable passages. I didn't have enough caffeine in me to be looking at a topographical anything, let alone one that didn't even remotely resemble what it looked like the day before because of the aftershocks. And it's my fault for not stocking 'Two's fridge with enough caffeine and energy bars to keep you guys awake enough to realize there might be a miniscule chance there was possibly a mostly dead body under all that rubble."

Virgil was fairly sure he heard John mutter under his breath, "He's only mostly dead." Because what else are you gonna do?

Gordon heard it, too, because he pointed a middle finger at John without looking away from Virgil. "Shut up, Johnny. I'm lecturing the guilt machine here, and I can't do that if I'm laughing at you." For extra measure, Gordon's salute to John made a detour to Scott (in case he got any bright ideas, probably) before becoming a full-fledged clowning upside Virgil's head. Again. "I blame the Earth for moving in that particular spot, like there couldn't be an earthquake in some other mine? I blame Grandma. She's the one who gave birth to Dad in the first place. It was her damn genetics. If he hadn't come up with this whole cockamamie scheme in the first place, you wouldn't have been sweating your ass off in a Malaysian jungle for ninety-some hours straight to the point where you made a perfectly logical call to go where you knew the survivors were. God forbid you actually do that. The survivors might appreciate it or something."
"Who uses the word 'cockamamie'?" Scott chimed in only to have John shake his head.

"Shh, I think he's getting to his point." All John was missing was the tub of popcorn to go with his sarcastically riveted stage whisper.

"He has a point?"

"The point," Gordon interrupted, "brother mine, since you won't listen to the fact you simply did your job and yesterday's backfire is completely incidental, is we all fucked up and some bad guy used it to his advantage, but we won anyway. We're still here, and damn it, I say we won. Anybody in the peanut gallery want to disagree?" Gordon's hand came over Virgil's mouth good and tight, moving his head side to side in time with Gordon's shaking head and exaggerated silent formation of No on his lips. "Nobody? Excellent. So we move on now, right?"

Virgil wrenched Gordon's hand away and flopped it around to indicate the destruction of the kitchen, patio, pool, and villa in general. "Not to be a pessimist or anything, but we do that how?"

"We go to bed." Scott shrugged, like it was the simplest thing in all the world. Maybe in his eyes, it was. "We all clean this mess up, we make Alan clean up the garage while we supervise, we eat dinner tonight, we get a full night's sleep, and then we wake up and do it all again tomorrow like we have after every rescue the last few years. After Paris, after Argentina, after Guam. Just like we did when we lost Mom and Grandpa. We relax and try to have a little fun instead of all this gloom and doom thing we've got going on. We remember that, yeah, life can be cruel and awful like it was yesterday, but then we look at each other and know it's also beautiful and incredible. And one day, when we least expect it, this day will seem a little less hard than it did the day before."

Obviously, Scott had been watching sports movies again. Fucking Rudy.

Gordon snorted, guffawed, sputtered, and pretty much went through an entire range of laughter with the effort to not laugh. It looked like he truly tried, but it was a bit much for him. "Wow. That was … " He tried one last time for a somber face but lost that battle with one last snort. "That was deep."

"Eat me."

"Also? There's no crying in baseball," John deadpanned.

Virgil looked over at Gordon, figuring he'd head the smartass off at the pass, but when he got there, his brother was only smiling genuinely at him. There would be no Told You So or insert-sports-movie-of-choice-here speech about being heroes. It would be so easy. He knew that. But Gordon was there with only a simple smile and a clap to the shoulder with a little extra grip tagged on to the end there. The squeeze was as much Are you okay? as it was Hell yeah, you're okay. Somewhere in this middle of this, amazingly, he was.

Gordon didn't look away, but he said to all of them, "Now, not that I want to feed Virg's bleach crack habit here or anything, but the Firefly is a helluva mess, and my sub needs a once over after the kids took it in the Thames." He feigned a disgusted shiver, although Virgil couldn't be sure if it was all that faked. It was the Thames. "Whatever happens next, the garage can't stay like that indefinitely. We can make Dad's decision easier if we know what we're working with. So let's go find out what's still good."

John wasn't looking, but Virgil saw Scott's finger point emphatically at Gordon's feet, even if his voice held no judgment. "And you decided to grow a brain when now?"

"When you set me up, jackass."
Gordon had to duck and duck fast as Scott tried to right hook that smirk right off his face. He danced (or tried with his feet all jacked up) backwards without looking, jerking his thumb over his shoulder with an even bigger smile. "Let's work the problem, boys!"

Chasing Gordon to the office wasn't so much a chase as it was a breeze cleaning the halls of too much thick spring fog. He barely made it up the stairs before he had to walk, but it didn't matter. They walked together, somehow lighter, even if Gordon and Scott were fighting over who got control of the music. Gordon was good at that. He was a total rat bastard for running his mouth off to Scott, but he did know how to light a fire under this household when needed.

Little brothers — who knew?

"I still owe you for the Danger Zone," Scott growled as they rounded the corner into the office.

Gordon merely saluted him with a middle finger as he ducked into Scott's tube down to the silos. Eloquent, that brother of theirs — especially when Scott slipped in fast enough to beat the door so they could get nice and cozy on the ride down together. The last Virgil saw, Scott's hands went around Gordon's throat.

"They needed some brother bonding time," he said when John sidled in behind his shoulder.

"It's the caring and sharing that keeps us together." John nodded solemnly. "Think they'll both survive the ride down?"

"Seventy-thirty Scott throws Gordo overboard, and I'm definitely not cleaning that up."

John clapped him on the back and led him toward his own rarely used lift. "Dibs on the Hot Dog's room. He's got the better windows."

Virgil merely yawned and scrubbed his face good and hard with both hands. He was too damn tired to care. Damn nightmares. It was gonna be a long, long day.

He expected to hear the sounds of quality fratricide (the good natured kind, anyway) the closer they got to the floor, but it was too quiet for that. Wow, Scott was fast, or Gordon managed to get the drop on him … Or they got caught up in the shiny of Brains's work bench. Okay, that wasn't what Virgil expected at all, but there they were, staring over the man's shoulder as he handed Scott a new toy with a proud grin.

"Have you guys seen this yet?" Scott asked as he and John joined them.

In his hands was a beautiful diving watch, something along the lines of the Tag Heuers that Gordon preferred. The face glowed with a flickering light like a television makes in the middle of the night. They all stared at it, mesmerized, as the face was replaced with Brains's waving, smiley image.

"C-can you see me now?"

"Yowza," Gordon whistled. He was the only one able to do even that much.

Frowning, Brains moved away from the camera on his laptop to reach over and turn the watch toward himself. Nodding with satisfaction at what he saw, he turned it back toward them. "Go ahead and a-a-answer me." He scooped up an identical watch of his own and walked off a good twenty feet with his back to them. "B-boys?"

"Here, Brains," Scott said loudly.
"Into the w-watch, Scott."

"It's two-way?"

"A day late, but-but-yes. We meant to test them in the field next month."

Gordon tried to take the watch away from Scott, only to have it yanked right back. "Get your own," Scott teased. "Mine."

"Will I be able to monitor them from 'Five then?" John asked, his brain clearly in Oh, shiny gadget! mode. Scott had to slap his hand away, too.

Virgil made sure to keep his hands to himself.

Brains came back to the table and plucked the watch away from Scott with a nod. "And us b-back here. I-I'm s-still messing a-around with it."

Gordon reached for the steel wig stand and the wired cap on top of it, which Brains happily slapped his hand away from without even looking. "This is awesome, Brains. Um, what is it?"

Brains took a square of blue fabric from the table the size of a baby blanket and threw it over the domed head. "N-n-noth — forget you s-saw that. F-failed experiment. You, um, you b-b-boys have a lot of work to do down h-here." He started fumbling around distractedly, patting the pockets of his coat and looking over the gadgets on his table like he'd lost his car keys. "I should ch-che-ch-look in on the k-kids."

They all watched their friend high tail it out of the garage, the lost look on his face quickly replaced by relief when he was far enough away from them to be unable to drag him back.

"What did I say?" Gordon asked quietly, fingering the fabric.

Scott reached over and pushed the incredibly soft square down and out of Gordon's fingers. "Don't worry about it. He'll let you play when he's ready."

John yanked the back of Scott's t-shirt, drawing him away from the table himself. "No toys for either of you. Out."

"But shiny!" Gordon protested, reaching out with both arms and wiggling his fingers, ready to pickpocket everything on the table.

And they were worried about Alan's maturity or lack thereof?

Virgil drew his arm tight around Gordon's neck, leaving little room for discussion or breathing. "C'mon, brat. You're the one who wants the Firefly all to himself. Your toy needs a good scrubbing."

"I'm giving the keys to Alan."

"It's that or help me with the lifts."

It was supposed to be a threat. Other than a little residual, there didn't seem to be that much scrubbing actually needed on the Firefly. It would need some systems checks, and who knew whether the kids had left the transmission somewhere on the other side of the garage, but for the most part, it should need an hour of work or so before Gordon could move on. Easy peasy. Which was why Gordon's "Let's just get started on the lifts then" had Virgil blinking. Wow.
But Gordon didn't say anything more about it. He walked over to the base of Virgil's tube, which had the most damage, looked it up and down, and disappeared into the cabinetry under the scaffolds for cleaning supplies for the intensive part of the job. "You gonna get the hose or what?" he asked when Virgil only stood there.

Right. Hose. No big deal.

They hosed the majority of the remaining foam away, watching it swirl down the drain traps in the floor with a certain amount of amusement. Somewhere between jokes about the Wicked Witch melting and plain old frustration that the kids couldn't keep this stuff even a smidge contained, Virgil lost track of Scott and John, but he figured they needed to be off doing their own thing anyway. He and Gordon fell into a warm silence when they started going at the rest of the mess with towels, scrub brushes, and spit and vinegar. Virgil found himself suddenly grateful that he never had to be around for the cleanup after some of their rescues. The stuff smelled nasty and tasted like regurgitated cod liver oil.

When Gordon's favorite Beatles song came on, their brushes fell into a synchronized back and forth of revolution and back and forth. Yep. It's gonna be all right. Just as soon as they get this mess cleaned up.

"Virg?"

He looked up, even though Gordon was concentrating and scrubbing fairly hard at the crease between the lift and its bumper. When Gordon didn't see him or continue, he asked, "Hmm?"

"That statue at the Louvre? The one when you're heading up those stairs. What's that one called again?"

"Nike? The Winged Victory of Samothrace. Why?"

"Just thinking about it, I guess. We should go there again one of these days. I can't remember the last time we took a vacation. You'd like the Louvre again, right?"

First Alan, and now Gordon? Either twenty was the new fifty and he looked like shit, or they weren't even being subtle in their desire for Virgil to take a vacation. Or maybe IR's future should be in question. Either way, though, his answer was a solid "Sure".

"I mean, you didn't get to see all of it the last time, and that was even with spending twelve hours there."

"We'll go, Gords. Even if it's only you and me, we'll go."

This time Gordon did look up with a beaming smile. Virgil couldn't believe how he'd taken that smile for granted lately. And he'd taken a lot of things about his family for granted lately. "Alan wants us to take a road trip, too."

"You always said you wanted to do the backpacking through Europe thing. We could stay in hostels."

There was a sneaky gleam of Wouldn't Dad just love that? in his voice when he answered, "Europe, it is."

Gordon set back to work with the towels at the sticky, dried crust of foam. Quietly, like it was meant to be only for himself, he said, "I like that statue."
The last time they'd been to the Louvre as a family, Alan and Gordon had been relatively small. They'd had to take breaks in nearly every room to keep Alan on his feet and hydrated. Gordon had quickly become bored until he became one of those kids who liked seeing the guards come to the rescue every time he set off alarms while trying to decipher the hieroglyphs with his fingers in the Egyptian wing. Virgil tried to imagine his brother in the Louvre as an adult, wondering if he would truly enjoy it, or if he would be there only to make Virgil happy.

But then, maybe that was the point.

On Alan's road trip, they were going to follow the Royals until they hit every stadium in the American league. On the Europe trip, Scott would like to see RAF Molesworth, where Grandpa Tracy was stationed before going back home to farm with his own dad — probably some of the other bases, too. And maybe Normandy, too, since they'd be in the area. Johnny? He'd … Well, he'd be happy doing all of that, wouldn't he? As long as they were all together, he wouldn't care.

Yeah, that was the point.

With more than a little disgust, Virgil rolled his eyes up toward the speakers a while later when the song crossfaded into one of those annoying club mixes Alan liked these days (but at least it wasn't that angsty travesty he'd come home with over Christmas). He started violently, nearly falling off his heels before he realized the solid body looming over them from the scaffolds was their father.

Dad didn't notice him as he watched Scott and John laughing easily over by the laser cutter (he refused to call it the name Alan had given it). He felt the mischief gods smile down on Gordon, their anointed ambassador to the Tracy family, and deliberately scooted one wide step to the side. Gordon got up, real clandestine-like, and circled around behind them with what Virgil hoped was a fresh bucket of water. He watched his father track Gordon's progress with a growing smile that brought some of the man's color back in time with each step. By the time Scott caught Gords in the act just quick enough to duck out of the way and leave John the sole victim, Dad looked more relaxed than Virgil thought he'd ever see the man be again. His knuckles were white around the steel bars, but from the pinch around his eyes, it was to keep from laughing.

Virgil had to hop to his feet and out of the way as first Gords and then John zipped by. Gordon's sneakers screeched as he tried to round the corner behind Dad's Mustang, only to find himself trapped by John on the other side. They eyed each other menacingly over the roof of the car, feinting left and right, both equidistant to Gordon's escape route. In Do-or-Die mode, Gords made the break for it, trying to run backwards until he could make the turn and take cover behind Scott — except Scott wasn't about to shelter anyone.

Scott had the hose.

Nope, he couldn't look.

Instead, Virgil found his father again. Whatever it was the man was thinking, he nodded down at the insanity below. It was sharp and decisive and in complete contradiction to the fatherly joy in his eyes. A second nod was gentler, kinder, and reinforced whatever decision he must've made. Virgil would have loved to ask him, but he melted back into the shadows, leaving his sons to their playful oblivion.

"Hey, kiddo." John popped up behind him, soaking wet hand squeezing his shoulder. "Thinking too much again?"

"It's what we're good at, right?"
"Not today. Scott has declared the rest of today thought free. I'm not in the mood to fight him on it." John's eyebrows went up pointedly as he said "Check it out, man, ten-thirty-three" with such a tone that if Virgil didn't get what he was trying to say, he was obviously an idiot.

He did get it. It was the accepting part that was the problem, but maybe the next twenty-four hours would be better for working on that part, or maybe the twenty-four after that. Right now, he wanted to appreciate that they'd made it these first twenty-four.

John held up his good hand and counted off six, mouthing off each digit until he closed his fist on the last. Six seconds. A lot could happen in six seconds, even if it was simply a dopey big brother with a lopsided grin being a major smart ass. Okay, yes, he got it. No need to drop an anvil on his head or anything.

"Well, they're buildin' a gallows outside my cell," Virgil sang tentatively, his eyes locked on John's. The nervous crack in his voice — which could easily have been him singing in character — was enough to put a smile on his brother's face. "And I've got twenty-five minutes to go. And the whole town's waiting just to hear me yell. I got twenty-four minutes go."

By the time ol' Johnny had nine minutes to go — But this ain't the movies, so forget about me! — they were all warbling so damn loud, it was a miracle the whole house didn't come down.

Forget International Rescue. The Tracy family was back in business.

(End Chapter Nine)
With some Virgil-approved, ass-rockin’ music by who-cares-as-long-as-it’s-loud shredding his stereo speakers, Gordon stared into his medicine cabinet, working his jaw back and forth to chew down the weight of Wow.

Yes, it had only been twenty-four hours. And yes, it was premature to think about anything beyond worrying if everyone was physically whole and safe — definitely not about if Dad really would pull the plug on IR — but he couldn't help it. The future was there, whether he wanted it to be or not, especially here in his bathroom. It stared him down, taunting him with all the possibilities.

One day — a week, two, a month from now, however long it took — his body could be completely healed from the two years of training and full duty and Yesterday. He wouldn't need any of this. Not the antiseptics, not the cortisone creams, not the Band-Aids or Ace bandages. Not the naproxen or Ranger Candy or — what was that? — lovely, lovely vicodin (getting slammed into a cliff under the weight of a rescue basket hurts with all the perks of a five star hangover, people). He wouldn't need all these gauze pads or iodine or any of this.

He could not hurt, not even a little.

For the first time, he might actually feel like a normal (nearly) nineteen year old man.

That was a helluva lot of Wow.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt that way.

Even better, he realized if he could feel that way, so could the others. His brothers and father could be healthy. When John's sling came off, it could hopefully never be needed again. By the time Alan went back to school, his bruises would be nothing more than a little yellowing, unnoticeable to anyone who didn't know it was there to begin with. Virgil might one day let them make a mess now and then again without following them around with a scouring pad and gallon of bleach. Even Scott might lose the zombie effect around his eyes once he was back down to only eight cups of caffeine a day. They could all be completely healthy.

Big fat globs of Wow.

And yet.

Gordon wasn't so sure he'd be able to live with that kind of change. Sure, he got Dad's heebie-jeebies about letting his children back in their 'birds, but he had to realize how much they were the ultimate product of his upbringing. He'd raised them to help people. Scared as he was, he couldn't unraise them from that way now. No, they were getting back in those 'birds, whether he was decisionally paralyzed (how's that for politically correct?) or not. Sorry, Dad.

Any time now, Dad would call them into what stood for a formal meeting in the organization. When he did, Gordon would walk into that meeting and vote Hell Yeah. Bring on the cuts and sprains and bruises like badges of honor or courage or citizenship of the nation, whatever good little Boy Scouts got for badges these days. Bring on the headaches and nightmares. Break a bone or two (preferably not on the same day, thank you), if that's what it takes. Even with all of that, Gordon couldn't imagine saying no.
Overwhelming creep chilled his blood as the contents behind the mirror taunted him for daring to say so. *Be seein’ you real soon, bucko. Real soon.*

Okay, so maybe take the hoo-hah exuberance down a notch, but still.

"Hey, Fish," Alan called from the other side of the door, "Did you fall in or what?"

Deep, long breath in, even longer out. Gordon ran his hand over his fresh haircut, shaking away most of the dread. He’d clean up the mess later (no tempting Virgil with the vacuum just yet). Steady, cucumber cool stamped back on his face, he gripped the doorknob.

*Real soon.*

Yanking the door open, he teased, "You gonna rescue me if I did, runt?"

A neon yellow sponge ball from his door-hanging basketball hoop collided with his nose. Guess that answered that. Gordon's internal revenge radar locked in on Alan — of course it was Alan, twerp — and dove for the ball at the same time Alan's face registered the meaning behind Gordon's wicked smile. Just before he fell past the foot of the bed, Gordon caught Scott leaning back against the headboard with a little *Some people's kids* kind of shake of his head. Right, because he was so damn mature.

Even before he hit the ground, Gordon whipped the ball back at Alan, hard — What? He so could have done damage … with that … painfully damaging sponge, shut up — which reminded him, the Royals’ last spring training game was last night, yesterday, this morning, whatever. Happy Opening Day, people!

Alan dove for the ball with a growl. Gordon felt enough delayed shock (and not just a little rug burn) run up his legs that it wasn't so much he *let* Alan get the advantage as he found himself on his back on Alan's chest with a spaghetti arm wrapped around his neck pretty quickly. A quick breath brushed his ear, reminding him Alan wasn't entirely running full speed either. He did his best to keep the pressure to a minimum, but there was no way he would let Alan catch him taking it easy on him, not today.

He wrenched his hips to the side hard enough to get some leverage to his knees. Hard as Alan held on, Gordon was able to follow the momentum around until he was fully on hands and knees. Alan swung his foot at one knee, but Gordon had no doubt it pulled at the kid's ribs in a nasty way. Alan's pale, winterized fingers wrapped around Gordon's tanned, summerized wrist and yanked it out like a tent pole collapsing an entire kit on top of them.

Both of them grunted as they fell to the carpet. This was a lot easier when they were little.

The runt was quicker on the move this time, skibbling out from under Gordon's grasp, pulling his wrist up behind his back, and landing good and hard on his tailbone. Gordon's fight back was weak at best as he felt Alan (and his bony, scrawny ribcage) crawling up his back. Alan knew it, too, because he panted, "No letting me win."

Oh, now the punk was in for it.

"Alan, don't tease your brother when you know he's weaker than you."

Both Gordon and Alan froze, tangled and panting, to crane their heads toward each other. Gordon's amused confusion was mirrored back at him in Alan's scrunched forehead. So he'd heard that, too.

Quietly, Alan asked, "Get him?"
Gordon nodded once. "Get him."

Sure, they probably shouldn't have warned Scott that Team Little Brother had joined forces against him, but the lazy bum still sat on the bed, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, book in front of his face. He probably hadn't even bothered to look up when he'd admonished them. There was no way he wasn't going down.

Until he wasn't.

Quick as Alan and Gordon were, Scott was quicker — and armed. Like he'd popped out of any cheesy slow motion take in a Michael Bay movie, Scott dropped his book and whipped out the fully loaded Super Soaker Gordon kept under the head of his bed whenever Alan was home. In the three seconds it took him to get to his feet in the center of the bed, they never stood a chance.

Gordon yelled for Alan to take cover and save himself, diving for the bright yellow beanbag chair in the corner. Brandishing it like a shield, he marched toward the bed and the enemy. He didn't dare risk trying to figure out where Alan was. Instead, he did what any sensible combatant would do: demand surrender from the guy with the gun and high ground from his lesser, useless position.

"So much for that prank alert, huh?" Scott taunted him. "I warned you I'd get you back."

"You really wanna test me?" Gordon threatened from behind the safety of his beanbag. "It's two against one, man. You're outnumbered."

"You realize I'm still older than you and can pummel your sorry ass, right?"

"You realize you're way too on the wrong side of twenty to act like this, right?"

The sound of two sharp snaps on the doorframe brought their heads toward the hallway. Virgil kept his feet firmly in the designated I'm Not Staying area outside. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder when he honed in on Scott. Gordon had to give him credit; Virgil didn't look like there was a single thing out of place. "John needs you. He said to tell you, quote unquote, it's your turn and you have big brass buttons, so bring whatever you need for the long haul."

Scott didn't bother to lower his squirt gun as he jumped easily off the bed. "Where?"

"Dad's office. What's going on? He wouldn't tell me."

"That thing with me he told you about. It's his thing now."

"Why is he the one with the … oh." A big ol' light bulb exploded over Virgil's head and illuminated his eyes. "Oh. Yeah. Makes sense he'd have the same thing, sort of."

"Come with me?"

Gordon had to curl his tongue in and bite down hard to keep from interrupting. There was something that snarled Why hello, scheme to him like always, but hadn't he already told Alan they couldn't expect everything to change overnight, even under the circumstances? Besides, being together on this didn't mean they had to be in each other's pockets every single second, right? The speaking in code — a brilliantly covert, not at all detectable code, that one — was getting old already, though.

He had to give Scott credit; Big Brother seemed to feel Gordon's minor irritation vibing at him. (Gordon flicking his right ear probably helped, too.) His hand clamped hard around the crown of Gordon's head, shaking it until their eyes met. "This isn't like before, man, I promise. Give me half an hour with him, and then meet us down on the north beach. Throw together enough supplies to get
us through the afternoon. We all need out of the house. I swear this isn't like that."

"No schemes? No plots? No Help me, Gordo-wan Kenobi, you're my only hope?"

Something crossed Scott's face, a decision he obviously hadn't made until that very second, that made him squeeze the back of Gordon's neck hard enough to force a wince. "Sorry. You know what? Make it fifteen — okay, twenty — minutes. You're right. John's right." He sucked in a whistling breath and pinned his eyes to Virgil's, even as he rambled on to Gordon. "I've put you all in danger without you knowing how or why for a long time now. If I can't let him do the same …"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It will. Nineteen minutes." Decision became peace that settled over Scott's eyes. Gordon couldn't remember the last time he saw that kind of peace there. Then it was gone as he put his focus on a flinching Alan, who had almost managed to sneak over the bed behind him. He yanked hard on Alan's ankle until his hips were even with the edge. "That means you, too."

"No, you guys should — "

"Alan."

"What?"

"If I have to hike back up here to drag your kicking and screaming ass down there, you won't like it. I'll give Gordon free rein to submarine your room at his own discretion the entire s'winter break."

With that, Scott headed for the door, snagging Gordon's beanbag and tossing it back in the corner along the way. He met Virgil with a clap on his shoulder in the hall, but he turned one last time into the room. "Hey, Gords?"

"Yeah?"

Scott grinned. "I don't know. I just thought I'd ask you."

"What?"

"No, What's on second."

"I Don't Know what you're talking about."

"Third base!" they said together, message received. Gordon flopped back on the bed, snagged the yellow basketball, and threw it up toward the ceiling. "You're still not funny, dork."

"Eighteen minutes," Virgil said, yanking Scott by the elbow down the hall.

Alan sat up slowly, hissing a breath about half way up. His hand was curled around his side, but he still managed a crooked look down at Gordon. "What in the world are you two talking about?"

Gordon searched for the right answer, a clever answer, any kind of answer to satisfy Alan's curiosity without necessitating follow up questions, but nothing came. Yes, he got the whole hypocrisy of him scuttling around the issue, but all he could do was shrug. Wait and see. Rocking himself back up, he knocked his head toward his escape hatch. "C'mon, we've got a kitchen to raid."

"Not without shoes, you don't." Alan pointed angrily down at Gordon's feet right before they hit the floor.

"Keep looking at me like that, man, and I'm gonna think I've got the life expectancy of an Imperial
Alan shot his hand out and clenched his fist. When Gordon didn't choke on his own idiocy, Alan shook his fist like a good rattle could make the damn thing work. Gordon reached out and yanked it and the rest of Alan toward him until he could hook his arm around the kid's neck.

"I'm sorry," he said as earnestly as Alan's struggling would allow. "The little bit I do know isn't my secret to tell, okay?"

"Like that's stopped you before. Now get off."

"I'm turning a new leaf. Besides, I've had enough of the drama for a year. C'mon. Beach and water and sunshine call my name. I don't know about you, but my jet lag has rocket lag. If any of us are gonna get a normal night's sleep around here, I need to stay busy until dinner. You can't expect those three to be in any way entertaining for me without you there. Don't abandon me now, battle buddy. I'll beg if I have to."

He didn't look like he had even the slightest energy left to keep up with a snail, let alone Gordon, but Alan's face lit up all puck-like anyway. "The first one to bring the drama gets a seaweed crown."

Gordon snorted and raised one wicked eyebrow. The last time that happened … Yeah. This would be good. So good.

Except where it wasn't.

There wasn't enough in their picnic basket (or the world) to keep Gordon's hands or mouth busy when Scott and John took turns telling them how bad things really were in their heads. Seaweed crowns were quickly forgotten, although a seaweed muzzle wasn't out of consideration if they didn't shut up. Gordon wasn't sure if he should feel some sort of guilt that his face was the last thing a terrified Scott would have seen that awful week, but he was pretty sure he would feel it anyway. Same for John. Virgil. Alan. All of them. Guilt, guilt, fuckity fuckall suck bombs. Geez.

Did family counselors have a pain threshold they were allowed to deal with before they broke out the rubber stamp and waved you on your merry way? Good luck, Tracys. You're all nuts. Send us a post card from Crazy City.

Okay, yes, some of this would probably be considered self-inflicted, but still.

By the time John got around to forcing Scott to explain the gun and Scott got around to forcing John to explain Virgil's six seconds and Virgil begged John not to sing Johnny Cash or pretty much anything ever again, Gordon didn't need any more convincing: they were all completely screwed with their pants on.

"You know what? This is ridiculous. How hard is it to get in a good mood?" Gordon got up, not bothering with the sand coating his shorts, and pulled Virgil (and his confusion) to his feet. Into Virgil's ear, he whispered, "Go with it."

Virgil's struggles seemed very realistic — seriously, ow! There's a head under that hair, douche nozzle! — but in the end, Alan saw what was happening and had no qualms whatsoever about helping a brother out. Gordon hadn't intended all three of them to end up head under water, but he wasn't about to complain either. He'd never be convinced there wasn't healing power in water. It made everything better.

Okay, yes, there was something kind of strange about them goofing off when there was a killer submarine beached half a mile away from them, but they had to take their beach back sometime.
They dunked and wrestled and pretty much forgot about the two lazy bums on the beach for a few minutes. By the time they popped back onto the sand, though, Gordon wasn't any less annoyed than he'd been before. Or disappointed. That was a better word.

"Guys, we're alive. It's time to stop moping and enjoy it."

"I have space lag," John said.

Pfft! As if that was an acceptable excuse. "You have a severe humor deficiency," Gordon retorted.

Scott regarded him over the rims of his sunglasses. "I thought that was me?"

"You're a lost cause. Big difference."

Virgil joined them and shook his hair out over John like a wet dog. Alan tried to wring his towel out over Scott, but Big Brother was too quick. Gordon watched, safe in his knowledge that the mischief torch was in good hands, as Scott chased Alan around the beach. That training for the cross-country team more than paid for itself with how long Alan was able to keep from being thrown into the surf. Virgil jumped in to defend Alan not long after the kid started screaming for reinforcements. When Gordon flopped down on the sand next to John, he couldn't help imagining Alan as a Labrador puppy they were chasing around. Now, if he could get John to relax …

Next to him, the black hole of fun pouted, "I have a sense of humor."

"Oh, yeah, you're a laugh riot."

"I take it back." Gordon didn't like the evil overlord color to John's voice. "No Lost Weekend for you for at least another year now."

"What's that supposed to mean? Lost how?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" John waggled his eyebrows since he couldn't rub his hands together like a Vaudevillian villain and hollered pleasantly, "I'm punishing Gordon. No Lost Weekend."

"Whatever you said, Gordon, apologize," Scott begged as Virgil caught him around the waist and tried to swing him into the water. A whitecap gulped up whatever he meant to say next. It was enough encouragement for Gordon.

He got down on his knees and bowed the traditional *I'm not worthy*. John simply patted Gordon on the head and sipped at his water bottle, although he thought he heard John's teeth hit the rim a few times as he tried to keep his evil laughter contained. One gulp sounded an awful lot like "Tell me I have a sense of humor, punk."

"You have a sense of humor, punk."

Even behind his sunglasses, Gordon could feel John's eyes roll.

"Sorry, Oh Hilarious One. You have a sense of humor, ugly and strange as it is. I laughed at you just … last … week? I just … " His defense petered out with gusto. This whole honesty thing they promised each other was so much fun. "Yeah, I got nothing. Look, I'm not saying you shouldn't freak out. We all have, and we all probably will for a while to come. I'm no one to talk, and I suck for even asking you to lighten up. I know that, but I'm asking for one afternoon anyway. I need this."

This time, John's sunglasses came off. He watched Gordon, not unlike the way he did one of his specimens of whatever science experiments he liked to do up on 'Five when he was bored.
Something flickered for a moment, his weirdo red screen Terminator T-101 computer brain rebooting or something, before he was back to being their designated listener and big brother John.

"You okay, little brother?"

The breath Gordon hitched said, *I just told you I'm not*, but it came out as "Try to have a little fun, Johnny. Do that, and I'll be fine".

Cool and graceful, John slid his sunglasses back on and leaned his head against his rock. "I'm the lost damn Beach Boy."

Gordon groaned. "You know you're walking right into the most obvious comeback in the world, right?"

Yeah, Gordon wasn't gonna touch that one. Or take Johnny's T-bird away.

And wow, wasn't that a depressing thought?

Okay, maybe a little humming wouldn't hurt. The wet clump of seaweed John tossed at him did.

Three rounds of John clumsily stuttering over the lyrics later, Gordon tuned him out. He watched Alan hunt for rocks, analyzing the smoothness and shape of each one before either tossing them back to the sea to get back to work on them or jamming them into his pockets for safe keeping. He would offer to help, but Alan had turned him down so many times in the last few conversations they'd had over temper tantrums and rock tossing that —

"Oh, damn." Gordon sat up, draping his arms over his tented knees. "You lost your skimmer."

"No big deal. I can get some pieces from Brains to build a better one."

John glanced between them, a pop can frozen half way to his mouth. "What's this?"

"You mean that thing you did with the rocks in 'One's silo?" Virgil asked.

"I'll make the next one better." Alan gave a flat, swirly stone a hefty zip across the water. He didn't move until a decent-sized wave devoured it whole while he studied it, already trying to find a way to beat the waves. Gordon didn't have the heart to tell him the water wouldn't let him conquer it, no matter how hard Alan tried. He should know. When Alan did look back, he had a wistful smile to say the loss wasn't much of a loss at all. "We got some good ones in down here before you guys took off."

In other words, Alan was sorry.

It was hard to see with the sun glaring in his eyes, but Gordon hoped his smile was brighter as he handed a stone up to him from his own pile. "Yeah, you did."

In other words, Gordon was sorry, too.

And then, because no moment could go by these last few days without someone saying something stupid or drinking up idiocy like it was free keg refills, Scott asked, "What's it like, watching us take off from down here?"

Gordon's mouth pressed into a hard, sympathetic line of *He means well, kiddo, really* even as he smacked what he could reach of Scott's leg. Numbnuts.

Alan threw the rock too hard, missing the surface of the water with too high an arc so that it simply
dropped under when it broke through instead of bouncing. He didn't look back, but Gordon could
tell there wasn't (much) heat behind the "You're a tattle-telling buddy fucker, you know that?" meant
for him.

"Scott did it," he defended himself as promised. "There were bamboo shoots and pain. Lots of pain.
Oodles. I cried manly tears of man pain."

"Two words: pinky swear." Alan punctuated each word with a middle finger.

Gordon raised his right back. "What kind of school are we sending you to that you can't tell these
aren't your pinkies?"

John snort-laughed under the crook of his good elbow. "Mouths, children. Add that to the list of
educational gems Dad's money is paying for."

"That one was all me," Scott confessed, raising his hand and pointing off at some random corner of
blame in the wild blue yonder. "I'd say we should start a swear jar or something, but we'd all be
without a trust fund inside a week."

Gordon flicked his attention between Alan's back and the banter going on on either side of him with
a gnawing at his gut. It wasn't intentional — anyone could see that — but they were doing it again. It
was so easy. With Alan gone most of the year right now, conversations were almost awkward with
him in them rather than without. The rest of them had such a shorthand when they talked because of
the work that when they played it carried over. Alan's shoulders twitched as Scott and John started to
argue about which one of them would empty the nest egg first, making Gordon fight back a little
anger of his own. He'd forgotten what this felt like.

For Alan, this was what it was when they took off for another rescue while he was left on the beach
alone. Noise and chatter, wrapped in a package of familiarity, always around him but never with
him. It was him waiting in the common room at school while Gordon swung from 'Two in the
basket, crashing into cliffs and never calling to say he was okay. It was …

"Seeing the lightning and waiting for the thunder," Alan said, but he quickly ducked his head. Under
the soft crush of a wave and blush, he said, "That's what it's like."

"Huh?" Scott asked.

Yeah, that wasn't what Gordon expected either.

"I like that," Virgil said with an approving smile that said I could paint that. Gordon could just kiss
him for that.

Confidence overpowering the embarrassment, Alan added, "I don't get to see it all that often, you
know? With school and everything, it's — I usually only see the 'birds on TV once you're there.
From here, it's pretty cool. I like how they feel under my feet."

Obviously Scott saw an open door with Opportunity: Must Exploit in gold leaf bold letters. He
looked up at Alan, shading his eyes, and asked, "And when you aren't here?"

Gordon nodded with his chin, encouraging. Maybe if they all heard it from Alan himself, they would
get it this time (and never ask him to play their spy games again). Maybe this time Alan could stick
up for himself without losing his temper or turning Scott's misguided but, yes, ultimately good and
busybody intentions against them all. Maybe they could surprise him. Gordon was in the mood for a
surprise.
"Depends on the day you ask me." Alan turned around, like he didn't want any of them to see him when he answered. He pulled his arm back and released another stone into the great blue, punctuating what he had to say. "Today it's a good thing. I'm still stuck with Lois Lane's ditzy cousin twice removed, but I don't have to worry about her this time. Until The Hood killed the mood, John Wayne was off to the rescue. It doesn't get better than that."

"She's really that bad?"

"I think … " Alan caught on whatever he meant to say and swallowed it, like the words were something nasty and moldy. "She's doing her job. It's weird. Sometimes she's so close to sounding like she might know something, but then she goes and says something so out there I have to leave the room so no one hears me laughing. Definitely smart, though, when she wants to be. She may not figure everything out, but she'll get close one day." He tossed a clump of tall grass at John, who didn't bother to blink, and smirked. "I think she has a crush on John's voice."

Virgil reached over and twisted his finger into the dimple at the right corner of John's mouth. "Aww, say somethin' pretty, Johnny."

"Eat me running backwards with a chainsaw." John snapped his teeth at Virgil's finger. When they missed and scraped together, Gordon shivered. He hated that nails on a chalkboard feeling and had to run his tongue over his teeth to try to get rid of the scrape-by-osmosis. John didn't seem to mind. "You won't always have to watch, Al."

"I know."

"You sound like you mean that."

"The world didn't swallow me whole yesterday like I wanted it to," Alan verbally shrugged. To Gordon, he added a mouthed "Nice pep talk, Scott" before he stuck his tongue out.

Sometimes they all could still surprise him.

Sometimes hatches blow for no reason, Dad would say. And sometimes they don't.

Feeling he was on equal footing — solid, forgiven, maybe even on the way to healthy footing — with them all for today, Gordon tuned them all out so he could watch his waves come in. This was the way it was supposed to be, the five of them against the world and the forces of Nature, whichever decided to screw with their universe on any given day. There was no controlling either of them, not really, but at least he could predict what the waves were going to do. If he listened, he could hear a rhythm to the ocean's chaotic temper. Poseidon had yet to let him down any more than his family could. Only the metronome of his heartbeat in his chest was more constant.

Rolling wave after curling wave hypnotized Gordon so that when he looked up again, he had no idea how the sun had dropped that far onto the horizon — or what in the world that thing in the sky was coming right for them. Only when Alan teased John — You think your jet lag is bad — and FAB1 made enough of a turn could he make out its shape. There was something both amusing and disturbing about how the sunset provided it such perfect camouflage.

"What are they doing here already?" he asked.

"Reinforcements." Scott waving his hands over his head at Parker banking for the runway was either an overenthusiastic HI or a desperate cry of GET ME THE HELL OUTTA HERE.

When Scott didn't elaborate, John chimed in. "Scott and I called in the big guns. She has a plan. We have a plan."
"After dinner, we're talking to him. Al? John and I want you to be part of that conversation." Scott fixed Gordon with a *Don't screw this up* look, which Gordon was perfectly happy to roll his eyes over. Like he was the one who needed to be warned.

Virgil's grin was somehow at peace as he voted, "Yeah."

For a kid who wanted so badly to get in those planes only twenty-four hours ago, Alan's hesitant "Are you sure?" growled heavy in Gordon's chest.

"We aren't putting you in a plane tomorrow. You broke it." The corner of Gordon's mouth popped up, daring Alan to smile back. "But this is as much about your future as ours. You should be there. Definitely."

"We'll see."

"That didn't sound so sure," Scott said.

"The way you guys were talking last night, it didn't sound like you thought Dad would listen to you anyway."

Virgil laughed. "Big Brother is staging a coup with guns and cake."

"Oooh, and a guillotine. I want a guillotine." Gordon pleaded, "Can I have a guillotine?"

"NO," they all shouted him down. Killjoys.

Alan had this sweet, not quite pathetic glimmer of hope in his eyes as he ignored the rest of them and asked John, "You think that's gonna change his mind?"

"I think he won't have a choice but to listen to what we want."

Their eye in the sky had his eyes on his sky, and he didn't look too optimistic. Neither did his scowl.

"Well then, can I ask you guys something?" Whatever it was Alan was thinking, his eyes were popped wide and zipping back and forth. He looked so small and unsure, like he thought he wasn't allowed to say anything. He was this close to saying *Nevermind.*

Gordon nodded his chin at him, inviting. "What's that?"

"What would Mom say about it? I … I know Dad talks to her all the time — you guys all do — but I … I don't remember her enough to know what she would tell him."

After everything, it was a natural question. If ever there were a time they would cash in and walk away from all this, this would be it. No one would blame them. International Rescue's defenses had been breached, her operatives nearly murdered, all for her technology. What The Hood had done would no doubt inspire copycats and ideas galore. Human Rights organizations all the world over could take the responsibility for them. Dad and Brains could sell off their designs to make sure they fell into the right hands first. No one would blame them at all. And Mom, well, she hadn't been much a part of it. She'd be able to see it in a clear head, in a way they couldn't.

Of all of them, though, Scott was the one who should and did answer. "I can tell you right now, kiddo, no matter what we decide to do with this or anything else, all Mom ever wanted was for us to be happy. I don't think even yesterday or some of the other things we've done would change that, not after living the life she lived with Dad for so long. She knew who she was raising, and that goes back as far as raising Dad. Wherever she is, Mom wants us to be together and happy."
First John and then Virgil came to slow, wistful smiles and agreed.

Things got quiet after that. Not uncomfortable or moody, which Gordon was grateful for. It was brotherly in a way that they hadn't been, even when they got back and hung out in their various incarnations the night before. For the first time since they had come home — maybe for the first time ever — they were all five together, the Fantastic Five, exactly as Mom and Dad had always intended. It felt good. Right.

Now, if they could just redesign the uniform and figure out how to set John the Human Torch on fire without blowing him up or concussing him …

By the time the sun had gone purple-blue and the campfire tried to die (if Virgil would've quit feeding it, anyway), Gordon had pretty much settled on them spending the night on the beach. Lady P would have plenty of time to work her magic on Dad, and he wouldn't mind a night away from those ugly security lights. But Parker came down to chase them on their way with threats to make them listen to his entire oral history of The Ashes since 1882. Which, incidentally, segued him to the time he was commissioned to steal some old stiff's ashes from his fifty years younger wife and her Cobalt SB-06C by his mistress.

It was a draw who was on the path up to the house first, Alan or Scott. Poor John was stuck with his handicap of equally useless encyclopedic knowledge. It took everything Gordon had to not ask if there was anything in the Geneva Conventions about torturing with boredom.

Since pretty much everyone had been forbidden to clean anything else in the house (ahem, Virgil) until noon the next day, the dining area was still enough of a mess that dinner was set up in the living room with card tables. Dad assured them he'd survived many a holiday with them, along with plastic plates, vinyl tablecloths, and Solo cups. Gordon wondered if there would be a designated Kids' Table.

Virgil peeled off from the herd along the way, his eyes lit with a wicked something Gordon couldn't help being proud of. Someone was up to no good.

Hooking his thumb toward the escapee, Gordon asked Scott, "Where's he going?"

"No clue."

From the top of the steps leading into the dropped floor of the living room, Gordon had to wonder how Dad survived this rumored Christmas tradition of plastic. Having Alan and Scott put one of those things together, getting the catches to actually catch on the legs and not have the table wobble until the beverages tipped off, was near impossible. It was enough to make Gordon want to up end the entire contraption. There was no way Dad and Uncle Tom got through more than one holiday of that together. No way.

The rest of dinner felt normal, like the whole family — all thirteen of them, except the sorely missed Grandma — just was again. Until Dad had to go speechifying, it was even fun. But no, the old man had to go and ruin it all.

"You all know that words are not my specialty," Dad said from the head of Adult Table Number Three. "Either I say too much, I say too little, or I say the wrong thing and we're all in trouble for a week. When it comes down to it, I hope, though I don't have the right words, you all still know the words in my heart for each and every one of you. This family would not be complete without each and every one of you. Thank you for coming home, and thank you for making sure the rest of us made it home to you. Thank you for making this place home. To my family."
Feeling awkward but completely in agreement with all of it, Gordon hoped someone would stuff some steak in Dad's mouth before he could be any more sincere or thoughtful.

There was a reason Tracy men didn't do speeches.

Once everyone was done, the TV came on so they (Gordon, Brains, and Tin-Tin) could catch the game replay while they cleaned up. Somewhere around the top of the third, John and Scott cornered Dad. He didn't look entirely happy about it, but he followed them out of the living room. A few minutes later, Lady Penelope and Brains stealthily collected Alan and Virgil, leaving Gordon to finish up.

Keeping one eye on the game while he worked, Gordon breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't until he hollered at the stunningly bad one-two-three bottom fifth inning that he realized he was alone in the room. For the first time since that alarm went off yesterday morning, he was completely alone. Not a single soul was there to be grateful he was still alive or admiring that he was acting too much like a grown up or concerned he wasn't grown up enough. For a few pitches, he could stand there and be a guy (not a kid or a man, just a guy) who would love his Royals, win or lose, until he took in his last breath.

For the first time in he lost track of how many hours, he was simply Gordon.

"Gords."

Gordon rocked back onto his heels, but he couldn't drag his eyes off the television. "Hmm? What?"

"Uh, meeting?"

"Uh, baseball? Mauer's having an off day. It might be the only — OH, COME ON!" Just as both the Twins and Royals managers stalked onto the field, Gordon threw his shoe at the television. "Off your knees, Blue! You're blowin' the game!"

"That's it. You're outta here." Scott's arm wrapped tightly around Gordon's neck, bending him in half at the waist and leaving him essentially blind. He steered Gordon through the halls and up the stairs, miming a detour into the frame when they came to the library door before pulling back in time to prevent the first concussion back. Yeah, because Gordon so wanted to be benched before they even were up to bat again.

When Scott let him up, John stood in front of Dad, looking like he was finally done for the day. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his eyes closed and shifted his shoulder as much as he could around the sling strap. "I don't know what else I can tell you. We've made our decision."

"I'm not arguing with the decision, John; I'm arguing with the timing of it." Dad wiped his hand down his face, which did nothing to lighten the bruises under his eyes. "It's going to take time to regain the world's trust. We have a target on our backs now, which may not be a risk even our closest friends will be willing to take. Things will be that much more dangerous out there for us now."

"There was already a target on our backs," Virgil said softly from the ornate chocolate leather sofa. Gordon wanted to wash that guilty green color from his face. Hadn't they already established the custody of guilt in all this? "We just didn't know it."

Scott gave Gordon a gentle push toward Virgil's sanctuary on his way to John's side. Gordon couldn't help being amused at how their ranks immediately closed up around Dad (rounded out by Lady Penelope and Brains), banishing anyone on the sofa to the Unpaid Hacks Section.
Plopping down next to Virgil, Gordon leaned into his shoulder, crossed his arms over his chest, and closed his eyes. For whatever reason, that particular couch had a tendency to induce sleep in him (not that it would be that hard right now). Perhaps it was the floor to twelve foot ceiling walls entirely lined with books and archaeological artifacts and moon rocks. Books made for good pillows, especially the kind Dad kept around.

Still, he should probably pretend to put up the appearance he thought he had a voice in what was happening. "What'd we miss?" he asked. "Where'd Alan go?"

Virgil shrugged. "He wanted to be alone. Unless he gives Dad a reason not to be, he's home until the next semester starts in August, so it's not like we can't hunt him down later. Otherwise, not much. Brains isn't saying anything either way. He won't put in the calls for parts until Dad gives him a go."

"So it's kids versus parents. Nice."

Another half hour of discussion went by with Dad and Scott raising their voices while Virgil and Gordon watched the Wimbledon conversation from their sofa box seats. Back and forth, should they or shouldn't they, Dad's conscience, Scott's nerve, John's safety, loyalty, responsibility, everyone's safety, logistics, blah blah blah. Anyone else in the room might as well have been invisible.

Gordon was about ready to go back to the Royals when Dad crossed his arms and turned his attention to the sofa. "I'm not hearing anything from the two of you. Virgil?"

"I think everyone has a point about everyone else's points, but honestly? We've talked it to death. I don't think it's possible for us not to be International Rescue anymore. So let's get this call out of the way so we can go to bed. We'll have a lot of work to do tomorrow."

"Gordon?"

"If a task is once begun, see it through 'til it's done." Gordon wasn't the least surprised when his brothers joined him to finish their grandmother's favorite poem in unison with him. "Be your task either great or small, do it well or not at all." Over the collective grinning groans at his apparent (deliberate) sentimentality, he said, "We aren't done yet, Dad. If we quit now, all we did was try to do a great thing badly."

Scott leaned over from his new perch on the arm of the sofa and whispered in his ear, "When did you go evil genius on me?"

Without looking away, Gordon craned his chin toward Scott's ear and whispered back, "That was Alan."

"Sneaky little shit."

"Copy that."

John swiped the remote from the table and tossed it to Penny, one last overriding of their father's authority. "Make the call."

"Jeff," Lady P said, which sounded an awful lot like They're doing this with or without you, so you might as well give in and make the call.

"Far be it from me to do a great thing badly," he said. He took a beat to focus on each of his children, studying their faces like he realized they weren't children anymore. As much as it probably hurt him — Gordon supposed it was every parent's greatest thrill and worst fear in one — Gordon could see he saw it, too: Jeff Tracy's babies weren't babies anymore. Four men stood in front of him. Heaven
and Hell help him. He mumbled something to himself, low and amusingly irritated, and pulled the trigger. "Do it."

One perfectly manicured pink nail thumbed the remote.

Dad threw his shoulders back a little bit straighter and tugged down his t-shirt. No one expected Billionaire Jeff Tracy to appear anywhere in a plain t-shirt, especially the tabloids. For him to show up in any kind of meeting dressed so casually, there had to be a good reason. He wanted her to see him as an ordinary man in a t-shirt with ordinary, good kids not in uniform. Gordon couldn't help thinking Dad knew this was coming even before they all ganged up on him — and he dressed for the occasion. Nice.

Gordon never got tired of watching the stack of three motorized shelves that first moved outward from the rest of the bookcase before gliding up out of the way so the thirty-two inch screen could slide forward. So damn cool. Lady P hopped off the table corner with the same airy grace she did everything else. She aimed the remote at the eye at the top of the screen until all that was left to do was wait.

"Be brilliant, boys," she instructed them as John took a seat on the other sofa arm, lining the four of them in place, the Von Trapp-ed Tracy children. (Do, a deer, a female deer!) At the last second, Virgil switched places with John with a pointed glare at the sling John was trying very hard to get out of. "It will be all right."

As long as she was truly as scary as Dad said, sure.

To prove her point, Lady P raised her hand with a dainty flair to silently count off the seconds on her fingers. Five. Four. Three. Two.

The screen cut from black to blonde as Lisa Lowe sat down at a desk in a secure location she'd been directed to in New York. She adjusted the camera so she was framed with the plain gray masonry behind her head before she sat back with a certain degree of nervousness that Gordon couldn't help being grateful for. It would've scared him a lot more if she wasn't nervous. "Hello?"

One last breath and Dad took the remote from Lady P to push the button he couldn't take back. The small video box from their end of the conversation popped up so they could see what she was seeing. No adjustment necessary on this end, Dad dove right in. "Good evening, Ms. Lowe. Thank you for meeting me. You know who I am?"

Ever the six-year-old, Gordon loved this part. People tended to go fish out of water mouth and numb around his father, especially when they didn't know what to expect. He was always so tempted to tell them it helped not to know him. People never wanted to get that part; he was just their dad. He changed diapers and cleaned up his kids' puke with the rest of them. Anything else he did was coincidental. It was like seeing the Mona Lisa; everyone spent so much time waiting in line to see something that really wasn't all that big or impressive, especially when there was so much else in the room to see.

Fumbling for the right words — Psst! This is the part where you say 'Yes, Mr. Tracy' — Reporter Barbie nodded.

Dad took it in stride with a smiling, careful prod. "Ms. Lowe, you should have received a delivery earlier today. Did you bring the box with you?"

Again she nodded, although she seemed to know she was doing it this time, which was a start. She dug into her humungous purse and pulled out a black box to show them. "I assume you're going to
"tell me how to open it then?"

"Not just yet. First, there are a few more conditions."

Lady P strategically moved shoulder to shoulder with Dad the way Gordon had seen her do every other time they'd brought a new agent into the fold. It didn't matter if she could kill you with one perfectly manicured finger or not; she looked like she could. That was enough. Gordon forgot sometimes to appreciate what a team the two of them made, like Bonnie and Clyde without the bank robbery and murder and screaming sister-in-law.

Sitting between Scott and John, Gordon could feel them both straighten to military attention. This was it.

Taking the golden rule of *You get more flies with honey than vinegar* that Grandma had drilled into every Tracy head from zygote-hood, Dad was big on giving first in any business transaction. And yes, this was business. Maybe years from now it would be different, but for now, Lisa Lowe was not a friend. She might be an agent by the time the meeting was through, but she was not a friend. So business it was, and in business, Jeff Tracy gave.

With the flick of a remote button, the little screen showing the library side of the conversation panned out to show the four of them sitting on the table.

"Ms. Lowe, I'd like you to meet the faces behind the uniforms of International Rescue." Gordon didn't miss the dig in his father's voice, though he doubted Lisa knew it was there. Maybe one day she'd realize what Alan had been trying to tell them seemed lost on her, that the men behind the uniform were someone's sons, someone's brothers, someone's grandsons and friends. Gordon followed Scott and John's cues while they offered the woman a short, curt wave as Dad introduced them.

"Your … " Lisa swallowed, blinked, and did pretty much everything people do when they're gobsmacked. "Your men are your children?" She belatedly remembered to add the "sir".

"You're meeting them so that, perhaps, when you open that box you'll understand the weight of what I'm giving you — and the world. Ours is a small circle of highly trusted people, people I have to entrust with the lives of my children. As you can imagine, I don't have the option of court documents to ensure people's cooperation in our operation, but I do consider the use of the combination to open that box as good and binding as your signature. I'm putting my children in your hands, Ms. Lowe. If that is a responsibility you cannot accept, we can end this meeting right now."

"NO!" Her hand clapped over her mouth immediately.

Dad gave her a moment to regain her composure, which gave Gordon enough time to contain himself, too. Seriously, Jeff Tracy was only a man, people. He wore holes in his jeans like anyone else.

It took her a moment, but when she got herself together, she had a look to her that Gordon associated with the higher profile interviews he'd seen her do before. As flustered as she'd been, Dad had picked her for a reason. He didn't even know about how annoyed Alan could be with her. Before going out into the world to report on wars and International Rescue and other investigative works, she'd done her time in the White House Press Corps. She knew her stuff. It was a mistake to think she didn't.

"I'm perfectly willing to hear what you have to say, Mr. Tracy, provided I set some conditions myself? Your agents said I would be allowed to ask a few questions?"
Oh yeah, Dad saw his fish on his hook. She wasn't going anywhere. It wouldn't stop him from playing with her for a few yards of line, but he wouldn't have to work to reel her in at all. He flashed what Gordon thought of as Dad's statesman look, chin slightly up, eyebrows up higher, pleasant line but no smile to his lips, not yet. "Go ahead."

"I'm assuming you've come to me because you need someone to spin the situation yesterday. Unless I get the whole story, the real story, I can't report anything. I won't be lied to, Mr. Tracy, and I certainly will not compromise my integrity with the network or my viewers in order to protect you if you jerk me around."

"You'll have as much honesty as I'm allowed. I cannot give you the identities of anyone in my organization without their permission, but you will know everything you need to know to do your job effectively."

"And that job would be what exactly?"

"If our arrangement becomes acceptable to you, you will be the sole authority on International Rescue. You'll have insider access, including radio communications. We have not offered this to anyone else, and I don't intend to again."

"What about Ned Cook? He's been digging into this as much as I have, if not more."

"I have it on good authority that if I'm going to bring a member of the press into the organization, you are the one we can trust. Do we have a deal?"

Her answer was to remove a pen and old steno notebook from her bag and to wait with her hands folded together like a schoolgirl with her listening ears on.

Satisfied, Dad let himself sit on the corner of the table. "On the lock, Lisa, I'd like you to press in the following combination: four, eight, fifteen, fourteen, twelve. Inside, you will find …"

Gordon tapped Scott's shoulder and nodded toward the door. Scott narrowed his eyebrows for a moment, but he shrugged and pitched his chin with permission. It wasn't like Gordon was needed for this part, not with Dad sitting there with his arms crossed and Scott sitting there with his arms crossed and Penny sitting there with her arms crossed. He knew enough about body language to know that if Lisa Lowe wasn't quaking in her Manolo Blahniks by now, his being there wasn't going to change it. He didn't like doing the intimidation part anyway. That's what they had Scott Tracy: Interrogation Specialist for.

He wandered the halls, not entirely sure what he was looking for, but he figured he'd know it when he found it. Not that there was much going on. The moratorium on cleaning of any kind was still in effect, so he was kind of relieved to see there wasn't a single broom or waste bin in sight. It wasn't often anyone in this house took time to just be, not cleaning or rescuing or rescuing the cleaners or cleaning up after the rescuers. The way Grandma talked, that was pretty much the way most people lived; life was one long laundry and dishwasher cycle, no matter what they did with their lives. He hoped everyone else took time to not do those things once in a while. This house could use more of that.

Finding the door to Dad's office wide open, Gordon poked his head around the doorframe. He almost didn't see Alan sitting there watching the wall like the men on it would peel away and become real if he didn't watch it every single second. Figuring that if Alan was hiding out here he was probably as peopled out as Gordon was, he was about to go in search of some other hidey hole when Alan called out to him without looking away to see which of them it was.
"Is it done?"

"Your favorite reporter has been and will continue to be properly guilted, yes." Gordon planted himself on the desk next to him. "She'll definitely never baked goods us again. So? What did you think of your first IR meeting?" He didn't mean for it to sound quite as teasing as it did.

Alan snorted. "It sounded an awful lot like any given dinnertime." He was quiet a moment before he relaxed, placing his hands behind his hips so he could lean back and cross his ankles. "I don't know how you people get anything done."

"There's a reason none of us want to do debriefings until after we've slept," Gordon agreed, absently scratching at the back of his head. (It totally wasn't out of embarrassment that the first thing Alan had to say when the Wizard pulled back the curtain was that they all looked like a bunch of rookies, no, not at all).

Alan shook his head, clearly thinking something about IR being this side of a government operation. After a beat, he waved his hand in a lazy circle at the mural on Dad's wall. "Did you know about this?"

Gordon ran his tongue over his teeth in an effort to contain his grin.

"You did, didn't you?"

"I didn't know, if that's what you mean."

"You really can't keep a secret at all, can you?"

And maybe Gordon deserved it for that. He didn't have the energy to point out exactly how many secrets he had kept for all of them over the years (although John probably had kept a whole bushel more), but breaking this one did pack a bigger punch. On the other hand, if the others knowing about how Alan felt about the mural and so many other things led to an artful masterpiece like this, well, he couldn't be bothered to care that he'd lied. Sometimes broken promises and crossed fingers behind your back were necessary.

The charcoal drawing of Alan crouching at the poolside between Dad and Virgil's feet was pretty good for short notice. He maybe even looked a little cool with that badass look on his face. Virg hadn't had enough time to properly shade away what would be behind Alan or color it in, but another few hours of work and a new layer of glaze and no one would know Alan hadn't been home the day that picture was taken.

"If it helps, I don't think you were supposed to see it yet."

Alan's "He didn't have to do that" translated to a sweetly embarrassed I wish he wouldn't have done that — especially now that he looked like a colossal dork like the rest of them.

"I think he did."

"Because you're a tattle tale and can't keep a secret and are pretty much the worst spy ever."

"He still had to. Dad can't work a camera to save his life. The only way you were ending up on that wall was if Virgcasso did it." Gordon peered at the wall, examining the details Virgil had managed to sneak in there in so short a time. He really did take Virg's talents for granted sometimes. "Of all of us, you're the only one who looks relatively human here."

"Well, somebody had to," Virgil said far too happily as he slid up behind them. He leaned his head
in between their upper arms, peering at the wall the same way Gordon had. "Man, I hate that thing."

Alan blinked.

Gordon raised his eyebrows at him. "You didn't think any of us actually like this monstrosity?"

Virgil walked backwards from them until his knees hit the sofa, humming. "All in all, it's just another __ ___"

Gordon knew exactly where this was going. Virgil had pretty much locked them in his room one night after neither of them could sleep post–Paris and made him listen to entire damn album because, seriously, didn't it have such incredible sound and production value? Yeah, Gordon had fallen asleep somewhere along the lines of Goodbye Cruel World and vowed he would never wake up again if he had to hear it one more time. Dude, that movie was so very trippy. Never again.

"Stop right there," he pleaded.

"Before we go any further, do you love me?" Virgil retorted, switching musical gears.

"Not if you keep singing, I don't," Alan said bluntly.

Virgil stuck out his lower lip in a pout. "I thought I was your favorite brother? Traitor."

Gordon glared at Alan and crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey, I thought I was your favorite brother."

"Not today." Alan's mouth twisted, taunting and Nyah-nah-nyah-nah-nah at the same time. He walked over and kicked Virgil in the knee in appreciation before he left them both for destinations unknown, muttering something about finding a mermaid.

"Living room in ten, pajamas and sense of humor required," Virgil called after him. Hooking his thumb toward the door, he grumbled good-naturedly, "Ungrateful brat."

"No kidding. What's in the living room?"

"Sleep deprivation cures galore."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone who wants to be."

"Count me in."

Virgil hoisted himself out of the couch with a little tug from Gordon. He stopped to stare at the mural, scowling. After a vocal blech of a shiver in the back of his throat, he headed for the door, humming another song that Grandma would wash his mouth out with soap for if she ever caught him singing it.

By the time Gordon joined them all down in the living room as requested, the coffee table was so full of junk food and hot chocolate and just stuff, he thought his eyes would go into a sugar coma. It looked awesome. In the middle of it all, Tin-tin and Fermat sat shyly accepting the praise and adoration of his brothers that they hadn't been able to shower on them until then. Tin-tin seemed to be doing her best to melt into the carpet as she and Alan played the age old game of Don't Look with each other. Fermat held Scott and John's attentions the most as the three of them dug through the movie selection for something. Nerds gotta nerd together, after all.
Everyone made it through the first movie together, no sleeping allowed. There was no way they were all going to make it through the second, but the first was the big one. Gordon couldn't help feeling, like the night before when none of the five of them wanted to be away from the others so they could heal together, tonight was the night the sons and daughter of Tracy Island needed to heal together. Maybe one day they'd let the adults back into things, but for now, this was their night.

That, or he was too sleep deprived to realize what a lousy sap he was.

The FBI warning on the front end of Indiana Jones and the — which one was that one? — was pretty.

Sleep was good.

Real good.

Someone needed to change the channel. His family was on TV.

Good sleep. Good couch.

And it would be really good if no hatches blew tomorrow, just in case. Somebody should get on that.

Hmm … sleep.

Sleep makes everything better.

They really should all sleep in their own beds again one of these days.

Good sleep.

Insert that Scarlett movie girl business about … tomorrow … and all that. He was too tired to remember what it was, word for word. He'd think of it just as soon as … He'd think about it tomorrow.

Somewhere far, far away, John and Virgil were singing. "The sun has gone to bed and so has Gords."

Damn straight.

(May 2012)

Chapter End Notes

So there you have it, the end of the first day of the rest of their lives. If you feel unsettled, if you feel like this story is just beginning, good. That's how you're supposed to feel. Like I said in the summary: what they went through can't be solved in the span of a Disney movie — or a fic. I hope I got them to the point where it feels like they're going to move forward as a family, even if they're still fighting nightmares and temper tantrums in the days, weeks, and months ahead. Maybe Virgil will inhale a little too much bleach during a relapse cleaning spree. Maybe Scott will blame the wall and put his knuckles through it. Maybe Alan will be a total brat one day. Who knows for sure? All I know is how their first few hours went. So if this feels unfinished to you, I did my job. Yay me!
Those of you who made it all the way through, thank you, from the bottom of my black little heart. You've made this an incredible adventure. Thank you for making me feel talented. I owe you all more than you could ever know.

For credit's sake:

The title comes from *He Is, They Are* by Harry Connick Jr., from his album *Blue Light, Red Light*. Lyrically, it was everything I wanted to convey with this story. I hope it worked.

Anything you might recognize as a bastardized quote from a movie or song lyrics, please credit to their proper sources, not limited to but including: *Ghost*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Right Stuff*, Rupert Holmes’s *Escape* (*The Pina Colada Song*), Mary Poppins, *The Godfather* trilogy, Bruce Springsteen’s cover of *Pony Boy*, *Schoolhouse Rock*, Neil Gaiman’s *Good Omens*, Irving Berlin’s *White Christmas*, Ferris Bueller’s *Day Off*, Johnny Cash’s many songs, *Cheers*, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, *The Rolling Stones*, *Prince* (no, the gett in *Gett Off* is not a spelling error), *The Human Torch*, *The Wonder Twins*, *Pink Floyd’s Another Brick in the Wall*, *George Lucas's Star Wars*, *Rodgers and Hammerstein’s The Sound of Music*, *Meat Loaf's Paradise By the Dashboard Light*, and *the Beach Boys' Fun, Fun, Fun*.

2. Market Garden was the second large scale airborne mission of WWII that, had it gone as planned, would've allowed Allied forces to cross the river Rhine, cut the route into Germany, and end the European side of the war before Christmas 1944. While initially a success, the final bridges weren't secured and the Allies had to go south and around into Germany instead.

3. The fictional law firm Jeff sends on the attack, Gage Whitney Pace, is where several Aaron Sorkin characters work/ed.

4. The historical reference to John Wayne without a lung forging the river is a true story. Prior to the filming of *The Sons of Katie Elder*, he was diagnosed with lung cancer and had a lung and two ribs removed. He continued to do his own stunts and was caught in the river. He nearly got pneumonia out of the deal. Great damn movie, though.

6. Black bras and strappy high-heeled shoes? I'm guessing you know what I mean, but I will simply direct you to a story by that name from my dear friend Tidia. I have a feeling Scott has done/will do the same for his brothers somewhere along the line, although maybe in a spendier joint. That's what big brothers are for.

6. SERE school is a military training different groups go through based on the possibility of capture. SERE stands for Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape. They really do teach you what you can eat, how to capture and clean animals, emergency medical procedures above what you get in basic training, etc. As a USAF pilot, Scott would be required to go through Level B or C training, depending on rank and what kind of missions he flew.

8. Ted Williams was a left fielder for the Red Sox and last player in MLB history to have a single season batting average over .400. When he passed away, his family got into a huge legal battle over what to do with his remains. His son maintained (and won) that he wanted to be cryogenically preserved so they could be together in the future.

9. BUD/S is the course to become US Navy SEALs. According to several friends, yes, it's as hellish as they say. Lucky them!
10. *Always Finish* is an anonymous poem my grandmother had a cross-stitch picture of on her wall. It was one of her favorite sayings. I can't believe I used it on my own kid the other day.

The idea of *The Lost Weekend* is inspired by the book by Charles Jackson about a five day binge of excesses. Brilliant book, if a bit disturbing sometimes. Our Tracys co-opted the name, but not the behavior (as far as I know).

And on that note, thank you again, whether I hear about it from you or not. If you had half as much fun reading this as I had writing it, well, then I had twice as much fun writing it as you had reading it. Heh.

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